



# What Does it Mean to be Successful?

by  
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We not only want every graduate to succeed in life, but we also want you to feel that success deep inside of yourselves and understand what it means to be successful. Recently I attended the funeral of one of my closest friends who died in a sudden accident. Family, friends, and those people whose lives my friend had touched deeply packed the stake center. Unlike many of us, he had expressed his love constantly to his children and grandchildren. He had a strong reputation among his professional colleges. Many came to pay their respects. He had served the people of Latin America as a mission president. He left those people infinitely better for his wise and energetic service. His missionaries traveled long distances to honor their great president and his wife, a full companion in that mission. He loved and trusted and taught them. Surely if any person could be judged successful, my friend was that person.

The funeral was a happy occasion, almost a celebration. One element, however, left me somewhat saddened. He did not seem to know and feel that he had achieved greatly. Somehow he erroneously concluded that his life had been a failure. His wife and children had tried to convince him that he had lived a wonderful life. I had also done my best to communicate my love and admiration for his great accomplishments by e-mail messages from Germany during the last month of his life, but he could only momentarily accept and understand the great impact he had on many people. I bring this up to introduce a vital subject: what does it mean to be successful? We desire that all of you will lead successful lives and know and feel that success for yourselves.

A growing body of literature explains how to achieve great goals in this life. For example, Dr. Charles Garfield wrote a book on peak performers and how they achieved the heights in their lives. His years of research uncovered these principles that set apart the peak performers from the rest.

They (1) had missions that motivated them, (2) set goals to achieve results in real time, (3) achieved self-mastery in managing their lives, (4) were team builders and team players, (5) made necessary course corrections, and (6) maintained overall momentum and balance in working with their game plan.

But that is not my subject. As great and desirable as it may be to become a Michael Jordan, a Bill Marriott, a Helen Keller, or a George Marshall, most of us will never know that thrill. Some of you may become peak performers, but I suggest that such achievements is not necessary to be a success in life. It may even be a hindrance. All of you can, in my judgement, become successful.

We can define success in a variety of ways. We could say that to achieve success is to gain a favorable result, reach our goals, and have a good and wished for ending to our life's quest. We could say that a successful person is one that accomplishes what she or he desires or intends in life, or one that succeeds in gaining wealth, position, or other advantage. Let's snatch a few other thoughts from here and there.

In a talk before the Hamilton Club in Chicago in 1899, Theodore Roosevelt said this about success:

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory or defeat.

In that way of thinking, the successful person is one who tries mightily, who is not afraid to venture because of timidity or fear. That is a good and relevant thought for our subject.

One of my favorite thinkers is the great jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Once he replied to a reporter's question on his ninetieth birthday, two months before I was born. He said: "Young man, the secret of my success is that at an early age I discovered I was not God." Humility is surely an ingredient of success and helpful as we reach for its meaning.

The great British statesman, Benjamin Disraeli, besides saying, "I hate definitions," gave us an element of success when he said: "The secret of success is constancy to purpose." Another great British leader, Winston Churchill, as most of you will remember, delivered this impressively brief address at Harrow School in 1941: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense."

I shall conclude this exercise in defining success with one of my favorites; In his book *They Call Me Coach*, the legendary John Wooden of UCLA said:

"Success is peace of mind  
which is a direct result of  
self-satisfaction in knowing you  
did your best to become the  
best you are capable of becoming."

The reason this definition appeals to me is that such success is within the reach of every one of us. We all need that peace of mind. If, at the end of the day, we know we did our best and we know we became the best we are capable of becoming, isn't that success? Doesn't that leapfrog past counting our money, being number one, and gaining fame? We all can continue to improve, continue to try, never give up, and give the world and our families our best. We may be misunderstood, belittled, and mistreated, but if we have done our best and continued to try, we are successful. In the final analysis, it is our attitude that counts. Also, what we are matters infinitely more than what we do. Coach La Vell Edwards, the wonderfully successful BYU coach, told other coaches who came to him seeking professional advice: "Coaching is what we do, not who we are."

Viktor E. Frankl, the Jewish psychologist, who spent World War II in a Nazi concentration camp where only one in twenty-four survived, learned there a magnificent lesson about success. He said that those men who did not let the situation destroy them, who comforted others and gave their bread to save others, offered "sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

He said that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but what matters is what life expects from us. We are being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist of right action and conduct. Success is not giving in to self-pity and inaction when the going gets tough, when we are disappointed by results, or when things haven't worked out the way we expected. If we haven't achieved a position or recognition, it doesn't matter in the final analysis. Success is what we do with the situation life has handed us. And when we discover meaning in our trials and tribulations, when we learn the lessons of life from them, we are well on our way to success. Jesus showed us the way on the cross.

Frankl noted that "the prisoner who lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed."

Churchill also said: "Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts."

Wooden added: "It is what you learn after you know it all that counts." He also said: "Things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out." This observation underlines Frankl's findings, already quoted.

The final aspect of success I desire to share is this: As we achieve success, we should never forget that we are part of the human race, and act accordingly with love and compassion for others, especially the poor. Otherwise our success is merely vanity, as Ecclesiastes observed. I like the parable Jesus shared about the rich man who had an abundant harvest and "thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room were to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And, I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall these be, which thou hast provided?"

If our life consists in merely gathering in our fruits, our bank accounts, and our stocks and bonds, of what value is our life. We need enough for our needs and perhaps our modest wants, and we need to take care of our families. But we should never forget the poor and those of our fellow men that we can help. I wonder if we haven't gotten away from the principles behind the old law in ancient Israel pertaining to the poor. The law was that in harvesting our fruits and grains, we should not take everything, but leave some on the trees and stalks for the poor to glean. The law required everyone to leave behind some of their crops for the poor and the stranger.

The Lord must love the poor because most of the world's people could be classified as poor. Let's not, in all of our success and striving for gain, forget those in need. Isaiah inveighed against Israel because they "beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor." The author of Proverbs captured the principle simply: "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord."

In helping the poor, we should never forget their own desire and ability to help themselves, nor trample on their inherent dignity. In her autobiography published by Utah State Press, my Grandmother, Effie Marquess Carmack, described the conditions in her Kentucky home, poor by any standards we would apply today. Without apology, she then observed: "Anyway, we never felt poor, as we had a frugal, industrious mother, who did her level best to keep good food and clothing for her children, and to keep good warm, clean beds." Notice the quiet pride and dignity these rural Kentucky folks enjoyed.

One of the most inspirational examples of the power of that dignity to raise a poor person of ambition to a higher level comes from the autobiographical story of Booker T. Washington in *Up From Slavery*. Washington was working for a pittance in the mines when he overheard two of his fellow workers talking about a great school that admitted young people of his race and made possible for them to work for board and room. He determined to go there against his families' wishes, even though Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was in Virginia, about 500 miles away. The story of how he walked, rode in wagons, and in train cars to reach Hampton is poignant. Hungry, cold, with only the clothes he wore, he often walked the streets at night without a place to stay. We pick up his story in his own words:

As soon as possible after reaching the grounds of the Hampton Institute, I presented myself before the head teacher for assignment to a class. Having been so long without proper food, a bath, and a change of clothing, I did not, of course, make a very favorable impression upon her, and I could see at once that there were doubts in her mind about the wisdom of admitting me as a student. I felt that I could hardly blame her if she got the idea that I was a worthless loafer or tramp. For some time she did not refuse to admit me, neither did she decide in my favor, and I continued to linger about her, and to impress her in all the ways I could with my worthiness. In the meantime I saw her admitting other students, and that added greatly to my discomfort, for I felt, deep down in my heart, that I could do as well as they, if I could only get a chance show what was in me."

After some hours had passed, the head teacher said to me: "The adjoining recitation-room needs sweeping. Take the

broom and sweep it.

I swept the recitation-room three times. Then I got a dusting-cloth and I dusted it four times. All the woodwork around the walls, every bench, table, and desk, I went over four times with my dusting-cloth...When I was through, I reported to the head teacher. She was a 'Yankee' woman who knew just where to look for dirt. She went into the room and inspected the floor and closets; then she took her handkerchief and rubbed it on the woodwork about the walls, and over the table and benches. When she was unable to find one bit of dirt on the floor, or a particle of dust on any of the furniture, she quietly remarked, 'I guess you will do to enter this institution.'

We can feel the dignity and power of this man who became one of the greatest men of the world in his day. I think the wise and generous man or woman who established the Hampton Agricultural College deserves our accolades and can serve as a model for you in your future.

In his humble way, George Albert Smith showed us the way to live. He, the grandson of the great George A. Smith, rose to be President of the Church. This is part of the personal creed by which he lived: "I would be a friend to the friendless and find joy in ministering to the needs of the poor." Who could forget the picture of President Smith taking off his overcoat in winter and placing it on the shipment of clothing the Church sent to Europe during the bleak winter following World War II. He was deeply respected by this community because of his tolerance and compassion for the poor.

He also said: "I would live with the masses and help to solve their problems that their earth life may be happy."

The writer of Psalms taught: "Defend the poor and fatherless. Do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy."

Billions of poor reside in the world. No matter how things go for you, stay close to the ordinary, garden variety, run-of-the-mill people of the earth. We are part of them and they of us. As John Donne so beautifully observed: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

In 1978 President Gordon B. Hinckley told BYU students:

I heard a man of prominence say the other day, "I have

amended the language of my prayers. Instead of saying, 'Bless the poor and the sick and the needy,' I now say, 'Father, show me how to help the poor and the sick and the needy, and give me resolution to do so.'

And therefore, what? Succeed, every one of you. You can, you know. Adopt the tremendous concept that success is not necessarily achieving high place, great wealth, or preeminence among your fellow men. Success will come to all if you, in your endeavor, do your best. Become the best you are capable of becoming. Choose honorable endeavors, if you have a choice, and stay constantly and always with those endeavors. Never give in to baser things. Success is largely in keeping your attitude solid, strong, and pure, no matter what circumstances you face. Never lose hope or purpose.

And remember who you are. You are a human being, a part of the whole, and but for the grace of God would be among the billions of the poor. Leave a part of your fruit and wheat on the vines of the poor. Help the poor as you have means in your success to do so. Never despise them and to what you can to join others in delivering them.

We honor you. We congratulate you. We fervently pray for your success and have confidence that if you heed what you know to be right all of you can be successful.