

Success Without Stress? Yes!

How do we define the word “success?” Put 10 people in a room and ask them that question, and I’m sure they’ll come up with many more than 10 answers, because that word means so many different things to so many different people.

Of course, we have the typical easy answer, for the “checklist” type life-livers among us. Go to primary and then high school, graduate high school, go to college, graduate college, get a job, get a better one, maybe go back for more school, get a job after the advanced degree, buy a house, get married, have children, check, check, check, and so on down the list. For many people, this is the standard approach to the living of life - safe, predictable, understandable, no surprises, an orderly passing of the days, weeks, months, and years. And not a thing wrong with that approach, by the way - it’s what many people strive for and achieve in their lifetimes.

But what about success for those of us who don’t necessarily fit into the above “checklist” approach, whether by circumstance, or by choice, or both? Perhaps life has thrown a curve ball into that “checklist” approach and forced someone to rethink that path. Perhaps a person, again by either circumstance or by choice, has taken a side road rather than staying on the main “checklist highway.” Do we no longer think of that “side road” person as successful? Absolutely not, in my opinion.

Let’s look at a local news story from recent years. A front page news story was about the growing number of incidents of school students who are resorting to cheating on tests or other graded assignments in order to maintain a high GPA. Students who were quoted in this article talked about how getting a B grade was tantamount to getting cancer! Someone needs to tell me when a B grade became unacceptable.

And in the same week when that story appeared came the overwhelmingly sad news that a student, an exemplary student by the way, committed suicide in the hallway of his high school, right here in our suburban Philadelphia area, Pennsylvania. He brought a loaded gun into school, fired shots into the air first so people would get out of his way and not get hurt, and then he turned the gun on himself and committed suicide. What was the suicide about? He had recently received a report card with falling grades, and his parents had told him he would need to cut back on extracurricular activities until he brought his grades back up. The student was active in scouting and was a volunteer fireman. He was well-liked by many and well thought of for his participation in the two mentioned activities, both of which have to do with hard work, achievement, discipline, leadership - in other words, success.

If we think about success, perhaps we could consider how many other meanings there are for that word. Have you ever watched a toddler trying to stand up for the first time? Usually he’s hanging onto some piece of furniture like a coffee table or a couch. He keeps pulling himself up and falling down and pulling himself up again, totally focused on this task accomplishment without stopping until he’s standing upright. And how proud the parents are that their child can now stand on his own! Nobody is telling him he can’t do it, nobody is necessarily putting pressure on him to do it in a certain “best” way. So he keeps trying and eventually achieves the goal of standing upright. That’s quite a success, isn’t it?

Let's go back to those people who for one reason or another have not stayed on the "checklist" type path. I myself am one of those people. Not always in my life have I, by my own choice, or by circumstance, been someone whose life has gone along in "checklist" type order. And along the way I have become more and more pleased that is not the case, because the side journeys have helped shape me into who I am now. Had I gone along in the traditional "checklist" style approach to life, who knows what I might have missed?

Every one of us has goals for ourselves. I know I always have. But I never put deadlines on any of them, like "by the time I'm a certain age I have to be married," or "I want to make a certain amount of money by the time I'm a certain age." I was more about saying things like "Someday I will work for myself." I do. Or I would say "Someday I will learn to ski." I have. For me it was never when the goal would be achieved, because that wasn't important. For me, it's more important that many of my goals have already been achieved, and I keep setting new ones. For me, this is my success. I'm living the life I want to live, on my terms, in my way.

I also think of success, as experiencing life in the here and now, and reminding ourselves of all that we have accomplished already. We can look down the road and envision where we would like to be. Along with that we can enjoy how far we have already come. The journey may have one ultimate direction, which is forward. With each moment, at each point in time, with each decision we make, we drive our own lives continually forward. Sometimes our decisions take us down some side roads we didn't expect. Sometimes, because of those side roads, we may need to retrace our steps and start over again.

Ultimately, success is personal. It doesn't have to be measured in money or the size of one's house, or by the kind of car someone drives, or by how many children someone has. It's not about competing with other people to be better than they are. The only person I think I need to be better than is who I was yesterday. Take the time to listen to your soul and your heart - what are they saying to you? Finding your voice in the world and then using it to support and encourage and inspire and applaud not only yourself but others - that's success. Being happy with ourselves, each and every day, that is success. It can be the most important life work.

I was once sent a wonderful quote from a friend through email. I don't know who said it, but for me it speaks volumes. Here it is:

"Real success is finding your lifework in the work that you love."

What I take from that quote is if we own that our lives are works in progress, then we are our own lifework. And therefore we know and are already achieving success.