
What is Success?

by Eugene V. Debs

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What is a successful life? A few moments' thought will convince us that the question is by no means an easy one to answer. We say this, that, or the other man is successful, but what do we mean by it? One man has houses and lands, has a large bank account, drives fast horses, and has many apparent friends, such a man is accounted successful. Yet all of these things that minister to his pleasure have been acquired by unremitting labor, by hard, avaricious dealings with his fellow-men, by trampling upon the hearts and affections of thousands; in the face of these facts is the man a successful one?

The question will be answered differently, according to the views of life of the one answering it. Some think wealth is the only measure of success no matter how attained. Such people have tuned their psalm of life very low. Such people will read the grand tragedies of Shakespeare and remember only this line, "Put money in thy purse."¹ The horizon of their lives is bounded with dollars and the chink of silver is more melodious to them than the symphonies of Mozart.

The man who becomes wealthy is in a measure successful, but only so far as the acquirement sharpens his intellect, broadens his powers, and develops him into a self-reliant, powerful member of society for its good. Selfish wealth is never good. One may be a millionaire, but if with it comes greed, avarice, oppression of others, the success is small indeed. Scattered along the path of life we find examples of men whose success brought them fame and glory and proved an unqualified blessing to all mankind. Baron von Humboldt, born to nobility and riches, left behind him the pleasures of wealth and the luxury of ease and climbed the distant Andes in search of facts for his immortal work, *Cosmos*. The winter's storm and the summer's fervid heat could not stay this grand man in his enthusiastic pursuit of knowledge. He did not spend his life in acquiring wealth, he lived but

¹ From *Othello* (1603), Act 1, Scene 3.

to commune with nature and wrest from her the secrets of physical life. Was not this man successful? This is what another great genius said of Humboldt:

I have seen a picture of the old man sitting upon a mountain side, above him the eternal snow, below the smiling valley of the tropics, filled with vine and palm; his chin upon his breast, his eyes deep, thoughtful, and calm, his forehead majestic — grander than the mountain upon which he sat — crowned with the snow of his whitened hair, he looked the intellectual autocrat of this world.²

Agassiz was at one time importuned to go upon the lecture platform and make money out of his vast knowledge as a naturalist. His reply will be ever memorable: “I have no time to make money.” Such a man would be hooted at on Wall Street by the men who speculate in the earnings of others and imagine themselves the great business men of this age. Yet whose success is greatest, that of Louis Agassiz standing among his pupils upon the sea shore of Penakese teaching them the secrets of nature,³ or that of Jay Gould heaping together millions wrung from the failure of thousands of his fellows? One rests secure in a pure fame, the other is hated and feared by his neighbors and at the last will have been simply notorious.

There is one criterion by which success can be fairly measured, that is the estimate placed upon us by our fellows. If a man is hated, is feared and shunned, if he is looked upon as small, avaricious, greedy, he is not a successful man though he be worth millions. On the other hand, if a man’s praises are upon the lips of all, if his reputation is that of an honest, sincere, and sympathetic gentleman, his success is assured, although he has not a dollar of his own.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² From “Law, Not God; or, The Message of Humboldt” (1883) by **Robert Ingersoll** (1833-1899).

³ Biologist **Louis Agassiz** (1807-1873) was given the tiny Massachusetts island of Penakese, one of the Elizabeth Islands, by a wealthy patron as the site for a school of natural history.