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The Tragedy of Success

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No one wants to experience poverty or misfortune, but wealth and comfort can be just as debilitating. Success, in any field, isn't all it is cracked up to be. It can open doors, but it can also become a drag on personal growth and set you up for catastrophe later.

The requirements of life are relatively simple and cheap. If you have just enough resources to meet those needs, you are going to use them efficiently. Once you have excess resources, however, you tend to become less efficient and more arrogant about how you use them. You take on more burdens and obligations to absorb that extra time or money, and soon you feel just as trapped and "poor" as you did before.

There is nothing wrong with having money in the bank, but it is human nature that when people have extra resources (or the illusion thereof) they are likely to use them. Instead of a simple apartment, they acquire a country estate with maintenance costs many times greater. Obligations mushroom, so that no matter how much money one has, it is never enough.

When your obligations are greater, you are much more vulnerable to unexpected change. You have to generate a huge income now to support it all, and if you can't, the whole house of cards will collapse.

At the root of most personal catastrophes is the euphoria of previous success. Once you win one great prize, you think the sky's the limit, and you start wasting resources and taking on obligations as though success was your right. Now, you can't simply fall back to the simple state you were in before. If your destiny shifts just a little, all your obligations will come due and there's likely to be a disastrous crash.

When you are struggling for success—for love, money, fame, power—you think this goal is all you need. When you get there, though, you face a whole new set of challenges. Will you fall victim to all the seductions and addictions of success, or will you know when to stop? If you don't stop, success will kill you just as surely as poverty will.

Success tends to stop personal growth in its tracks, because once you find something that works, you usually stick with it. Because you don't want to give up a good thing, it can be extraordinarily difficult to change gears. Success builds a protective cocoon around you that restricts your openness to the world and inhibits your motivation. Barring a calamity, you tend to follow the same easy patterns for the rest of your life.

If you find success as an actor, that's what you'll always be, and if you find too much success in one role, you will be forever "typecast" there, because that's what the world expects of you.

Many a rising young star has been brought down to earth by taking the logical next step in a perceived progression of successes. They accept the irresistible promotion offered them, and in the process they move from free and happy to burdened and trapped. Every "success" is potentially like that: a prison rather than a panacea.

It would be ideal if you could experience all the benefits of success while holding your needs and obligations at their pre-success levels. Success without obligation is the finest reward, but this is a scarce commodity. The world will rarely hand it to you, so you have to create it for yourself.

The first step is to redefine "success". We are used to thinking of it in external terms: as millions of dollars,

a high-ranking position, a plaque on the wall or fame among people you have never met. These are all things you can point to publically to prove you are successful, but they aren't what matters within your own world.

Internally, the most valuable fruit of any success is freedom. The greatest prize is to be able to do what you believe is most important at the moment without being held down by past obligations. Money, and to some extent fame and recognition, can sometimes help you achieve this freedom, but it isn't necessarily true that 10 times the money will give you 10 times the freedom. You also have to control your expenses and obligations.

Any "success" that also results in greater risk and obligation may not truly be a contribution to freedom. Think of the typecast actor or the struggling business owner. Many of the stereotypical roles seen as "successful" are little more than gilded prisons you would never want to inhabit yourself.

When you are poor, you have to carefully manage you pennies to make sure outflow matches inflow. Success requires the same sort of careful management. Just because you *can* do something within your expanded resources doesn't mean you *should* do it. You still have to monitor the burdens and obligations of every action, and refuse those "successes" that dig you in too deep.

Freedom is the real coin of the realm. Rich or poor, your lifelong allocation of time is still the same, so you have to make the most of every minute.

—G.C.

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