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THE TRAGEDY OF SUCCESS

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If you had an enemy who you wanted to hurt, what would be the best way to get even with him? You could sue him in court or humiliate him in the press. You could torture him on the rack or draw him over hot coals.

Or, if you really wanted to destroy his life in a slow and excruciating way, you could arrange to have him win the lottery. A few million dollars will do it. He'll probably never recover.

Never underestimate the destructive power of excessive and unwarranted good fortune. It zaps the life from individuals and societies. It detaches people from their roots and from healthy relations with reality. It promotes sloth and discourages growth. It encourages frivolous investments that drag down people's lives in the long run.

Winning the lottery may seem fun at first, but the penalty comes when the money runs out and you've lost the skills to sustain yourself. Then you may end up far worse off than you were before.

The same thing happens when you feed the pigeons in a city park. They love the free food, but when you feed them regularly, they lose the ability to forage for themselves. Their numbers expand under your largesse, so the environment can no longer support them naturally. When you stop feeding them, as you inevitably must, the pigeons will be in dire straits. It won't just be a little hunger now but mass starvation.

When someone experiences some form of good fortune—be it a job promotion, falling in love, sudden wealth, or winning a beauty contest—you want to congratulate them. It is remarkable, however, how quickly good fortune can morph into bad. Success is a disorienting change that most people

can't handle, and it often sets them up for future failure. Something apparently good in the short term may not be best in the whole arc of one's life.

Success tends to freeze people at the developmental level they were at when the blessing occurred. If you suddenly win everything you ever wished for, you have little incentive to move on. If you find fame as a movie star or a football player, you're pretty much trapped in that career. If you hadn't got what you wanted, you might have been forced to evolve, perhaps in a direction that is ultimately more meaningful.

All developmental growth involves some anxiety and risk. It requires that you be hungry enough to leave your comfort zone. By eliminating your hunger and offering safety, success can sometimes trap you in a velvet prison where life is too easy for your own good. There needs to be an edge to fall off, a nearby abyss, before you are really motivated to change.

Yes, you can be too pretty, too rich, too famous and too blessed. As soon as you have these things, you tend to take them for granted. You see them as an entitlement—something you deserve for your personal virtue. Often, however, the success turns out to be a product of dumb luck more than anything, and it can vanish just as easily as it came. Then, you're just another fool, another rags-to-riches-to-rags tragedy.

How many have sung the same song? They knew success, but they flew

too high, melted their wings and fell back to Earth. In the end, they would give anything for even a thimble full of what they once had, for the resources they once blew on trifles.

Success doesn't have to be turned away, but you must never take it personally. You are only the custodian of good fortune, not the recipient. It isn't a sin to have money in the bank; the risk comes when you start spending it. Sports cars, vacation homes and other unnecessary luxuries require ongoing maintenance that ultimately sabotages your freedom. With a little shift in the winds, these possessions and commitments can quickly become a prison.

Money, beauty and good fortune also let you buy your way out of tight spots that should have woken you up and forced you to change. You start falling back on dumb, awkward, expensive solutions rather than cheap and elegant ones.

Success is a powerful drug, like cocaine. It feels good at first, but you quickly become addicted. When the drug is then taken away, the results are usually sad. Most of history's greatest tragedies, from the Fall of Rome to the Great Depression can be directly linked to the excesses and euphoria of success.

Like a free buffet, success can be a pleasant experience at first, but for your own health and nutrition, you need to limit what you take from it.

—G.C.

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