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"Up" is Not the Only Way: Helping Students Re-imagine Success

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I know several accomplished people with crippling failure narratives. Their conspicuous successes don’t fit any of the few and confining success templates the dominant culture provides, so it’s hard for them to recognize how impoverished the world would be without them. Because they are people who read, reflect, ask life-giving questions, wrestle with ambiguities, change their minds, and generally prefer exploration to argument, they haven’t made it to the top of the ladders they were trained to climb. One of them never finished college. One has a PhD, but never made full professor because he preferred teaching, which he did with elegance and ingenuity, to scholarship. One resists going to parties with his peers. One lives at the edge of a dark vortex of depression. One overcompensates with over-commitment.

Their struggles with a sense of failure are not uncommon. There’s not much room at the top of a pyramid or a ladder or in a CEO’s office. Happily, some corporate structures are becoming more egalitarian. Crowd sourcing, TED talks, retreat weekends where everyone wears jeans, mindfulness practices, and a few “leaderless revolutions” have changed the way people respond to social challenges and cultural pressures. Alarming signs that social institutions as we have known them are malfunctioning have helped some of us begin to redefine success.

Nevertheless, it is my unscientific observation that over the past decade or two students have become noticeably more distracted, less curious, and more anxious. These three conditions are related. The distractions of almost incessant messaging, flashing ads, appeals from competing causes, demands of intersecting social circles, and, for many, managing growing piles of stuff consume the energy it takes to be curious and the leisure it takes to wonder or speculate. They erode the self-confidence it takes to experiment, try things out, take risks—in other words, to learn.

I'd like here to identify some of the ways in which our efforts to help students achieve success may be contributing to that erosion and how we might help cultivate an academic culture and conversation that is more sustaining, life-giving, and conducive to lasting well-being. Well-being, it seems to me, would include active engagement with the world, satisfying relationships, mental and physical health, and hope.

First a word from a few students on success. These are taken from a piece in *College Magazine*[i] that recorded students' responses to the question "What does success mean to you?" I offer three responses and invite you to notice some of the key terms:

> "Being a successful college student means starting to applying yourself now to prove to future employers you are responsible and when they hire you, they are making the right decision." – Daniel Gallagher, sophomore at Lehigh Carbon Community College.

> An average student with great networking skills will probably get just as far as a student with a perfect GPA." – Sabrina Cook, a sophomore at Yale University

> "I'd say that being a successful college student does enough to not fail any classes, doesn't skip enough assignments or class to be shed in a bad light with the teacher, and be involved with others in on campus activities (clubs, teams, events) and off campus activities (friends, parties, socializing)." – Pete Tarrant, a graduate of Ithaca College

What these three responses have in common besides a certain general earnestness is a focus on how they are or will be perceived by those in authority; a certain unexamined utilitarianism; and an acceptance that the institutional structures they inhabit will, one way or another, determine the terms of their present and future success. Please the employer, impress those in your social or professional network, please the teacher. The limitations of these notions of success are painfully obvious and may be ascribed partly to immaturity, but they also reflect incursions of a post-industrial corporate culture that regulates and commodifies time, labor, and even imagination. They expect, probably rightly, even if they're in cutting-edge environments where creativity is encouraged and new egalitarianism is encouraged, to be accountable, sometimes rather abjectly, to people in whose hands their livelihood lies.

Those of us who have them for four years, or a few more, if we work with grad students, have a chance to help students redefine success in more complex, more challenging, deeper, healthier terms. We can help them re-imagine success. Let me count the ways—here are a few.

1. We can take a critical look at the language we, they, and the media use when we talk about success, considering how the words trigger anxiety and activate unexamined assumptions about what one must do to "be saved." Here are a few words they are likely to hear so frequently (sometimes from us) they have probably internalized their implications without sufficient scrutiny.

"Top/bottom" – Although some corporations have made efforts to modify hierarchy and do away with the notions of "ladder" or pyramid that imply a race to the top, these terms are still imbedded in many conversations about success. You want to be at the top of your game. One motivational poster reads, "The toughest part of getting to the top of the ladder is getting through the crowd at the bottom." A simple Google search of "getting to the top" yields multiple

examples of motivational exhortations to the tune of “Strive to arrive at the top.” One danger of this metaphor was succinctly articulated by Alain de Botton: “Getting to the top has an unfortunate tendency to persuade people that the system is OK after all.”[ii]

Excellence – this seems like a laudable goal, and most college brochures mention it more than once. Built into its etymology is the notion of “superiority, distinction, surpassing others, being ‘high’ or ‘lofty.” So the notion of a vertical climb that is competitive, and that necessarily leaves the many behind suggests that excellence has to be “won” in a competition.

Competitive – students learn to look for what offers them a “competitive advantage” even in high school, particularly when they are filling out college applications. To question the value of competition requires an altitude it’s hard to get to, since it strikes at the heart of capitalist theory. But more and more experimental schools are, in fact, looking hard at it, and emphasizing collaboration over competition. When one doesn’t need to excel or win or beat out others, one can afford to share ideas more generously, cross-pollinate more frequently, and take more risks.

Winning/Losing – Competition of course entails winning and losing. And someone has to lose. I’ve seen this at work in highly motivated students, some of them law students, who become very skilled at turning conversation into argument, often forfeiting opportunities to be more exploratory, reflective, imaginative, or simply to slow down and muse. Most would agree that not everything can be bought or sold, though that notion is endangered; but the idea that success is to be *won* is built into the ways we fund educational opportunities, scholarships, grants, and student organizations, and the way we talk about those opportunities .

Without using up all my time commenting on problematic terms, let me just mention a few others, inviting you to consider the ways they encourage anxiety, urgency, utilitarianism, commodification:

fast-track (as opposed to slow food, slow conversation, slow, reflective learning)

people as *prospects* or *contacts* (as opposed to friends or colleagues)

friends, family members, or *team members* as terms expropriated to describe fellow employees

networking skills (as opposed, say, to lively conversational abilities)

productive / efficient (as opposed to imaginative, deliberative, patient)

working out (as opposed to playing)

drive (as opposed to curiosity, interest, being in the present)

positive thinking (as opposed to a willingness to "take a full look at the worst"—see Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bright Sided* on this subject!)

leadership (which, emphasis on team language notwithstanding, remains something most students are encouraged to develop)

2. We can revisit Thoreau

And others like him. We can listen once again, with them, to his astute, even prophetic critique of industrialism, individualism, capitalism, expansionism, conformity, ambition, greed, and growth. "The life which men praise and regard as successful," he writes, "is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of others?" And later, "…the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run. An average house in this neighborhood costs perhaps eight hundred dollars, and to lay up this sum will take from ten to fifteen years of the laborer's life, even if he is not encumbered with a family . . . so that he must have spent more than half his life commonly before his wigwam will be earned."

Learning to read Thoreau entails a good deal more than reconsidering American capitalism and its consequences; it's also an education in rhetoric, wit, and observation and an unapologetic invitation to spiritual awakening at the possible expense of "success." He replaces ambition with the hope of living deliberately, so as not, when one comes to die, to find out one has not lived. Thoreau's heirs continue to populate the literary landscape, combining lament for a damaged earth and criticism of the systems that do that damage with hope that lies in imagination, open hearts, spiritual awareness, and humility. There's a reason *Walden* is an American classic. And an American sermon we still need to hear.

3. We can encourage "downward mobility."

I borrow that term from a Stanford law professor who, having encouraged our son and others to consider going into hard, non-lucrative work of becoming public defenders, smilingly acknowledged that he was generally regarded as the "mentor to the downwardly mobile." Working with students of extraordinary privilege—economic and/or intellectual—he challenged them to envision a mission at the margins, to resist the seductions of high salaries, prestige, and impressive top-floor offices in order to serve the underserved, challenge inequity, mass incarceration, and systemic injustice, and in the process come to terms with their own lives in whole new ways.

I have worked with medical students over the past decade who make similar choices; all those in the small, self-selected cohort at the UCB-UCSF Joint Medical Program work at a "suitcase clinic" for the homeless and write theses in public health that generally have to do with improving healthcare for the poor. A fair number of premed students I taught a few years back at UC Davis came from migrant or immigrant communities in the Central Valley and planned to go back to work for very little among uninsured people whose health prospects were not very good. Affirming that sense of mission is an important part of our work, and of alleviating anxiety over achievement that liberates them to achieve what they do for purposes they have claimed as they chose "a path with a heart."

The growing number of politicians who refuse corporate contributions and seek campaign finance reform offer an interesting point of reference for students willing to consider “downward mobility.” We can help them consider what it means to resist being bought and sold – to distinguish between being paid fairly and being paid off.

4. We can equip them with questions.

Learning to question what might seem obvious lies at the heart of a liberal arts education in any case. Here are some questions they might not think to ask that can help allay anxiety by widening the lens. They are questions that deserve to be asked more than once—perhaps yearly. Perhaps daily.

Whose purposes am I serving?

What do I want money for?

What am I called to in this season of my life? (Not “What is my passion?” but what is my calling? Here, too, the word choice makes a considerable difference.)

What are the tradeoffs in the choices I’m making? (“How much of life” am I willing to give for what I’m pursuing?)

How have I adapted to this building/schedule/institutional culture/set of expectations?

What am I buying into? Who made the Kool-aid?

5. We can make the classroom a countercultural site where presence is practiced.

I had a chance to try this in a course on “contemplative reading” I began teaching years ago, and have continued in one form or another since then. Being completely present in the moment is hard when the daily distractions are so myriad. Even when you silence cell phones and monitor or close computer screens, students need help to bring their energies into the present moment. We all do. It takes only a few minutes, though, to model and encourage mindfulness and presence, and help students practice bringing their energies and focus to the present moment. We breathed—a few long, slow breaths, sometimes standing and stretching first. We stood or sat in complete silence for 1-3 minutes. Then the had a minute or two to jot down words, phrases, or feelings that came up in that silence. Sometimes we took another few minutes to reflect on the process. As we turned to the reading material for the day, I reminded them that we were not likely to “get through” or “cover” the material, but that we would see where the conversation about it led us and dwell there a while.

All semester the words “cover” and “get through” were deliberately in quotes. They had not only permission but a mandate to do one thing at a time, slowly, and stay there as long as it was fruitful. They often had explicit permission not to “finish,” if “finishing” or going on interfered with dwelling, or going in. We paused over words. We paused over each other’s words. We wrote some things out by hand. We had a good time. We didn’t finish. I have reason to hope some of them are not finished now, even a decade or so later. And I have reason to hope—and some anecdotal evidence—that these small practices led to others that have made them less anxious, more attentive, and more willing to wait for the unfoldings, disclosures, discoveries and surprises that come when one doesn’t try to “push the river.”

6. We can emulate Montessori.

Though Maria Montessori was a pioneer in early childhood education, her observations about learning, and the practices she developed and taught teachers are eminently pertinent to “higher” education, and to the problem of anxiety we’re discussing. One of the students in the small medical program I’ve worked in over the past ten years—a satellite program of UCSF where students take something of an alternative path to medicine—joked that her classmates rather happily thought of the program as “Montessori for medical students.” They work in teams, collaboratively. Though they are examined, the exams are oral, thoughtful, conducted by mentors. They learn inductively from cases. They determine what they need to learn next. Some of them—the ones I see—choose to spend a few hours a week on reflective reading and writing, sometimes poetry, sometimes stories, sometimes personal essays by people in the field. They have stress in their lives, but it is my observation that their stress doesn’t translate into chronic anxiety. The Montessori principles I see at work there can be implemented in most learning environments, though sometimes doing so involves pushing a bit against institutional norms, nomenclature, time frames, or assessment strategies. Here are a few of those principles:

--*"Follow the child"* – help students discern or rediscover their own interests, experience their own curiosities, frame questions that matter to them.

-- *Allow and encourage the student to go where curiosity leads her.* Encourage doing the work at hand for its own sake until she's done, taking the time it takes.

-- *Respect "sensitive periods."* This is Montessori's term for those developmental stages when one skill or another comes into sharp focus for the child. For older students this may simply mean asking them to consider what they're on the verge of, what learning curve they think they're on, what gives them particular energy as they make their way through required material. What are they ready for? Ripe for? These questions can be taken seriously even in the midst of highly structured curricula, schedules, majors, and gen ed requirements, though sometimes taking them seriously requires some subversiveness.

-- *Help them reclaim the ability to concentrate*. This means freeing them of external goals so as to enter into study and reflection more single-mindedly. If they have one "eye on the prize," they will distract themselves from the inherent value of what is at hand. Montessori discouraged competition, tests, rewards and punishments—and certainly grades—because all of those tended to erode the development of a sense of satisfaction over work well completed.

-- *Recognize and treat boredom, flat affect, utilitarianism, and indifference as symptoms of a pathology*. Understand teaching as a healing art and health as the capacity to take joy in work, find meaning in it.

7. We can put plants in the classroom

This may seem like an odd addition to a list of pedagogical strategies, but numerous studies have indicated that students learn better, concentrate more consistently, and enjoy learning more when they learn in the presence of living plant life. One such study, from the Royal College of Agriculture at Cirencester claimed that "attentiveness increases as much as 70% when plants are put in a classroom." In another, the group that worked with plants present recorded a reaction time that was 12% quicker than those working without. In effect, this meant their productivity rate was greater too. The blood pressure and pulse rates of the participants also returned to normal more quickly and their scores showed significant increases in post-task attentiveness.[iii]

Richard Louv, who has written extensively on "nature deficit disorder" an its relationship to learning, cites the well-documented value of the Japanese practice of "forest bathing" on peace of mind and learning capacity. Living and working in the presence of living plant life changes our brains, our heartbeats, our attitudes, our interest level, our energy. Speaking of the insular, artificial indoor environments many students inhabit for long stretches of daytime, he writes, "There's no denying the benefits of the Internet. But electronic immersion, without a force to balance it, creates the hole in the boat — draining our ability to pay attention, to think clearly, to be productive and creative."[iv] He raises a poignant and pertinent question for teachers in his consideration of what it might take to restore authentic relationship with the natural world, which includes knowing the names of plants, tending to them, spending time among them. "Progress," he reminds us, "can also be measured by our interactions with nature and its preservation. Can we teach children to look at a flower and see all the things it represents: beauty, the health of an ecosystem, and the potential for healing?"[v] Such a long look can offer a needed respite from technology overwhelm and the threat of terrorism.

8. We can help them cope with the news.

It's not just college that creates anxiety. The historical moment and culture we live in, mass media, chronic global conflict, economic instability, climate change, racism, epidemic illnesses . . . the list goes on . . . cause all of us to have to cope with anxiety most of the time, if we're alive and breathing and paying attention. For those who stand on the threshold of an adulthood saddled with student debt and facing underemployment, listening to the news is not a comfortable business. Many of them don't. But they need to. We can help them be willing to know what they can know, sorting out reliable sources, sifting evidence, gathering in circles of trust to talk about what is happening, figuring out how to "accept the things they cannot change, change the things they can, and find the courage to know the difference."

We can assure them it's not their job to save the world, but to participate in whatever is life-giving, sustainable, whatever serves the common good. We can help them reflect on and define the common good. We can help them focus on public issues from a place of generous conviction that "Everyone does better when everyone does better." We can help them step up to the challenging standard Hardy articulated when he suggested that "if way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst." We can help them tolerate that full look by standing there with them, bringing them back from the existential edge they may get to when they witness images of children starving in Yemen or Los Angeles or of children in cages at the border. We can discourage knee-jerk reactions that substitute for the kind of witnessing that takes a courageous step back to take in a little more, look a little longer and a little harder, and sometimes reassess their inherited judgments. We can help complicate their faith and their politics and their reading practices.

9. We can help them laugh.

Laughter, Wendell Berry reminds us "is immeasurable." A character in Christopher Fry's *The Lady's Not for Burning* asks the wonderful, resonant question, "For God's sake, shall we laugh?" It might be said that that's exactly why we should laugh—for God's sake, for the sake of spiritual sanity, because it reminds us that in the very long run, those of us who hold onto faith and hope can afford to laugh. Laughter is one mark of that hope. I'm not talking about the laughter we may enjoy from the varieties of political satire offered on Comedy Central, though that certainly offers an outlet and sometimes an astute critique of what deserves to be criticized. I'm talking about the more capacious laughter of recognition that takes delight, still, against all odds, in life itself—what small children do, or the antics of animals, or a deft moment of wit--and discovers even in the midst of hard things, small surprises that remind us of our deepest purposes—to nurture one another, to tend to the earth we've been given and our place on earth, to notice when we are nudged toward new knowing and to say yes.

10. We can help them find their way to "Yes."

One common exercise in improvisational theater is just to say yes to whatever happens: yes to the fallen object I now have to navigate around; yes to the line I didn't expect; yes to the intrusion; yes to the turtle someone let loose on stage. Learning to say that kind of yes to what comes may offer us all some respite from anxiety.

I want to end with one small story about what that kind of "yes" looks like. Between 1987 and 1991 the citizens of Estonia won their independence from the Soviet Union without firing a single shot. They understood as well as any population in modern times the power not only of solidarity and of showing up, but of singing. In 1989 they stood together 2 million strong in a human chain that extended 420 miles across the Baltic states. When Soviet tanks came after their one TV tower they stood together, unarmed, to face them down, and succeeded. And they sang. Fully a third of the Estonian population showed up at the national fairgrounds on one occasion to sing. All children were raised to believe in and practice the power of song. When Soviet police ordered brass bands to drown out their song, they sang louder. They took no lives, but they claimed life. And they taught their children by amazing example that we're all in it together, that life is not safe, but it can be joyful, and that singing together, breathing together, is a conspiracy worth joining. May we, in our turn, become, and help our students become, joyful co-conspirators.

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[i] https://www.collegemagazine.com/what-success-means-you/

[ii] Alain de (Swiss TV commentator) quoted in Timoteus Elmo, *Alain de Botton* (LOC Publishing, 2011).

[iii] http://plantsolutions.com/documents/PlantsForLifeReport.pdf

[iv] Richard Louv, *The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder* (NY: Algonquin Books, 2012).

[v] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (NY: Algonquin Books, 2012).