**A Story and Reality**

**The Story**

It is a hot summer day in the middle of July – only two days after my 18th birthday. I am packing the last of my bags into the red Ford Contour I drove throughout high school and that I lovingly named Regina Rose Petty (Regina for my favorite singer, Rose because she is red, and Petty because the first place I ever drove her was in Pettybone park). My Dad squeezes my final bag into the trunk and closes the lid with a resounding bang. There is a small moment of silence that follows, that whispers of the next, inevitable moment. There is nothing left to do now, except to say goodbye. My emotions conflict as tears well in my eyes and I turn to hug my parents and wish them farewell, while at the same time my heart pounds with excitement. Though it’s difficult to say goodbye I am anxious to start this journey – I am excited to feel the independence of being an adult pursuing my dreams.

I get in the car and, like the responsible adult I’m hoping to become, I check my mirrors, buckle my seat belt, and adjust my seat. *I am ready for this* I think to myself, and I realize, finally, how true this statement is. I back out of the driveway and head down the street. I can see still see my parents waving to me through my rearview mirror, but then I turn the corner and they are gone. I crank up the radio, letting Regina Spektor’s soft lyrics console the fact that I miss them already. Then I role down the windows and as the wind begins to dance around me and the open road stretches to infinity and beyond in front of me, I realize that I am *finally* on my way.

Unlike most recent graduates though, I am not going to college. I am taking a year off and, naïve as it may seem, I am going on a road-trip to view 12 of our nation’s national parks. That gives me one month at each park, the first of which is to be the Yukon, during which time I will camp out, explore, and write, and in doing so I will learn. I will learn about myself and I hope that, as I come out of it all, I will have a truer sense of who I am as a person. Socrates said, “Know thyself,” and that’s what I intend to do. And I intend to do it through this trip because I know it is something that I will enjoy – it is something that I love doing and that I will find happiness in.

Thoreau said in his book, Walden:

“The mass majority of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. *But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things*.” (Thoreau 7)

In my copy of the book, from the time that I first began reading Thoreau, I have scribbled, “lead a life in which you do what is true to yourself” next to this excerpt. In taking this trip, I hope to follow that advice. I am moving beyond the desperate lives of the majority of men and going out in search of what I enjoy doing and what will make me happy. After all, isn’t that the truest definition of success – to do what makes you happy and what will inspire in you your deepest passions? I know that this adventure will do that for me. And while it may not be an education like the ones the majority of my friends will receive from their respective colleges, it will still be an education in some sense of the word. Instead of learning from textbooks I will learn from my personal experiences and the lessons I will learn, I am sure, will stay with me for the rest of my life.

**Wake Up**

What you have just read is nothing more than a brief excerpt from a dream – my own personal dream of what I would do with my life if I were fortunate enough to feel no societal or financial limitations. It expresses my idea of how I would spend my time if I truly believed in a phrase I have often repeated to myself, that “success is happiness and doing what you feel passionate about” – the idea that to live a good life, one need only be happy. The sad, sad truth of the matter though, is that I do not truly believe this statement that I have, in the past, so adamantly preached. If I *truly* did believe it, I would be out in the world, living my dream, no matter how foolish it might seem to others. Instead, I am a freshman at Bryn Mawr College exploring myself through books instead of through experience and just beginning to come to terms with my own hypocrisy.

This entire idea was sparked by an exchange between my “In-Classed/Out-Classed” class and a local intercity high school. Through blog postings between the college and high school students, the subject of “success” and what it means to be successful came up. Many of the high school students claimed that one needed to go to college to be successful while all of us college students started saying that college was *not* a necessary component to success. I eagerly jumped in to agree with the rest of my classmates and all was fine in my mind until one high school students made a response that shattered everything. *How could we say that we didn’t need college to be successful when we were* in *college?* Of course I immediately jumped to my own defense, as most people do when they have been cornered into facing their own truth. I claimed that that fact was arbitrary – college and learning is what makes me, personally, happy, happiness is success, so college would help me fulfill my personal definition of success. I argued that the definition of success varies from person to person because so too does the definition of happiness; that going after that happiness would make a person successful and the thing that would bring that person happiness was not necessarily college – it could be anything. I proved my idealistic point but deep down inside, I knew that I was lying.

**Why I’m a Hypocrite**

As much as I want to believe that I can achieve a personal feeling of success by doing what makes me happy, I know that there is a part of me that does not trust this idea. If I truly trusted and believed in this idea, I suppose I would go after my dreams and let the chips fall where they might, idealistically hoping that everything would work out because I was pursing my dreams. But I know the world does not work in this way. That understanding is ultimately why I’m at Bryn Mawr.

I am not here, necessarily, because it will make me happy. I am here because Bryn Mawr is an open door. If I study hard I can earn a degree. With this degree and a decent GPA, I can get into graduate school, earn another degree, then get a job, and, ultimately, obtain job security and financial security. So the sad truth of the matter is this: as much as I love that idealistic concept that “success is happiness,” and as much as I would love to live my dream, I know and have accepted that it is unrealistic. I am in college because I equate having that degree which will lead me to a sense of both financial security and job security, to success; more simply put: I equate college to success. In my mind I am a hypocrite because I say “success is happiness” but what I mean is “success is happiness within reason – you also have to do *go to college, get a job* and *feel financially stable* to be successful.”

**Other Factors that Hinder the Dream**

Beyond acknowledging my true definition of success, and the role it plays in hindering my dreams, I need to confront the other factors that play into the idea of why I view my dreams, like the story described above, as unreasonable and as ideas that can never exist in reality.

*How I Was Raised*

A friend of mine and I were talking about why we were struggling with our feelings that our dreams were so unreasonable. In addition to a number of other factors, we discussed that our dreams, while beautiful, simply did not reflect the way that we were raised and the people we were brought up to be. While my parents have never held any expectations of me except that I do my best, I feel that there has always been this expectation that I would go to college – the dream I described, obviously, doesn’t fit with that expectation. Furthermore, I was raised in a middle class family and while my family and I have been fortunate enough to have never faced serious financial struggles, our financial situation certainly taught me the importance of job security and financial security from an early age. So I have always felt, it seems, that to be “okay” in this world, to be *successful*, I need to have a job that will make me a “living” and in order to have this, I need to go to college.

*Security*

I keep bringing up this word “security,” so it’s about time I defined it and explain why it doesn’t work with my “success is happiness” definition. Success is “freedom from danger, risk; safety” (“Security” def. 1). Thus this idea that I need job security and financial security to be successful stems from a belief that to lack this things would be dangerous. Think about it in this way: If I were really going to pursue that ambitious dream of mine, I would lack financial security and job security. How would I make money? By extent of that, how would I eat? How would I even be able to afford continuing to travel on that journey? To pursue that dream would be to throw security to the wind. I wouldn’t know what to expect from that situation and while the unknown is exciting, it is also startlingly scary. Ultimately, while the idealist in me completely wants to take part in that dream and to feel the excitement of the unknown, the realist in me says to stay put… it’s safer that way after all.

*Class*

The final component of why this dream isn’t realistic. Logistically, I can’t financially afford to take a year off of college to go chasing after this dream. My socio-economic class thus further limits my options in pursing my dreams… and thus in life in general, as well. It’s hindering, it’s frustrating, but it is reality. Socio-economic class plays such an integral role in the extent to which we are able to pursue our dreams.

I suppose that is what I want you to understand here. I am not a hypocrite because I want to be – I honestly and truly wish that I could live that naïve dream and that I could believe that idealistic statement that “success is happiness.” But it simply isn’t possible or reasonable given my financial circumstances and I think that is the trap that **so** many people – “the mass majority of men” so to speak - fall into in the modern world (Thoreau 7). We all (at least in the middle class I think) get caught up in thinking about what is financially feasible for us to do, and what dreams we cannot live because we do not have the wealth to live them. I am stuck in this mentality as well.

**To Finish It Up…**

I question how I can break away from that mentality. How does anyone break away from it? I suppose by taking the plunge – by diving into that unknown and living out the dream anyways – by saying “screw it” to the world and going after the dream despite everything else. But I don’t know if I can do that. I feel so safe as I am right now after all. Why would I want to challenge that safety when I know so many people would trade places with me in an instant? Why would I want to give that up? I know the answer of course – so that my life is not in vain; so that it is not desperate; so that I can live up to my own standards. But it will always be that initial jump past the realities of financial responsibilities and the need for a decent job that will hold me back from myself.

**Bibliography**

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