

The Recipe for Success: Mystical or Calculable?

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I was born a little over two decades ago, and in that time I have been rather disconnected from what it means to be successful. In other words, I haven't given much thought to it. I now find myself preparing to walk the stage and receive my diploma in the coming months, having an internship at my uncle's fish farm facility this coming summer, and preparing to pursue a higher education in a field that, four years ago, would never even have been on my radar. "How did I get here?", "Why was I able to graduate where others could not?", and "What help did I get along the way?" are just a few questions I've been asking myself after having read Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*. I've come to the conclusion that there is a recipe for success and its ingredients are unique to every person, but if we consider everyone to be a blender mixing together those ingredients, I think we will find that everyone has a bit of opportunity and cultural legacy poured into themselves and we never pass a glance at these items that have made us, well, us, and that's easy to do when you didn't do the pouring. So, what do you do when it's time to reflect on your path to success and you notice that life has slipped a few ingredients in without your knowledge? Well, for me, I realized I needed to take them into account now, allowing them to paint that broader and clearer depiction of what makes me who I am and what I've done. In the end, I realized that to find out who I was, I needed to go back in time and take a look at the family and environment that molded me. In other words, I couldn't just reflect on myself; I needed to consider everything that had a part to play. Before we examine how I ended up where I am today, let's first examine these mystery ingredients that life likes to slip into our blenders.

Opportunity: Blink and You Will Miss It.

Reading through Gladwell's *Outliers* was enlightening. I truly couldn't stop reading and finished it within a couple of weeks, but I think there is something to be said about

the topic he discusses that we cannot be misguided by if we are to understand why he wrote this novel. *Outliers* is truly about lifting the veil on what it means to be successful, or clearing the fog, if you will. It seeks to dispel the mystical aspects of what we see as success stories in others by describing the process of how they got there, the paths they took, the roadblocks they faced, the opportunities they were given (obvious and obscure), and the ways that our ancestors and our cultures can have an impact on our lives and our paths to success. Having said that, we can't think of this novel as a rulebook that we could follow that will lead us to some grand mountaintop standing next to other success stories like Bill Gates and Joe Flom. That simply isn't what Gladwell was striving for. What I believed his purpose to be with *Outliers* was to create a detailed series of patterns that we simply could not overlook because these patterns clearly have had an effect on an individual's ability to be successful or to be that outlier, having both positive and negative effects on people's lives, but those patterns don't set the rules, and I don't think anyone reading Gladwell's novel should be discouraged if they were born later in the year, haven't got their 10,000 hours in before 25, are poor and disenfranchised, lack the "street smarts," or things just don't line up the right way. Success is individualized; there is no set example, and if you put in the hard work and make the most of your opportunities, hopefully you'll attain your goals.

Growing up, I was fortunate to have a close-knit family in a town that we basically built ourselves, not unlike the Rosetans, but instead of a bunch of different families, just think of one large family in a very small town. More on that later. When I was growing up, there were no discussions about whether or not I was going to be successful; I was the first child, and everyone in my family just "knew" I was going to be someone. Of course, looking back now, while I understand it's morally unjust to tell a small child they will never amount to anything, no one in

my family actually knew that success was destined for me. How could you know? Essentially, they hoped and prayed for me, raised me, and did everything they could to keep me from becoming homeless. Now here I am about to graduate with an undergraduate degree, so it seems that their hard work paid off and their prayers were listened to, but we all know that doesn't paint the whole picture, and hopefully by the end of this, I can try my best to explain my success, or my own view of what success is. When I was younger, all of my grandparents were already retired, and no one in my family was what I would call an outlier. I mean, most of my family worked for the state, and those still working, that being my mother, father, and uncle, were a mortgage broker, a school bus mechanic, and a fish hatchery manager, respectively. By all means, these are meaningful jobs, but nothing bringing in millions of dollars or changing the world, but that was my upbringing with the idea of what success is and that certainly is what my family's legacy with success was. To me, being successful meant having a job and a house and living a life that would make you mentally, physically, and spiritually content, and to this day, that is still true. I may not be shooting for the stars, but who says I have to?

Growing up, the idea of success was never on my mind, and I didn't start to develop an idea of my definition of success until later on in high school. These patterns that Gladwell expertly points out certainly weren't obvious to the members of my family. I was born on August 8th, 2000. According to Gladwell, that makes me a prime candidate to have the best shot at becoming a Major League Baseball player, and yes, I did play baseball growing up, but that was never apparent to me or my family, who supported me during that time. Suppose I was told that I had a better shot at living the professional sports life and making lots of money. Would that have changed things? Would I have gotten my 10,000 hours in and become the best all-star athlete of the 21st century? Who knows, but I have a pretty good inclination that the answer would have

been no. As a child, I participated in a number of different activities, from baseball, karate, and bowling to fishing and even snowboarding, but my greatest passion was video games. In fact, only two of those things remain as staples of the activities I partake in during my free time: fishing and video games. I certainly, by this point, have put my 10,000 hours into both of these hobbies of mine, but does this mean that I'll make my money by partaking in them? Absolutely not. There's a running theme in my family that we do not make a living out of what we are the best at, only what we are good at. Growing up, I didn't know about this trend. Perhaps it's in my genes because I took to heart something that was never formally taught to me, and I believe I will live a more content life because of it. Now Gladwell poses a great question for discussion: should we be making opportunities for children no matter what their birth month so that they can practice and get their 10,000 hours to have a higher chance of doing what they love? In this case, I don't have a set answer. In this case, I'm content with the conservative or liberal outlook, but this question does lead me to wonder what we would do with a massive influx of people in any career if we just gave anyone under the sun a chance. I'll leave you with this question: If everyone became equally skilled in an area and one individual was just as qualified as anyone else applying, how would you determine which one you would hire? I'd say let's hire them all.

I was never told I was a "bright young man" or a "smart cookie" growing up, and I didn't need to be. I was never oblivious to the fact that I was smart, but I tried and still try to be humble, and I never let my intelligence get in the way of making meaningful, long-lasting relationships with friends I still have to this day. Social class, politics, and IQ scores meant next to nothing to me. I just wanted to meet people no matter who they were. As long as they were down-to-earth and all-around good people, we were friends. Gladwell mentions the effects that social class can have on raising a child, and my parents raised me more like little Alex from his

story, but my parents split when I was 10 years old, and my mother raised me and my brother as a single parent, and money wasn't exactly in overabundance. However, my parents still continued to raise me to be assertive when it mattered. Even though I don't talk much now, if something truly bothers me, I will speak up about it. I find that impressive given that neither my mother nor my father were ever taught to be assertive by their parents; hell, they were significantly poorer than I will likely ever be, but they were still able to teach their child to be good to himself through good and bad times.

Gladwell goes on to destroy the notion that the higher the IQ score a person has, the more successful they will become, and even without the evidence he gives, I gathered that long ago growing up. I've witnessed people deemed stupider than someone else do some rather remarkable things, and I've seen smart people with what afflicts Christopher Langan: a severe lack of practical intelligence. From the perspective of opportunity, something akin to the result of the Oppenheimer attempted murder would never fly in today's time, but that brings to light the impressive conclusion that *Outliers* makes from the perspective of opportunity. Oppenheimer, Flom, Gates, and Joy were hopefully able to reflect on the fact that none of them knew that the stars were aligning for them. None of them knew that the date of their birth was in a "goldilocks" zone to set them up to arrive on the scene of their career at the most opportune moment. Flom's experience is the most impressive. Being Jewish, being born when he was, and being the son of a garment maker were factors in what made him, but who would ever guess those three things would be the ingredients for the recipe for one of the greatest corporate take-over lawyers in his time? Certainly not me or Joe Flom, for that matter. If there is anything to be taken away from the importance of opportunity on the path to success, it's that truly anything can give you an

edge, so don't consider anything about yourself to be a negative factor because it could someday be something that puts you on that level with the rest of these outliers.

Legacy: Does What Your Ancestors Did Affect Your Success?

Right away, this aspect of Gladwell's *Outliers* made more sense to me, and I believe that is because, in the moment, I don't think the average individual can truly distinguish if pursuing or walking away from any one opportunity is going to make or break their path to success. On the other hand, I can say without any doubt in my mind that if it weren't for the actions taken by the generations that preceded me in my family and the support of my still living relatives, I would not be where I am today. Truthfully, I don't know where I would be without the support of family and friends, but I can say with certainty that I most likely wouldn't be here today writing this paper, I would not have an internship this summer, and I would not be pursuing any higher education than this, let alone receiving a diploma in the coming months. Having been given the opportunity to reflect back upon what has led me to be successful up until this point, I can identify just a few opportunities that have allowed me to gain some distance along the path to success, but without the aspect of my family's legacy and again, the support of my living relatives, I wouldn't even be on the path at all. I'd be lost somewhere on the side roads. Perhaps even dead in a ditch.

My family hails from almost every inch of Ireland and Scotland. They were potato farmers and shepherds the whole lot, and eccentric at that. Gladwell's tale of the feuds in Kentucky was all too familiar to me, and the experiment he highlights had me fuming a little just thinking about the situation, and I'm not even from the South. Cultural legacy is undoubtedly real, but using it as a way to explain the ways in which we act or why math comes easily to us

seems foreign, almost as if we'd never expect anyone to believe the fact that I'm so easily angered because my relatives were shepherds or that the Chinese are good at math because of the way their culture deals with numbers. It sounds far-fetched without any explanation, examples, or statistics to back it up. Statistics certainly aren't going to cut it if I injure an individual in a fit of rage and blame my dear old great-great-great-great grandfather, the shepherd from Glasgow, I never met. The joke aside, there is something important about cultural legacy that means we just can't ignore it. Similarly, with the importance of opportunity to those who have been successful, cultural legacy can present both a hindrance and an advantage on the path to success, and we can and need to learn from the ways in which legacy has affected Korean society's ability to pilot safely and the ways in which it has allowed those from Asian countries to become so steeped in hard work that Japan has students going to school 243 days a year and China has individuals bringing the rice worker's mindset to every avenue of society. I'm glad to have learned that the road to success does not need to feel so mystical, and while it is hard to say who will wind up as an outlier, I can say for certain that there were many opportunities as well as aspects of cultural legacy that allowed that person to arrive at where they are today.

I simply couldn't end the paper without talking about what allowed me to be sitting here writing this paper today. With a diploma dangling in my face, an internship with my uncle's fish hatchery exciting me about the future, and all the wonders and worries that are plaguing me about pursuing a higher education in the field of aquaculture just a little more than a year's time away, it all starts with my great grandfather, Thomas Meehan, changed to Mehan, one because my great grandfather was petty, and two because back in the day, America hated even itself, or wait, it still does. Thomas Meehan set up shop with his wife and five children in Stillwater, New York. Sadly, Tommy Jr. died of an aneurysm at 22 months, so now Tommy Sr. was stuck with

his wife and four girls, my grandmother, Euphrasia Meehan, and my three great aunts, Sarah Meehan, Helen Meehan, and Virginia Meehan. He raised these girls to be some of the toughest women this side of the Atlantic, and boy were they, and truthfully, they needed to be for what was to come.

You see, the Meehan's had a stretch of good luck being that they were the first Irish to set up shop in the little town of Stillwater and they made the most of it. My great grandfather built a big inn at the center of town called the Moose Head Tavern, and soon after, all the rest of the Meehan clan came over in waves to the point where we ran and just about still run every bit of society in that small little town on the Hudson River. Not long after almost all the Meehan clan had settled in, there was an incident between Cillian Doyle and my grandmother that led to bad blood between the Doyle and Meehan clans, and violent acts occurred. Just think of Stillwater during this time as a mini-Harlan, Kentucky. After the violence subsided, the DoYLES wised up and decided to relocate to Mechanicville, New York, just a short distance down the river. My great grandfather had grown old, and my grandmother took over his ruling hand as the head of the town. My grandmother knows how to harbor a grudge best, so in spite of the Doyle's, she and her sisters made it their mission to have every aspect of society in Stillwater, albeit a smaller town, be triply better than Mechanicville's. Most notably, that was the difference between the schools. In its hay day, long before I was born, Stillwater's school was the best in Saratoga County. It has since dropped, but in contrast, Mechanicville's school has always been at the bottom of all the public schools in Saratoga County, and that is my grandmother's proudest achievement.

Here's where we will speed up the story, as I've just noticed I'm probably going to reach 10 pages. My grandmother went on to sell the Moose Head Tavern to the gas station chain Stewart's for a rather large sum of money, and spent half of it to buy houses for her and her sisters and the other half to save for her family. She would go on to have two children. My uncle Aaron, was the oldest and, as soon as he could, he moved far away because he and my grandmother were just much too similar for their liking, and Zachary, my father, the youngest. My father would stay in Stillwater, going to college to become a mechanic, and he had two children, myself and my younger brother, Lucas.

Now here is where everything falls into line, so stay with me as I give a little recap. My great grandfather took his family from Ireland to settle down in a small town in Saratoga County, not long after his only infant son dies of an aneurysm, and Tommy turns from a jovial, caring father to a rather strict disciplinarian who raised some of the toughest girls I've seen yet (I can only imagine what they were like in their hey day). Soon after, all the family follows suit and comes over, and the inn that Tommy built attracts a young Irish man from the neighboring town who gets into a disagreement with my grandmother (the man must have had balls of steel, pardon my French). There's a period of bad blood that sets the stage for my grandmother, who harbors a mean grudge and builds things around the town with the help of her three sisters that make Stillwater ten times more desirable to this day than Mechanicville. She then lives a happy life, eventually selling the inn and getting nice properties for herself and her sisters, and has two sons, one of whom is my father, who has a child with his wife, who is me.

Because of all this, I was able to go to a public school that was, and still is, considerably better than the neighboring towns. I was closest to my benevolent and strict grandmother, and the

first one born of my generation in the family, because my uncle didn't want to write a thesis and have a child. My grandmother and I are now the closest people in my family, and I am set to receive her other half of the money from the sale of the inn on the condition that I make something of my life. My uncle, realizing he can't stand my grandmother anymore, leaves for college and realizes he wants to study aquaculture, which eventually leads to him opening his own facility, the one I am to do an internship at. This opportunity intrigues me to the point that I've decided to pursue a higher education in the subject. So, there's a bit of my legacy and the opportunities I have been given in life. I'll conclude with this: it is almost impossible to think about a successful person and not want to know about their path to success. What opportunities came their way? How did their familial and cultural legacy give them that great advantage? If you can reflect on your path to success and say without any doubt that you are a 100% self-made success story, then you are the true outlier.