

Life-giving Success

by Gordon W. Brown

Our lives are struggle. Sometimes we feel so stuck in the muck and mire of trying to succeed that we begin to doubt ourselves. At times we look in the mirror and are disappointed instead of hopeful, we see death instead of life. Yesterday, I was talking with a friend on the phone. We talked about a variety of things in our lives, catching up. We shared some history and some of how we came to be what and where we are today. As we talked, from somewhere in my subconscious, the words “I am a fraud” bubbled to the surface. As I said this, the gnawing doubt (most of which I have managed to overcome) was that I had not become all I could have been. Had I always set my sights too low?

Vonnegut and Denver get to the heart of the matter. And the ideas found in Exodus are both challenging and restorative. Are we Life-givers? Are we active in preparing our future? Do we seek life, joy, hope? Do our thoughts lift us? Can we put our past in perspective and take some credit for those activities and accomplishments that testify to our humanity? Yes, because we learn how. Yes, because we share our awkward truth with courage and humility.

Kurt Vonnegut (playwright, novelist, non-fiction writer)—

“When I was 15, I spent a month working on an archeological dig. I was talking to one of the archeologists one day during our lunch break and he asked those kinds of ‘getting to know you’ questions you ask young people: Do you play sports? What’s your favorite subject? And I told him, no I don’t play any sports. I do theater, I’m in choir, I play violin and piano, I used to take art classes.

And he went, ‘Wow! That’s amazing!’ And I said, ‘Oh no, but I’m not any good at ANY of them.’ And he said something then that I will never forget and

which absolutely blew my mind because no one had ever said anything like it to me before: ‘I don’t think being good at things is the point of doing them. I think you’ve got all these wonderful experiences with different skills, and that all teaches you things and makes you an interesting person, no matter how well you do them.’

And that honestly changed my life. Because I went from failure, someone who hadn’t been talented enough at anything to excel, to someone who did things because I enjoyed them. I had been raised in such an achievement-oriented environment, so inundated with the myth of Talent, that I thought it was only worth doing things if you could ‘Win’ at them.”

John Denver (singer-songwriter)—

“I have a definition of success, and what success is to me is when an individual finds that thing which fulfills himself, when he finds that thing that completes him and when, in doing it, he finds a way to serve fellow man. When he finds that—he is a successful person.

It doesn’t make any difference whether you are a ditch digger or a librarian or someone who works at the filling station or the President of the United States or whatever, if you’re doing what you want to do and in some way bringing value to the life of others, then you’re a successful human being.

It so happens that in my area, which is entertainment, that success brings with it a lot of other things, the money, the fame, the conveniences, the ability to travel and see the rest of the world, all of those are just icing on the cake and the cake is the same for everybody.”