

Misery as a Turning Point for Academic Success

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Four factors seem to account for the untimely success of education late-bloomers—individuals who compile a mediocre academic record in high school but become serious-minded, dedicated college students. Late bloomers early express a capacity for total commitment and are given a second opportunity to excel. In addition, almost all late-bloomers experience a negative turning point. First, they are miserable; then, they succeed. Misery has been similarly implicated in making changes through psychotherapy, Alcoholics Anonymous, and cult conversion. As in these other areas of individual change, a student who is miserable enough to want to change may not know how to do it. At this point, instructors, advisors, and counselors have a special opportunity to become agents of change. This is precisely when they ought to intervene in order to provide social support.

It was a Thursday afternoon in March when Jennifer came to my office. The young woman's parents had urged her to see me for some advice about improving her dismal academic record. She had approached the end of her freshman year and was on the verge of flunking out. After speaking with her and reviewing her transcript, I was convinced that Jennifer was intelligent enough to succeed, but was totally uninvolved with campus life. I thought that she might benefit from changing into a major she genuinely enjoyed and from participating more in campus activities. Within a week of our meeting, Jennifer had taken my advice: She changed her major from English to speech communication and joined the campus chorus. By the end of the term, she had dropped out of school.

What Jennifer failed to tell me (and I failed to ask) was that she was having a wonderful time and didn't feel any particular need to remain in college. While enrolled in a full-time program (and attending classes only when she "felt like it"), she also held a part-time job which gave her plenty of spending money, was dating her supervisor at work, and was otherwise preoccupied with partying. Her parents paid most of her bills, and she hadn't really considered what she wanted to do as a career. Like many other college students, Jennifer was not terribly interested in learning for its own sake. From her point of view, there simply was no incentive to give up all the good times in favor of spending man hours in the library.

Bill Levin at Bridgewater State College and I have long

wondered how we might get the Jennifers of the world to become committed students. To this end, we recently interviewed a sample of honor students at Northeastern University who represent a particular variety of *educational later-bloomers*—serious-minded, dedicated college students who had compiled only mediocre academic records while in high school. As late bloomers, many of these honor students had earlier "gone through the motions" of pursuing a college education. Borrowing from Merton's (1949) typology of modes of adaptation, they had rejected the goal of academic success while continuing to attend college in a merely perfunctory or formalistic manner. Such a person remains in school because that is what middle-class Americans are expected to do (Levin & Levin, 1991).

Based on our interviews with late-blooming honors students, we were able to identify four factors that seem to account for the untimely success of many late-bloomers: capacity, opportunity, precipitants, and social support (Levin, 1993).

Setting the Stage for Success

Capacity

First, not unlike students who succeed on time, the late-bloomers we studied had a good deal of intellectual potential. They were bright and capable, to be sure. But, perhaps even more than their early-blooming counterparts, the most telling aspect of the late bloomers' potential may have been

their capacity for total commitment and involvement. During high school, many of the late-bloomers we interviewed were almost fanatically devoted to a cause, a hobby, a job, a sport, or an idea. Many had been *too busy to study*. While in high school, for example, one young man had become committed to physical exercise. Hard-pressed to find the time to hit the books, he had still managed to jog, lift weights, run, bike, and swim on a regular basis. Another student we interviewed had been heavily into illegal drugs. He had spent hours in the library, but not doing his homework. Instead, he had read and researched the literature concerning his addiction. Then there was the mechanical engineering major who now has a 3.6 cumulative grade-point average, but had only a 2.5 average in high school. He, however, had been a member of his school's debating team and chorus, in addition to working at a job more than 20 hours a week (Levin, 1993).

Opportunity

Clearly, many young people with potential never bloom because they lack the economic resources to do so. Their parents may be lower- or working-class in terms of socioeconomic status. They simply cannot pay the cost of a college education.

Thus, educational ritualism is largely a middle-class phenomenon. Because their parents help to pay the bills, students coming from the middle and upper classes can often afford to continue their college education in spite of indifference or poor performance. As a result, they are able to remain in school, biding their time until their apathy might be transformed into educational commitment.

Opportunity also varies from society to society. Almost everywhere outside of the United States, the timing of academic success is inflexible. Students must achieve high grades and achievement test scores early in their academic careers; they must also enter college by a specified age. Thus in England, India, and Japan, students who have not excelled by the time they reach high school have traditionally been effectively disqualified as college material. What is more, students in such countries have not been given opportunities to do so later in life, regardless of their academic potential. Even after the educational reforms of the post-World War II era, highly structured lines of study separating high school attendance from access to college remain the modal pattern around the rest of the world (Jones, 1990; Levin & Levin, 1991).

In American society, we at least tolerate some degree of late-blooming. Almost 20% of all American college students were C and D students in high school. At least one third of all colleges in the United States have open admission policies. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of students who begin at community and junior colleges later transfer to four-year institutions. The growing number of women who return to college after raising children provide a significant new pool of potential late-bloomers. Similarly, the increasing acceptance of mid-life career change has created an entirely new category of late late-bloomers who continue their edu-

cation after spending decades in the work force (Levin & Levin, 1991).

Hitting Bottom Before Climbing to the Top

Precipitants

From our interviews with late-bloomers, Bill Levin and I were able to identify a number of precipitants—situations or events which served as turning points for late academic success. A few of these precipitants were positive. In one case, for example, a young woman bloomed after developing a close relationship with a boyfriend who expected her to be a serious student. In another case, a late-bloomer gave credit to a new and exciting course that inspired him to study hard and to change his major.

Even when positive turning points could be located, however, they were almost always accompanied by negative precipitants as well. Indeed, many of our late-bloomers were, at least on a temporary basis, intensely frustrated, upset, and disappointed before they succeeded. In a word, they were first *miserable*; then they bloomed.

In a few cases, the negative turning point consisted of a tragedy that hit close to home, too close to home for comfort—for example, the death of a close friend or relative through either suicide or homicide or a near-death experience because of a drug overdose.

Many of the honor students we interviewed were a few years older than their schoolmates, having dropped out of college for a year or two, transferred from another college, or spent a few years in the military. At some point prior to matriculating (or rematriculating), they began to acknowledge the importance of their educational deficiency, viewing it as an obstacle, a failing, a major shortcoming to overcome. While out of school, some had been forced by circumstances to take jobs that were low-paying, boring, or unpleasant. They then realized that their career opportunities would be greatly enhanced by returning to school and studying toward a college degree.

Because Northeastern University is an institution that stresses cooperative education, most of the late-bloomers in our sample had taken a job for a six-month period while undergraduates. Many suggested to us that their work experience "on co-op" had showed them, perhaps for the first time, the strong connection between grades and the work they were likely to be doing after they graduated. An unpleasant co-op was particularly motivating; it forced the student to deal with the likelihood that, unless things changed drastically, this was the kind of monotonous job they might be forced to fill for the rest of their lives. Some reported that they despised the work experience they had been assigned while still bad students (the better co-op jobs generally go to better students). They became almost consumed with possibilities for improving the prospects for a meaningful career.

The importance of misery as a precondition for change has been duly noted in several related areas of behavioral

science and policy. Social theorists have long recognized the profound impact of negative forces in the process of social change. In the nineteenth century, for example, Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1964) applied a similar notion to change at the societal level. He argued that group conflict rather than cooperation or harmony surrounding the economic institution provided the catalyst necessary for more advanced forms of social life. In its extreme form, conflict took the form of revolution out of which a new synthesis emerges. For example, capitalism developed out of the remnants of feudalism; communism arises from the ashes of capitalism. More recently, Coser (1956) suggested that conflict was functional for the maintenance of social order.

At the individual level, misery has also been observed to operate as a turning point for important change. According to Lyddon (1990), profound modifications to personality through psychotherapy are often a result of some temporary stress to the client's system in the form of "system jolts, turbulent environmental stresses, or internal conflicts" (p. 123). From this perspective, difficult problems, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, are regarded not merely as perceptual errors in the interpretation of life events, but as powerful opportunities for enhancing mental health.

Cult conversion is another area of change in which misery has been shown to play an important role. According to Lofland (1966), those young adults who decide to convert to cult membership typically experience considerable tension in their everyday lives. They feel frustrated in achieving their goals and sense the tension more acutely than most people do. In fact, many of them are society's misfits, vulnerable people who are disillusioned, dissatisfied, disappointed with life, and are headed "down and out" (Appel, 1983). For example, many had lost or quit a job or had flunked out of school (Lofland, 1966).

A final area of change in which misery seems to play an important, if not a crucial, role is that of recovery from alcoholism. Founded in 1935, the treatment program known as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has more than 14,000 chapters and a membership of over a quarter of a million alcoholics. According to AA, an alcoholic must first be motivated to quit before he is able to control his drinking. AA teaches that the alcoholic must reach "rock bottom" before help is effective (Bourne & Levin, 1983). At that point, he or she is ready to accept change.

Readiness to Accept Change

Social Support

In all of these related areas of individual change—cult conversion, psychotherapy, and recovery from alcoholism—misery may be an important, even a necessary, but clearly not a sufficient condition for change to occur. Misery in all of these areas provides the motivation. It is a turning point. In addition, however, the individual who now seeks to change must be shown how to do it. In psychotherapy, of

course, the therapist is present to lend support and guidance to a client who is motivated to change.

In AA, this is accomplished through peer support. The association is made up entirely of ex-alcoholics who come together to relate their experiences with alcohol and tell other members how they successfully struggled to overcome their own addiction. The steps involved in remediation are clearly delineated, and the new member is encouraged to comply. If someone seems on the verge of succumbing to temptation, other members of AA will act as parents, teachers, and supporters through communication and personal example.

In cult conversion, members of the cult similarly provide a positive affective bond for a new convert who has given up his ties to conventional society, but remains unsure of the truth of their world view. Cult members engage the recruit in frequent and intensive interaction—for example, in an organized retreat in which the new convert has close association with those already totally committed. In this way, the recruit is intensively exposed to the group supporting the new standards of behavior he is motivated to adopt (Lofland, 1966).

There are probably numerous college students who are miserable enough to want to succeed in school. Relatively few will do so. Instead, they lower their level of aspiration, change their goals to those that do not require a college degree, or find some source of satisfaction outside of their jobs. Those who cannot adjust and remain miserable, in their quest for acceptance and success, may become deviants.

Many potential late-bloomers simply do not know how to succeed. They may not know how to study, they may not have friends who support and encourage their success, they may not know what to read, or they may be timid about changing their major in line with their personal interests and goals. Those who have dropped out of school may not easily be able to find sources of encouragement and support. Even those still in school may act from the negative self-concept they held in the past rather than on the basis of the self-confidence they will need in the future.

Once a student is ready to accept the importance of educational success, therefore, instructors, advisors, and counselors have a special opportunity to become agents of change. This is when they ought to intervene to provide structure and support. Timing is crucial. Just like AA members who seek to recover from alcoholism, incipient late-bloomers may need inspired mentors and role models. Just like teenagers on the verge of cult conversion, they may seek peer counseling and involvement. Some will look for tutoring and advice. Others will want support and encouragement. If they find what they need, they may succeed. If not, they may remain miserable.

In closing, allow me to return to the case of Jennifer, a student who came to me for advice and then dropped out of school. After leaving college, Jennifer got a full-time job as a waitress in a pizza restaurant. Her parents stopped sending money and her boyfriend left. She was suddenly less than happy with her life. She began to ask, "Is this the kind of

boring, tedious, underpaid job that I might have to take the rest of my life?" Ten months later, Jennifer went back to Northeastern. She changed her major, changed her friends, changed her thinking about school, and became a straight A student.

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