

## **The Sweet Smell of ‘Success’ Isn’t All That Sweet**

By Laurence Shames

John Milton was a failure. In writing *Paradise Lost*, his stated aim was to “justify the ways of God to men.” Inevitably, he fell short of accomplishing that and only wrote a monumental poem. Beethoven, whose music was conceived to transcend Fate, was a failure, as was Socrates, whose ambition was to make people happy by making them reasonable and just. The inescapable conclusion seems to be that the surest, noblest way to fail is to set one’s standards titanicly high.

The flip side of that proposition also seems true, and it provides the safe but dreary logic by which most of us live: the surest way to succeed is to keep one’s strivings low – or at least to direct them along already charted paths. Don’t set yourself the probably thankless task of making the legal system better; just shoot at becoming a partner in the firm. Don’t agonize over questions about where your talents and proclivities might most fulfillingly lead you; just do a heads-up job of determining where the educational or business opportunities seem most secure.

After all, if “success” itself – rather than the substance of the achievements that make for success – is the criterion by which we measure ourselves and from which we derive our self-esteem, why make things more difficult by reaching for the stars?

What is this contemporary version of success really all about?

According to certain beer commercials, it consists in moving up to a premium brand that costs a dime or more so a bottle. Credit card companies would have you believe success inheres in owning their particular piece of plastic.

If these examples sound petty, they are. But take those petty privileges, weave them into a fabric that passes for a value system and what you've got is a national mood that has vast motivating power that can shape at least the near future of the entire country. Under the flag of success, modern-style, liberal arts colleges are withering while business schools are burgeoning – and yet even business schools are having an increasingly hard time finding faculty members, because teaching isn't considered “successful” enough. Amid a broad consensus that there is a glut of lawyers and an epidemic of strangling litigation, record numbers of young people continue to flock to law school because, for the individual practitioner, a law degree is still considered a safe ticket.

The most sobering thought of all is that today's MBAs and lawyers are tomorrow's MBAs and lawyers: Having invested so much time and money in their training, only a tiny percentage of them will ever opt out of their chosen fields. Decisions made in accordance with today's hothouse notions of ambition are locking people into careers that will define and also limit their activities and yearnings for virtually the rest of their lives.

Many, by external standards, will be “successes.” They will own homes, eat in better restaurants, dress well and, in some instances, perform socially useful work. Yet there is a deadening and dangerous flaw in their philosophy: It has little room, little sympathy and less

respect for the noble failure, for the person who ventures past the limits, who aims gloriously high and falls unashamedly short.

That sort of ambition doesn't have much place in a world where success is proved by worldly reward rather than by accomplishment itself. This sort of ambition is increasingly thought of as the domain of irredeemable eccentrics, of people who haven't quite caught on – and there is great social pressure not to be one of them.

The result is that fewer people are drawn to the cutting edge of noncommercial scientific research. Fewer are taking on the sublime, unwinnable challenges of the arts. Fewer are asking questions that matter – the ones that can't be answered. Fewer are putting themselves on the line, making as much of their minds and talents as they might.

The irony is that today's success-chasers seem obsessed with the idea of not settling. They take advanced degrees in business because they won't settle for just a so-so job. They compete for slots at law firms and investment houses because they won't settle for any but the fastest track. They seem to regard it as axiomatic that “success” and “settling” are opposites.

Yet in doggedly pursuing the rather brittle species of success now in fashion, they are restricting themselves to a chokingly narrow swath of turf along the entire range of human possibilities. Does it ever occur to them that, frequently, success is what people settle for when they can't think of something noble enough to be worth failing at?