

## **Christopher Stanleigh Ronan Gagné**

### **What matters most to you, and why?**

#### **Community is most important**

If one were to define “what matters most to you” as “what commands your greatest attention,” I could not help but acknowledge the overriding importance of community. Prima facie, the relentless concern for one’s community appears to be the foolish pursuit of an ethical ideal without a practical application. However, an examination of the importance of community reveals that its value resides not only at the aggregate level, but also within and for the individual.

I acknowledge the limited capacity of any language to convey a subtle idea, especially when one word can imply a wide gamut of meaning depending on one’s audience. American culture is generally individualistic and therefore we have relatively few words that fully articulate the broader concept of the community. The conventional definition ranges from the family to the corporation and from the personal network to the country. For Hobbes, it was a leviathan formed and sustained by otherwise powerless individuals to create physical and psychological security, to realize a common aspiration, and to retain a common history. My definition of community is inclusive of this idea but is keenly aware of the dynamics between individuals in the daily interactions of the community. To me, a more apt model for community is a healthy ecosystem, where each part is adapted to exist in the whole, and the function of the whole is contingent on the integrity of its parts. I believe in an amalgamation of occidental ideas of individualism and oriental ideas of community, a community without the implicit loss of the identity and importance of the individual.

## **Why the conventional definition of “success” is less important**

Like community, success has many meanings and metrics originating from a variety of cultures and value systems. The conventional American measurement includes money, fame, and status. Americans rank companies not based on their socially redeeming impact, but based on their SEC filings. We idolize supermodels and rap stars based on their demigod-like aura and perceived superiority, despite the fact many are utterly unhappy and unfulfilled. Americans typically offer respect based on a title or social role rather than on personal history or record of service.

An individual who claims that they are committed to success has said nothing. Most sane people care about success, but it is impossible to gain any value or insight into someone’s character solely through their possession of the drive for success. On the positive side, it is certainly true that the drive for success provides direction and motivation. However, these qualities alone do not provide an ethical construct within to operate, and therefore will not guarantee a lasting success. The greatest villains of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all possessed direction and motivation. Did that ultimately bring them any type of success, and if so, for how long and at what cost? The executives at Enron and MCI WorldCom were undeniably committed to success, but their ethical transgressions ultimately brought catastrophic failure that has now extended beyond their individual fall to damage the business communities of which they were a part. If we were to universalize the executives’ actions (as in Kant’s ethical system), would the community that they took advantage of perish? Could it flourish?

The materialistic view of success so common in American culture produces the wrong incentives. It motivates us to work diligently, even if we are patently unhappy with our careers and lives. Our drive for success unattached to a value larger than

ourselves causes us to suffer, and it creates a demand for escapist entertainment and petty amusement that is largely unique to American culture. For too many people, saving money for retirement is more important than what they are doing to get there. Work can be unbearable, demeaning, and soulless, and still appear to be a path to success. When we measure our success in dollars, trophies, and titles, we will remain unfulfilled.

Ego brings a further problem. According to Steven Cooper, an Occidental College alumnus and current CEO of Enron, most business failures result from poor management. The success-oriented individual manages from hindsight, unwilling or unable to acknowledge their mistakes because they feel a need to protect their own interests, their own ideas of success. The community-oriented individual inherently seeks the insight and foresight of others because they care more about their community and less about their personal agendas. These individuals are typically at the leading edge of their fields where they need all of the insight they can muster. They are not martyrs, they are comrades.

Selfishness brings failure; pragmatic selflessness brings success especially because fulfilling the “American dream” was never the goal. My heroes are not supermodels or fast food entrepreneurs. Despite their relentless pursuit of their material objectives, these icons are utterly unacquainted with the common pursuit of the human race. The canned regurgitations of a tired idea and the ceaseless hunt for the next trendy material good do not push the human race forward and, in fact, it is often regressive. Automating the restaurant and demoting the artisan to a mechanic of the machine causes an abuse of the community. Indeed, as Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, what good can come from a man who has spent twenty years of his life making heads for pins? I

instead glorify the scientist, inspired by a muse, relentless in the pursuit for a cure or knowledge. I glorify the artist, the avenue of creation, pushed by a drive to make a change for the sake of the change rather than its selfish results. Embracing communion is about making a change not for the ego but for the benefit of others and therefore the good of the implicit whole.

On the other hand, a commitment to the community speaks volumes of the individual. The community-oriented individual is uncompromisingly ethical, relentlessly progressive, and mindful of the people and institutions that have enabled their success. These traits inherently encourage the formation of the success they seek. Therefore, I focus on an alternative way to measure success. Success informed by the community is composed of sustainable profitability, self-actualization, and harmonious relationships instead of money, fame, and status. To attain the conventional standards of success, it is appropriate to make one's own personal success the chief object of one's concerns. To attain the broader success, one only need embrace the community, aid it to function properly, and success will inherently follow.

Furthermore, success remains an object upon the horizon, a final destination some time and distance ahead in the future. It is the path towards that success, and therefore the community and institutions, that is most important. For the goal can give a direction, but the manner in which that goal is pursued actualizes the person's values. For example, my volunteer work for the U.S. Forest Service in the summer of 2002 provides a useful support for this discussion. For example, it was my duty as a wilderness patrol officer to hike from a trailhead to a lake, picking up trash, cleaning fire rings, and educating hikers along the way. I thought of my duties as going beyond the mechanics to fostering the optimal use of a precious resource by my community. If the

path to the lake were a simple straight line from the trailhead, and my task were simply to pick up trash, then both the route and the task would have been relatively straightforward. However, the trail is often difficult, and my goal was to make a lasting change. Therefore, just as one cannot cross a rugged terrain by blindly following the bearing of their compass, one rarely finds their success with little effort. Those who by chance inherit their success find it a shallow victory and struggle with their ignorance, lack of fulfillment, or even insanity. While one would be foolish to ignore their direction of their success and wander aimlessly, in the day-to-day process of life it is less meaningful.

What I discovered last summer is that the greatest joy is to found in walking, not arriving. It is certainly true that the lake vista is beautiful, but it is not my chief object; I will spend most of my life walking and if I don't enjoy the scenery I'm walking down the wrong path. The business corollary is identical. It isn't appropriate to be a business person for the perks or the perceived success. One should be in business because they sincerely enjoy the process and the people. One cannot fully embrace this concept unless they are willing to embrace the community—the path—that therefore transcends the destination and becomes a destination and goal in and of itself.

Lastly, the community-oriented individual remembers the people and institutions that co-created their success. Returning to my wilderness metaphor, the community-oriented individual respects and remembers the creeks and shade trees that brought them strength and comfort along the way. Embracing communion is providing assistance in the future as an acknowledgement of assistance received in the past. A failure to consider the future of others is the mark of a selfish, solitary individual. We are often going to need to pass by that same creek or shade tree in the future, and our previous

respect ensures its future survival for both ourselves and the generations ahead. Even when we found previously built bridges to be useless or worse, we should still respect them. There have been a dozen bridges in my life that I am glad I didn't burn in anger, bitterness, or contempt, as many of my closest friends and advocates have needed to cross them at one time or another.

In conclusion, I will not be successful if I only possess a large bank account, an entry in "Who's Who," or the leadership of a conglomerate multinational corporation. I will be successful because I have followed a cause that is meaningful to both the community and myself. I will gauge my success in sustainable profitability, self-actualization, and the harmony of my relationships. My goal is not to become rich, but to create and nurture a product or idea that will change peoples' lives for the better, even in some humble little way. Nothing else—no amount of money, fame, or title—will ever make me truly happy. The surest means of this success is one of community advocacy and support, not only because I hope to attain reach the final destination, but also because I enjoy the path itself. If I stumble and fall along the way, I will have a kind friend to lift me up and I will still be fulfilled.