

The Destructive Meritocracy Myth

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If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire. —George Monbiot

Ancient Witness: John 9:1-7

A few years ago, there was an unfolding scandal in the news. Super affluent parents, including some television actors, were charged with using their wealth in what amounted to bribery to universities to get their children into elite schools. They paid sports coaches, who then lied to admissions officers, saying that the applicants were champions in certain sports but were not. One parent paid \$6.5 million to have their child admitted to an Ivy League school. Others paid to have admission test scores falsified or hired proxies to take the tests for them.

This is on top of all the perfectly legal advantages the wealthy enjoy:

- Parents have long hired expensive tutors to coach their children.
- They use their connections to have impressive internships for their college applications.
- Elite schools engage in “legacy admissions,” which is special access for kids of alumni donors.
- Charles Kushner, for example, donated \$2.5 million to Harvard in 1998, not long before his son, Jared, applied. He then was accepted with less than stellar academic credentials.

With all the legal advantages, families in the top 1% are 77 times more likely than the bottom 20% to land in an elite school. The kids then undoubtedly present their fancy degrees as evidence of how skill and hard work win out in society. These degrees then lead to high-paying positions, perpetuating their family’s status and wealth.

But meritocracy is a destructive myth, especially in America.

In a study by the Economic Policy Institute (“State of Working America, 12th Ed.), they looked at what social scientists call, “intergenerational elasticity” in different developed countries. The lower the elasticity is, the higher the social mobility. So an elasticity of zero would mean complete intergenerational mobility, with poor children just as likely as rich children to end up as rich adults. Whereas the higher the elasticity, the greater the influence of one’s birth circumstances on one’s later life position.

Of all the developed nations, the U.S. had one of the highest elasticity quotients of .47, meaning it has the least social mobility, and one is less likely of moving up in the U.S. Whereas countries such as Denmark and Norway have elasticity of .15 and .17 and therefore much higher social mobility. One could say that the mythic “American Dream” is much more alive there than here!

In another study by Michael Carr and Emily Wiemers from the University of Massachusetts (2016), they conclude:

It is increasingly the case that no matter what your educational background is, where you start has become increasingly important for where you end...

The probability of ending where you start has gone up, and the probability of moving up from where you start has gone down.

In other words, the ability to move up has gotten worse, as the gap between the rich and the poor increases. Right now, three people now have more wealth than the sum total of 50% of the people in the United States. Higher income inequality means a greater intergenerational persistence of advantage and lower social mobility. Carr and Wiemers say that in the presence of this increasing inequality, it's like the rungs of the ladder have moved farther apart, and moving between them has become more difficult.

So even while the American Dream has faded, meritocracy has always been a myth. Sure, there are anecdotal stories where a person of modest means succeeds at something and accumulates a fortune, claiming to be entirely self-made. But where would these entrepreneurs be without taxpayer investments in education, transportation, the legal system and so on, creating a healthy society? Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize winning economist has calculated the societal contribution to be at least 90% of what people earn in the U.S. and Europe.

And we haven't even begun to talk about so-called success at the expense and exploitation of others: slavery, child-labor, conquest and land grabs, repression of workers, etc. How can one claim to have won a race when they have started miles ahead of others?

And then, as Robert Frank points out, even in an environment of complete equality, many have merit, but few succeed. And what separates the two is luck. (*Success and Luck*) Sheer luck is a huge factor that many of the winners fail to mention. Meritocracy is a fiction. As George Monbiot (MON bee oh) said, "If wealth as the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire."

But not only is meritocracy wrong; it's bad. It is not only a lie; it's a dangerous lie. It's destructive.

Research has shown that believing in meritocracy makes people more selfish, less self-critical, more prone to act in discriminatory ways and more indifferent to the plight of the poor. For the super-wealthy, the narrative of meritocracy says that they deserve all their money because of hard work and effort, while others do not. Remembering the role of luck, on the other hand, increases generosity.

The meritocracy fiction also masks the transmission of wealth and privilege across generations. As Ann Richards famously said about George W. Bush, "He was born on third base and thought that he hit a triple!" This myth has the winners taking their good fortune as evidence of their merit, hard work and superiority.

And it also stigmatizes the losers. Poverty becomes a character flaw, a sign of immorality. People, in this narrative, are poor because they are lazy. Therefore they are undeserving of compassion. Ronald Reagan's infamous term, "welfare queen," blames the poor for their lack of hard work. They are merely gaming the system. Shame is a strong aspect to the meritocracy myth. Meritocracy is a justification of the status quo and obscures privilege, racism, sexism and the injustices in society.

But more than even all this—even if meritocracy were completely true and there was total social mobility, which it is not—it asserts that talent and hard work should be the *only factor* in the distribution of resources. It asserts a social Darwinism and a survival of the fittest. It asserts a division between the worthy and the unworthy, the deserving and undeserving. It asserts that our human worth and value is determined by our merit.

Now, Jesus had a response to the meritocracy myth of his day. In Judaism of Jesus' time, they assumed that the world operated by the principle of blessings and curses. That is, if one is good and faithful, God will bless you. And one is disobedient, you will be cursed. This was a God-centered meritocracy, if you will.

So because of this meritocracy worldview, when the disciples saw a blind man they assumed that he was cursed by God because of someone's lack of merit. "Who sinned that he was born blind?" they asked. Then they speculated, since he was born blind, O.K. we'll give him a pass. But maybe it was his parents?

Jesus said, "No." That's not how it works. When someone is healthy or wealthy, that's not a sign of God's favor. And when they are sick or poor, that's not a sign of God's displeasure, either. Furthermore, said Jesus, this thinking entirely misses the point.

According to Jesus, human worth is not something that is earned. It is inherent. Human worth is not based on merit! Every person is a precious child of God, whether they are a winner or a loser, lucky or unlucky.

And then Jesus shifts the focus from the *cause* of the misfortune to the larger *purpose*: "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed." These things that just happen—those born blind, those who fall into poverty, those who fail—these are *opportunities* for others to respond, for God to act through us. This is a chance to discover the sacred impulse to create a world and society that cherishes the dignity and value of all people, regardless of merit or achievement or circumstance of birth.

Ironically though, much of the church today operates by this performance principle, dividing people into the worthy and unworthy, the achievers and non-achievers, acting as though the most important thing is how "good" we are. But for Jesus that's not the most important thing.

Jesus' way is the exact opposite of a meritocracy! And so is any other authentic spirituality, for that matter. Jesus points to a reality where we all get what we cannot deserve and can never earn: the completely unmerited Sacred Presence, the utterly gratuitous and ever-flowing love of

God. And this path of Jesus releases us from the oppressiveness of meritocracies—from the self-blaming and shame of not measuring up; it delivers us from false pride and a lack of empathy; and it offers wholeness, peace and salvation from our failures and self-judgement.