

**Elvis Presley got a C in his eighth-grade music class, yet became a music legend. But he also died on the toilet. So, maybe we shouldn't celebrate mediocre grades after all.**

## High, Reasonable Hopes

All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence;  
then success is sure.

*Mark Twain*

I grew up in what I understood to be meritocracy, a system wherein the folks who worked the hardest and excelled the most could expect to reap benefits exceeding those of the average person. It was reasonable to assume that Joanna—who read her books and did the homework she was assigned—would enter a better academic institution than Todd—who smoked pot and watched TV all day. You’d have been hard-pressed to find someone who would argue that Todd’s memorization of every *Star Trek* plot point placed him on an equal footing with Joanna when it came to admission to Harvard. Indeed, last I heard, Joanna had her Ivy League sheepskin while Todd was fermenting mushroom juice with a bisexual Wiccan he met in a forest party.

As a young advertising-agency writer, it made sense that I would make more money than my unemployed roommate because I got up at 7 a.m. and went to work, while he got up at 4 p.m. and went to sofa. I don’t think he’d disagree that

our salary inequality was logical and pretty fair, seeing as he was always well rested.

When we look at the biographies of the mega-accomplished among us (actually, they live away from us because they can afford to), there is an undeniable pattern that emerges. Their histories are almost interchangeable: At fifteen Mr. X started working in the such-and-such industry. He left the army and was accepted to Yale, which he paid for himself by working two full-time jobs. He graduated magna cum laude and opened his own business sixteen minutes after the commencement speech ended.

Even when these guys drop out of college, it's because they were too busy overachieving to bother with school. Bill Gates is a dropout. Seems to be doing okay. Guys like Bill have something most of us haven't got, and it's not just billions and billions of dollars. It's a determination, talent, and intellect that lies dormant in most folks. By "dormant" I mean there's a good chance it's not there.

I not only expect those people to be better off than I, but I want them to be. That's because of my belief in the meritocracy. Their accomplishment sends a message, and the message is: *If you lie stoned on the sofa all day, no Lexus for you.* I think that's a good message.

When my friend John would excuse himself early on weekend evenings to go home and practice his guitar, I understood that this sacrifice of his made him more likely than I to become a rock star—especially since I quit after my first piano lesson and spent two years sitting in the back of band

class faking the trumpet. So devoted was John to his hoped-for musical career that nothing could separate him from his daily guitar practicing—not ladies we’d met, not my pleas to stay out a little later, nothing. When the mood to practice hit him, as it often did, he was on his way home with no reservations. I admired his determination and was certain that his sacrifices would one day pay off. And they did. His amazing talents with a guitar ultimately helped him become a rock star, just like he’d imagined would happen. I had no problem with this. Although I have a musical sense and could probably craft some clever lyrics, this was not a slot I had any logical hope of filling. Now he has many millions more dollars than I can probably hope to earn. All well deserved, of course. Another tale for the meritocracy files.

Alas, at some point in my lifetime and prior to yours, the system changed. Now we no longer live in a meritocracy as much as we do a wantocracy—wherein a tone-deaf person with no musical training or skill thinks it’s perfectly normal to expect to be the next David Bowie—because he’d really like that to happen. My point is made every season on *American Idol* when we watch some of the nation’s least talented individuals aspire to fill positions that not too long ago would have been considered outrageously unachievable. How a heavily bruised four-hundred-pound girl with a Marlboro-tainted larynx can think the world is hankering to hear her forget someone else’s lyrics is beyond me—but not beyond the countless individuals who, like Enorma McCantsing, express shock and dismay to discover in front of thirty-eight

million people that screeching and stumbling through a Britney cover has only enriched our lives, not theirs.

We live in a generation in which some people mistake wanting something for deserving it and in which the bar for what some consider talent is so low that not even the limbo community's most elite could pass under it.

I don't want you to be that person who puts himself out there to have dreams he should never have had in the first place dashed in a grand spectacle before a commercial break. I don't want my child's hubris and/or naïveté winding up in a YouTube clip to accidentally entertain the masses. For your benefit, and mine, I offer you this sage advice:

*Have high, reasonable hopes.*

These four words will save you—and your relatives—a lot of grief and embarrassment. It should seem like common sense, but common sense is like a Rubik's Cube: We recall having it for a while but don't exactly remember what we did with it.

I have met people who neither finished college nor held a job, yet spend their time imagining themselves as CEO of an as-yet-unnamed megacorporation. I know untrained, untalented actors with awful fake accents who expect to be film stars someday. Some of the least funny people I've ever met were in a comedy class—certain they would eventually entertain a large audience that did not consist entirely of sympathetic, tortured family members.

While some of these people are completely lazy and unmotivated, others are very driven—taking lessons, perform-

ing, generating endless screenplays and business plans—unfortunately they’re just not good at it. Regardless of their energy level, all these individuals share one quality that I hope you will not develop and that I will try my hardest not to impart to you: complete and utter self-delusion.

I want you to have big, reasonable dreams. I want you to succeed. I’m not saying, “You can’t”; I’m just saying, “Don’t fool yourself if you can’t.”

As clichéd as it may sound, anything is possible. History is filled with people of all types and backgrounds who, especially in a country like the United States, have been able to cut amazing paths for themselves. You *can* be an astronaut, or a president, or a movie star, or a guy who makes crossword puzzles I can’t finish. But it’s important that you realize there are ways of getting there—and they’re seldom easy.

Wanting to be something is the first step, not the final step—a common mistake many people make before appearing on Fox to be eviscerated by Simon Cowell. The big mistake that people make is forgetting that wanting to be something has to be followed up with action to make that happen, coupled with the ability to be self-critical and reasonable. If you can be honest with yourself—sooner than later—it will prevent you from finding yourself onstage at forty-three in a dingy nightclub with an audience of eight people watching your soul die.

So, you *can* do it. Dream big, practical dreams. Have high, reasonable hopes.

This epidemic of overly confident, incredibly nontalent-

ed individuals with unrealistic expectations can be explained as the unfortunate by-product of a few things. The first of which, I believe, was the epidemic of political correctness that started in the eighties. PC began with the best of intentions, but, like a bad rehearsal-dinner speech from a mean-spirited best man, got ugly and uncomfortable. It created a culture—a not very bright one—that was passionate about not wanting to hurt anyone’s feelings. With its simplistic logic, calling someone “African American” rather than “black” took care of decades of inequality. Calling a handicapped child someone with “special needs” would eliminate the challenges of having a handicapped child. Your busboy went from “illegal” to “undocumented”—even though in reality he could be deported either way. Everyone believed things could be fixed with words.

This linguistic claptrap became a BBM (Big, Beautiful Monster) with gigantic, intellectually challenged tentacles that reached out and strangled other aspects of our lives. Suddenly teachers didn’t grade in red ink because it was “hurtful,” and teams no longer competed for points because that might imply one team was actually better than the other. Everyone got ribbons just for showing up at the race, lest they feel excluded. According to the profiles on Match.com, we’re all “very good-looking,” too.

It’s no wonder, then, that the end result is a generation or two of people who’ve never heard a discouraging word; people for whom the suggestion that they can’t direct, paint, sing, or make flan is incomprehensible.

Now, take those same folks and put them in today's dual-income society, with Mom and Dad feeling guilty for not spending as much time with their children as they'd like. The moment the nanny goes home, the guilty parents fire up the coddling: *Everything you do is great! You're the best! G'night!*

The consequences of this—as we see on TV far too often—is a kid who has spent a childhood being praised for merely existing. A child who never failed because failure was impossible. A child who thinks *impossible* is a word. Family, friends, and society never once critiqued his abilities because under the laws of political correctness, constructive criticism became hate speech.

And so, we're left with a child who dreams so big and stupid he spends two days sleeping in a tent for the chance to butcher "Proud Mary" in front of his countrymen. Great entertainment, indeed, but I don't want that to be you.

