

VILLAGE VIEW

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"Are you successful?"

That's a question asked each of us dozens of times a day; it's a question asked by nearly everyone we meet. Although unvoiced, it's part of nearly every encounter we have with others.

It's a question that's usually answered, too, but not by the person of whom it's asked. Rather, the interrogator forms his own response. Judgement is made of and by each of us, based as a rule upon appearances. Isn't that absurd?

Let's explore this idea a bit further. What is success? Is it the acquisition of great wealth? Moderate wealth? Does the laying up of money spell success?

Because the Cape attracts a goodly number of wealthy summer residents, we who live here year round probably have a greater opportunity for contact with more people of wealth than if we lived in a more homogeneous suburban society. Most suburban communities are made up of families with similar incomes. If a family's fortunes improve, it moves to a more expensive neighborhood; a decline in resources forces a move to a less affluent community.

People are not only more comfortable when surrounded by their peers, but economic and social pressures exert forces that encourage stratification.

Although Cape Cod is probably not unique in its broader base of families with varied incomes, it does present a culture different from most of American suburbia. Here we have, compressed into a small geographic area, isolated by the surrounding seas, a cross-section of Americana. The Cape could be called a microcosm of the American scene.

In summer months the villages are inhabited by a larger proportion of the well-to-do than can be found in the average town lying on the outskirts of urban areas. The estates lining the oceanfronts, the bays, the edges of lakes and rivers, any place with a water view, are testimony to the presence of wealth.

Back from the beaches we find somewhat smaller, less pretentious, less expensive residential areas. Here live the more financially successful property-owners, the recently retired executives, the well-heeled but not truly rich.

And ringing commercial areas stand the small homes of the ubiquitous, and blessed, middle-class Americans; here live the stable, the ordinary, the grass-roots folks.

Tucked closer to business districts are homes of those who might well be described as low-income families. These are the youthful families struggling for survival and upward mobility. Here, too, we find many of our elderly and some of our poor, although on the Cape the poor are to be found in isolated areas as well.

This is a pattern that exists throughout the country in densely populated areas. Every city in the United States has its concentration of underprivileged living close to its heart. Further from business centers live those who struggle to be self-supporting, and beyond, in ever-expanding circles, are found the more and more wealthy.

As family income expands, the improved financial situation permits a move to a larger house, a bigger plot of land and more conspicuous consumption. The closer one lives to the center of town, the lower his transportation costs become, the less need is felt for private cars, the nearer one is to work, to stores, to services.

We judge success, then, to some degree at least, by where people live. And when we make a judgement by locale, we are measuring success by financial status, alone, for to a large extent finances determine where we live.

Other considerations influence our judgement of success, as well. What size and make of car does someone drive? How is his home furnished? What sort of clothing does he wear? From what family, social and educational background does he spring?

These bits of information are observable; we see and hear and sense them when we meet one another at the post office, the library or public gatherings. We take measures of one another, based on how people look, how they sound, and their conduct.

Does this provide us with an accurate gauge of another's personal success? It may at first appear to do so; and yet, success should be, and is if we analyze it carefully, much more than possession of tangible wealth. Success is better defined as how well one manages with whatever his assets may be, copes with his station in life, and deals with the people with whom he lives.

At every level of wealth there are those who achieve self-satisfaction, respect of friends and neighbors, loving relationships within and beyond their family circles. And there are also those to whom no quantity of money will bring personal successes. The underprivileged among the affluent are frequently encountered on Cape Cod.

We observe people of wealth who are impecunious in important ways in spite of their possessions; they may be haughty, leaving them unloved; they may be rude and demanding, diminishing the respect others have for them; they may be emotionally crippled, depriving them of the capacity to give or accept affection.

Nobody with these problems, regardless of his monetary wealth, is successful. Physical disability, given proper medical care, can be overcome; thousands of physically handicapped live full and deeply satisfying productive lives. Mental disturbance, properly treated, can be cured and the patients regain stability and resume normal activities.

All of us know successful people of modest means. They may be members of our family, greatly loved because they give of themselves and find joy in that giving. They may be friends or neighbors, warmly generous and welcoming, always ready to join in and take part, always there to help.

These are the successful individuals in our society or any society, possessed of qualities they can never lose in the stock market, never be robbed of, never misplaced in upheavals of this troubled world.

Their success can't be measured by where they live, the size of their house, the clothes they wear, the car they drive. It can't be measured by their vocabulary or the manner in which they hold a teacup.

Their treasure lies within them and in the hearts of all who know them. It can be assessed only by the esteem in which they are held and in which they hold themselves and others. The successful person is happy; his joy shines from friendly smiles, warm words to everyone he meets, kindnesses to his fellowman, gentleness to the weak, consideration of the elderly and infirm, caring and concern for the comfort of others.

A person's success can't be measured in a single glance; that can only tell whether he's rich or poor in worldly goods. To judge a person's success, you must know how he behaves toward the rest of the world, and how he feels about himself as a member of the great mass of humanity inhabiting the globe.

Success lives in the hearts and minds of men, not in their pockets and purses.