



Success - By Whose Definition?

by Sharon Buck

Talking to most anyone these days, I get the impression that people are stressed. Other teachers feel it too. So much is expected. So much is supposedly at stake – both our students' success and therefore our own. We struggle mightily with success and failure as individuals and as a society. As a teacher and performer from my own hard earned experience, looking through the narrow glass of success and failure is limiting thinking and will not serve us or our students. Our students' lives are busier than ever and one has to ask "what's it all for?"

We as teachers want the best for our students. But is the picture of success that the music world paints really the best for them? We desperately want them to succeed. But how are we defining success? Thousands graduate from prestigious music schools every year, and the field, whether it be opera, classical, jazz, pop, or rock, is inundated with very talented singers, only a few of whom have carved a niche for themselves at the highest professional level. Are those who don't make it failures? If the definition of success is winning the top prize on televised talent shows like American Idol then chances are a singer will probably be disappointed. Does being a successful singer boil down to fame and recognition? Many young kids these days have lofty dreams, but do they have what it takes? Does the art of singing devolve to survival of the fittest? Is there nothing else? Is there any point at



all in even trying?

One of my favorite questions from parents inquiring about my voice studio is, "My child is not really talented, but she loves to sing. Would you consider having her join your studio?" My response is usually, "Sure, if she is not afraid of hard work!" We as teachers know it takes a lot of determination as well as skill to even get a part in a local music theater production. Yoda's now famous quote from Star Wars comes to mind:

"Do or do not. There is no try."

But there are many students who come to our studios who do not have lofty goals and have no interest in competitions. What then? Regardless, I feel it is my job as the teacher to prepare my students for the "real" world, while at the same time I wonder what I can do to improve the world they are entering. That seems like a daunting task.

Perhaps the answer lies in a quote from Herman Cain:

"Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success."

Maybe we have things backwards. We teachers have influence and the positive impact we have on our students can have far-reaching effects. Effort is necessary to make progress and progress helps feed self-esteem. I call this the "cycle of success" and it gains momentum as the student is encouraged, with structure and nurturing, and the skills to accomplish the task at hand, whether that is singing a scale in tune or a first performance. By affirming our students as individuals, being honest in our feedback, listening to them, and helping them carve out and achieve their own definition of success, we ARE making a difference. Bear in mind that every student is unique and their needs and goals will differ; there is no formula. There may come a time when we feel we can no longer help a student; at such times, I believe we must be

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honest and prepared to pass them on to someone who might be better able to serve their needs and goals. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we as teachers must be committed to our own learning and growing as teachers—not just in our field, but personally. Like it or not, we are important role models for our students. What we say, and how we lead our lives and organize our studios leave indelible impressions on young and old alike.

These are achievable goals and I firmly believe it is up to us to do our part. As Yogi Berra said:

“If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up some place else.”

My hope is that when a student leaves my studio they will enter a world that they help define, by not being afraid to be their authentic selves and staying true to their own goals, led by their own desire for happiness, thereby hopefully leaving the world better than they found it. I am all for preparing our students for that “real”, tough world, but in seeing each student’s potential, crafting achievable goals together, and being our best selves as we share our joy of music with them, perhaps we are actually improving the world they are entering, one student at a time.

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