**ENG 445: Literature and the Individual**

**ASSIGNMENT 3  
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Serial Number 24**

At the outset, I would really like to take this opportunity to thank Professor T. Ravichandran for this absolutely wonderful assignment that allowed me to watch videos that are definitely amongst the best that I have watched in my life. A couple of them, in a sort of collaborative effort, have managed to provide me with a new philosophy in life and allowed me to look at life with a fresh and recharged perspective at a much needed time.

The assignment asked us to enjoy the videos that were suggested and let them have an influence on our thinking. Armed with the knowledge and insights we gained from the wonderful speakers, we are asked to explain the concept of creation/synthesizing of human happiness by linking them to various factors and that forms the crux of the rest of my work.  
  
**Attitude towards failure**

I believe this to be the single most dominant factor when it comes to the synthesis of happiness. Most of our unhappiness stems out of disappointment from failure. Be it professional failure or failure in our personal lives, they are a constant source of unhappiness for us in two ways. We are miserable post-failure because that is now our natural reaction towards it. In fact, what is worse is that failure leads to unhappiness even before we have actually failed by means of dreadful anticipation of said failure causing nerve wrecking times for most of us. It is here that we need to ask this question, does this necessary need to be so? Is unhappiness the only outcome of failure or is it possible that failure has more (read better) fruits to offer?

While this has been a question that I have wrestled with on many a fine evenings myself and therefore already had views on this, listening to Steve Jobs, JK Rowling , Oprah Winfrey and Harsha Bhogle has helped me to think a lot clearer on the matter and therefore reach a better understanding. The trouble begins because of our outlook on failure. More precisely, as JK Rowling said about her younger self, most people her age were afraid of failure. We look at failure as this ominous black spot on the white cloth that is our lives and I think this is where we are wrong. Failure is not meant to be looked down upon. It is simply a lesson in disguise. I would like to quote Oprah Winfrey here. She said, “*Don’t ask why it is happening to me. Rather ask what it is here to teach me*”. That I believe is the best response to failure and one which would lead to a happier life. Even Harsha Bhogle emphasized on this when he said that failure allows a person to deal with situations better. A person who has never failed does not know how to handle a difficult situation. True happiness lies in realizing your mistakes from the failure and rising above them. Failure could act as a great liberator too. As in the case of JK Rowling, she said “*Failure meant a stripping away of the inessential*”. This is a fantastic opportunity for a person to truly realize who they are in reality. She so beautifully said that “*Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I built my life.*” In the case of Steve Jobs, being fired from Apple was a major failure but it also allowed him to get away from the shadows of great expectations and rejoice under the thrill of being a beginner again. These examples serve to show that in a lot of cases, failures have actually proved to be stepping stones for major success in many lives. The thing that made the difference is the attitude people had towards failure. While people who are dejected and demotivated after failure continue to be scared and scarred for the rest of their lives, people who looked at failure as an opportunity to learn and grow and develop, actually ended up using failures as ladders to climb up higher in life, both professionally and personally, which ultimately led to happiness.

**Ability to make decisions based on intuition**

I am sure all of us have had moments when we somehow *knew* what the right decision to be made was at a particular point of time in our lives. You might call it gut feeling, intuition or maybe something else. We can certainly say that such a force exists in nature and in many cases it acts as a compass, allowing us to move in the right direction in our lives. The sad part about this is, many a times people are not confident about actually listening to their gut feeling or intuition and rather take decisions that are based on the dogma of public opinion. The truth is, we do not want to take responsibility of our failures. As a result, we avoid taking risky decisions that we feel are the right ones because in the event of a failure, we would be held responsible. We rather allow ourselves to settle for the more conventional and publicly accepted decision because then we have the fallback of saying that we went according to “conventional wisdom”. However, what we fail to realize is that in the latter case, failure leads us to think of what would have been had we followed our gut feeling and this is a cause for much greater distress than failing due to decisions we felt were right. Steve Jobs said something that applies so well to this situation that I would be remiss if I did not quote it here. He said, *“We cannot join the dots looking forward. We can only join it looking backwards. So we need to place our trust in something and believe that it will all turnout all right in the end*”. This is a fabulous piece of advice on how to make decisions that would allow us to be happy with them. Nobody can predict the future. So we can only believe that the dots would somehow connect in the future. This line conveys the essence of what I have been trying to convey. The only way to be happy with the outcome of our decisions is to make them ourselves using our gut instinct and intuition and in believing that our decisions would turn out to be the right ones in the end.

**Knowing to choose what is right**

This aspect of our lives deals with the ethics of our decisions. A lot of us have this attitude in our lives where we assign paramount importance to the destination and regard the journey as irrelevant. What this allows is room for an attitude that says “Do whatever is necessary to attain your goal”. This attitude might seem lucrative at first but can lead to severe unhappiness later on in life because it allows for the possibility of unethical decisions during our journey to attain our goal. Unethical decisions come with the promise of short term gain and are therefore appealing. However, they also cause a lot of unhappiness and discontent in people’s lives because they form a weight on people’s conscience that only grows heavier with time. This is where our ability to know to choose what is right becomes important towards out happiness. We are quite aware of what the ethically correct decision would be in most cases. We only need to convince ourselves that that is the only right decision to that situation. Only then would we be able to have a clear conscience which would allow us in the synthesis of happiness.

**Having the courage to follow one’s dream with conviction**

Let me ask you a question. Think for a moment as to whom you consider to be a source of inspiration in your life? I am sure you must have a great personality in mind. I am extremely positive that the person you have in mind did not lead a life of forced decisions but rather followed his or her dreams till the end and that is the reason that you draw inspiration from their life. All the people we look up to in this world actually share this feature. This attribute is a major contributor to our happiness because there is an enormous amount of happiness attached to our dreams.

JK Rowling’s father wanted her to get a vocational degree but she knew her passion lied in literature. She managed to pursue her interests despite familial objections and we all know how that turned out. A lot of us have the habit of saying that they are not able to follow their dreams due to the expectations of their parents. But as JK Rowling puts it “There is an expiration date on blaming your parents for steering you in the wrong direction”. If our current paths do not lead us to happiness then it is our own responsibility to make a change and follow our dreams. A prime example would be the current state of so many engineers in our nation that are dissatisfied with their lives because they have come to the realization that engineering was never their true calling. They did not have the courage to follow their true passions and dreams in their lives and end up suffering because of it. Steve Jobs said “*Our time is limited. Don’t waste it living someone else’s life*”. This should act as a lesson to everyone to have more belief in their dreams and their ability to make their dreams come true because happiness lies not only in achieving our dreams but also in the pursuit of them.

**Redefining education, learning and success in one’s own terms**

Education and learning are two of the major pillars which support our lives. They are meant to be liberators for the people. Knowledge can be used to synthesize happiness because with learning comes understanding and skill and with understanding and skill comes the ability to derive happiness from situations. However, this definition and utility of education and learning has been compromised by the rigid standard against which the success of people are measured by the society. Albert Einstein once said, “*Everyone is intelligent. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it would live its whole life believing that he is stupid”*. That is what the standard for measuring success has become. People possess different talents and different passions but the direct spotlight on academics and “respectable” jobs that we have in India does not allow other talents to flourish. This is a cause for major unhappiness in the lives of many people who are extremely talented in the fields that they are passionate about but fail to perform in academics and are labelled as failures by the society. Changing the rigidity of a whole society is too much to ask from an individual. But I implore everyone to not pay attention to society’s judgment of their abilities because they are extremely volatile. One day you are failing mathematics and you are labelled a failure. Years later you become a movie star and suddenly you are the center of the universe. People change their opinions about someone so frequently and so easily that it is pointless to pay attention to it. Rather one should strive for excellence in whatever interests them the most. Harsha Bhogle said something about this that has left such a deep impression on me that I think I will use that as a life Mantra. He said that we should not judge our success by results because outcomes are rarely in our hands. What we could rather call success is achieving excellence in the training and preparation that we do in the journey to achieve our goals and then accept whatever result we get and strive to improve upon it. This allows our success to be defined in our own terms and would lead to tremendous amount of happiness and contentment because there is only internal judgment.

**Emotional Intelligence played a major role in the success of J.K. Rowling and Harsha Bhogle**

As an avid reader of the Harry Potter series, I can positively say that J.K. Rowling is a master of getting people to be emotionally attached to fictional characters. There is a line in the first Harry Potter Novel that says “There isn’t going to be a child in this world who hasn’t heard the name Harry Potter”. The funny thing is, little did J.K. Rowling know that was going to be true not only in her fictional world but also in the real one. This speaks volumes about her success. One particular reason for her massive success is her mastery of being able to understand and portray a wide range of appropriate emotions through literature. She mentions in her commencement address that she realized the value of imagination in her life during her time with Amnesty International where she was horrified with the sufferings of the people that came for help and could understand their pain even though she did not experience it herself. She learnt to empathize with the people and learnt to find value in the freedom her life offered to her as compared to those people that were suffering in other nations. This helped shape a lot of the literature that she produced. She is the first billionaire in the world who lost her billionaire status because of philanthropic donations. This exemplifies her emotional intelligence and actually enhances her success in my eyes.

We all know Harsha Bhogle as the witty cricket commentator that always makes the game of cricket a little more interesting with his presence of mind. Being a graduate from IIM Ahmedabad, we know he has a very good IQ. But listening to him during his address to the people at IIM Ahmedabad, I realized how emotionally mature he is and how that has played a defining role in his career. One major point that I would like to highlight is something that he said during the address. He said that he did not mind leaving his ego outside the door and playing the “non-striker” role. What he meant was that he did not try to compete with the other commentators but rather tried to make them look better. He would ask himself, how could I make Ravi Shastri look better or how could I make Sunil Gavaskar look better in the commentator’s box. He said that as a result people wanted to commentate with him rather than with someone else who wanted to compete with them. This shows tremendous amount of emotional Intelligence on his part that he realized what the best decision would be in that situation using not his brain but his understanding of people’s emotions and reactions. It helped get ahead in his career and allowed him to be the household name that he is today.