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The Success of a Little Brown Girl, Misty Copeland

The standard way of thinking about success has it that people can be accomplished by individual effort, so people tend to think about the factors of success simply. If people try hard for their goals, they believe they can succeed socially. On the contrary, if people do not achieve they think the reason is that they did not just try hard enough. However, are the factors of success based on the only one reason? Many scholars assume and analyze essential factors of success; psychologist Angela Duckworth assumes grit is a mindset to challenge without fearing failure, and journalist Malcolm Gladwell insists there are many reasons for success beyond individual talents, such as the Matthew effect, practical intelligence, concerted cultivation, and 10,000 hour rule. These elements of success can lead people to success by acting in various ways depending on each person's unique situation. In ballerina Misty Copeland's memoir *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*, Copeland describes her process of development and successful achievement in her life. She overcame racism and became the world's top ballerina despite the low-income family environment and her late start to the ballet. In her memoir, she had strong grit achieving her goals since childhood that served as a fundamental reason for her to stand up again when she was in a difficult situation. Also, she had extraordinary talent in ballet, and this trait gave her many opportunities to succeed as a ballerina, which resulted in the "Matthew effect" working for her success. In addition, her economic and emotional hardships and difficult situations had a positive impact in her life, so my success factor of "the pearl in the mud effect" has also influenced her

positively. Analyzing all these the elements of success that worked for her will help inform what is needed to reach her level of success.

Many people assume that constant efforts are needed to succeed, and one researcher, Angela Duckworth, explains such effort as grit. She states, “grit is related because part of what it means to be gritty is to be resilient in the face of failure or adversity ... grit predicts success over and beyond talent” (Duckworth 1-2). According to her, grit is not only a force and an enthusiasm to stand up again without giving up in situations of failure and suffering but also a driving force to success beyond the innate ability of people. As a result, a person with grit means a person who can get closer to their success. Misty Copeland, who is an American ballerina, has strong grit. In her memoir, she grew up in a financially poor and an emotionally unstable family environment as a child, and she had to suffer from racism in her process of growing into a ballerina because she is black. However, she always tried to perfect her role as a ballerina. For example, she tried to make the best of her ballet practice and tried to appear perfect at school (Copeland 61-62). It means that she has a strong will to perfect her work. Due to the fact that such will and effort she was able to show prominent growth and succeed, even though she started ballet in a relatively late period. Moreover, she mentions, “I knew that’s what I would have to do now. Recover, hold my head up high, and balance on my own” (Copeland 127). When she suffered a spinal injury due to hard practice and was unable to demonstrate her capacity as an existing ballerina, she did not get frustrated and didn’t quit her effort, and she stepped hard to recover her health. Also, she has a strong mind and never gives up. In her book, she did not give up in the midst of suffering and failure, but she rose again to her goal. She also insists her effort for her dream, “How I couldn’t give up, couldn’t run away, and if I had to work the times harder than everyone else, then I would so I’d always know that I’d tried. I fought way too hard to abandon my dream of

being a principal dancer with ABT” (Copeland 187). It signifies her grit and effort to endure people’s prejudice and racism in order to succeed in the white-centric ballet world as a black girl. Furthermore, she was overwhelmed by herself without losing her dreams, even in the enormous pressure of her surroundings. Unlike her mother, she demonstrated the necessary grit to stay focused on one thing without quitting when times got rough. Thus, she tried to perfect her role as a ballerina without giving up in her unstable environment, financial hardship, and racism because she had grit which means resilience. Her grit and efforts to continually strive for her situation led her to success.

In addition, for people’s success, it is crucial to create opportunities to achieve their goals and to make those opportunities the cornerstone of further another success. A journalist Malcolm Gladwell calls this phenomenon the Matthew effect. In his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, he explains, “Who are most likely to be given the kinds of special opportunities that lead to further success. It’s the rich who get the biggest tax breaks” (Gladwell 30). It means that people born with extraordinary talents or who are more mature than their peers are likely to get a small special opportunity for their success and that these invisible special opportunities come together to create a shortcut to their success. For instance, Bill Gates, who is a principal founder of Microsoft Corporation, had 9 steps of extraordinary series of opportunities to learn computer code programs for his success when he was a high school student, such as Lakeside School with access to time-sharing terminal and wealthy parents, chance to use computer programs for free in C-cube and the University of Washington, Pembroke gave him the opportunity to work together, and the Lakeside allowed his writing code project (Gladwell 54).

In the same way, Misty Copeland also had the Matthew effect. She had a special talent and physical condition in the ballet and gained little special opportunities since she was a child,

receiving recognition from people, such as Elizabeth, Cindy family, Lola, and Kevin, for her potential. For instance, Copeland mentions in her memoir, “In nearly every way, my body was modeled for dance. I have legs and arms that go on forever and are as pliable as rubber bands. My neck is long, my head small, and I have knees that veer backward as I straight ... I was born this way” (Copeland 162). According to her, her physical condition was like the best condition required for a ballerina. Even though she is a black woman, this innate gift of her promises a path to success, and is the first “opportunity” that she had and others didn’t. Because of this, she got small opportunities as a ballerina and got more chances as the Matthew effect. She was recognized for her natural talent by Elizabeth and received a formal ballet lesson from Cindy. They provided her with economic help, a stable residential environment, and an emotional sense of security (Copeland 69). In her book, she states, “I now realized, Kevin had pulled out a figurative ladder and was giving me opportunity after opportunity to pull myself up toward that prize I wanted so much to grab” (Copeland 198). This means the Matthew effect was definitely working in her favor as she began to become famous by winning the Spotlight Awards as a young ballerina, after that she could join the American Ballet Theatre that she had wanted from her childhood, and Kevin's full support and encouragement there could see her growing into a professional ballerina. As a result, she did not forsake the small opportunities given to her, but made her own and made other opportunities for her success, which means that the ladder of success has become increasingly solid as a professional ballerina.

There are many ways in which people in the situation of hardship and adversity cope with their reality. There are one group of people who are frustrated with their hard reality, and on the contrary, there are another group of people who they are more eager to concentrate on their goals

in order to escape from the stressful situation by taking advantage of the hardships they face. Focusing on the tendencies of the people in the second group is meaningful in identifying the success factors of people. They take the situation of negative reality in their favor as a positive factor to focus on the goal. The negative reality and the obstacles to the fulfillment of their dreams serve as factors to succeed in getting away from them. Ultimately, this leads them to focus on their goals and become more eager to achieve. This phenomenon is like a soldier fighting on the battlefield with their back to the wall. Thus, I named this phenomenon as “pearl in the mud effect”. It means that people concentrate on their goals and try to achieve their dreams strongly to escape from the difficult surroundings and to transform into a stable and positive environment. For that reason, they are stronger and more intrinsically motivated to achieve their goals compared to the other people who are in a stable environment without trouble. Therefore, the pearl in the mud effect is even more brilliant and meaningful in suffering.

Along the same line, pearl in the mud effect can be found in Misty Copeland’s success. In her childhood, her mother changed her husbands and boyfriends from time to time, and she did not live with them for a long time. As a result, Copeland’s family had to move frequently and did not have emotional stability. Besides, because she is black, some of her ballet skills were not properly assessed. In a poor situation, she had to live in a small motel room with her family, and her mother was always busy caring for six children, including Copeland, and could not afford to give her any attention. She states, “I was grateful to hide from the chaos for a little while at the dance studio, inside ballet, where there were rules and life was dignified. Beautiful” (Copeland 62). In this situation, she was able to concentrate on the ballet because of her muddy surroundings, which were rather complicated and confusing at the time, such as psychological breakdown between families, family indifference to her dreams, and residence in a motel room. She also felt

“the stage was somehow an oasis” and she was able to forget her worries and concentrate on her dream during her ballet. (Copeland 25). As a result, it lead to focus on her ballet practice and her dream as a professional ballerina. She mentions, “It seems that whenever my voice had the courage to rise up ... it would recede back to a hush at the first sign of adversity” (Copeland 196).

This shows her a passion in her inner self and a more positive attitude towards her dreams, as she tries to focus and achieve her goals, as a professional ballerina with ABT, in a hardship situation. Her pearl, then, is not only Misty herself, but also her dancing. After that, she kept focussing both mentally and physically to ballet practice. Finally, she was able to approach her dreams without losing her goal as a professional ballerina, using her weaknesses as a positive element to reach her dreams, even in a poor and unstable family environment and a negative situation in black. That means the pearl in the mud effect was applied in Copeland’s life as a ballerina.

In conclusion, she grew up in afflictions and adversities in a poor and unstable black family, finding her dreams in the ballet and constantly endeavoring to become a professional ballerina. Due to the fact that her grit, she began to be recognized in the late ballet world. Also, thanks to the help of the surrounding people who recognized her natural talent and potential for development, she was able to get special opportunities to accomplish her goals, and she made all of her opportunities without losing those opportunities. These Matthew effects made a shortcut to her success. In addition, she applied pearl in the mud effect to her, using her reality, which is in a negative environment, as a means to concentrate rather on goals, producing effective and positive results. Finally, Misty Copeland had the success factors, such as grit, Matthew effect, and pearl in the mud effect, as a professional ballerina. These success factors have led her to success as the world’s top ballerina.

Works Cited

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