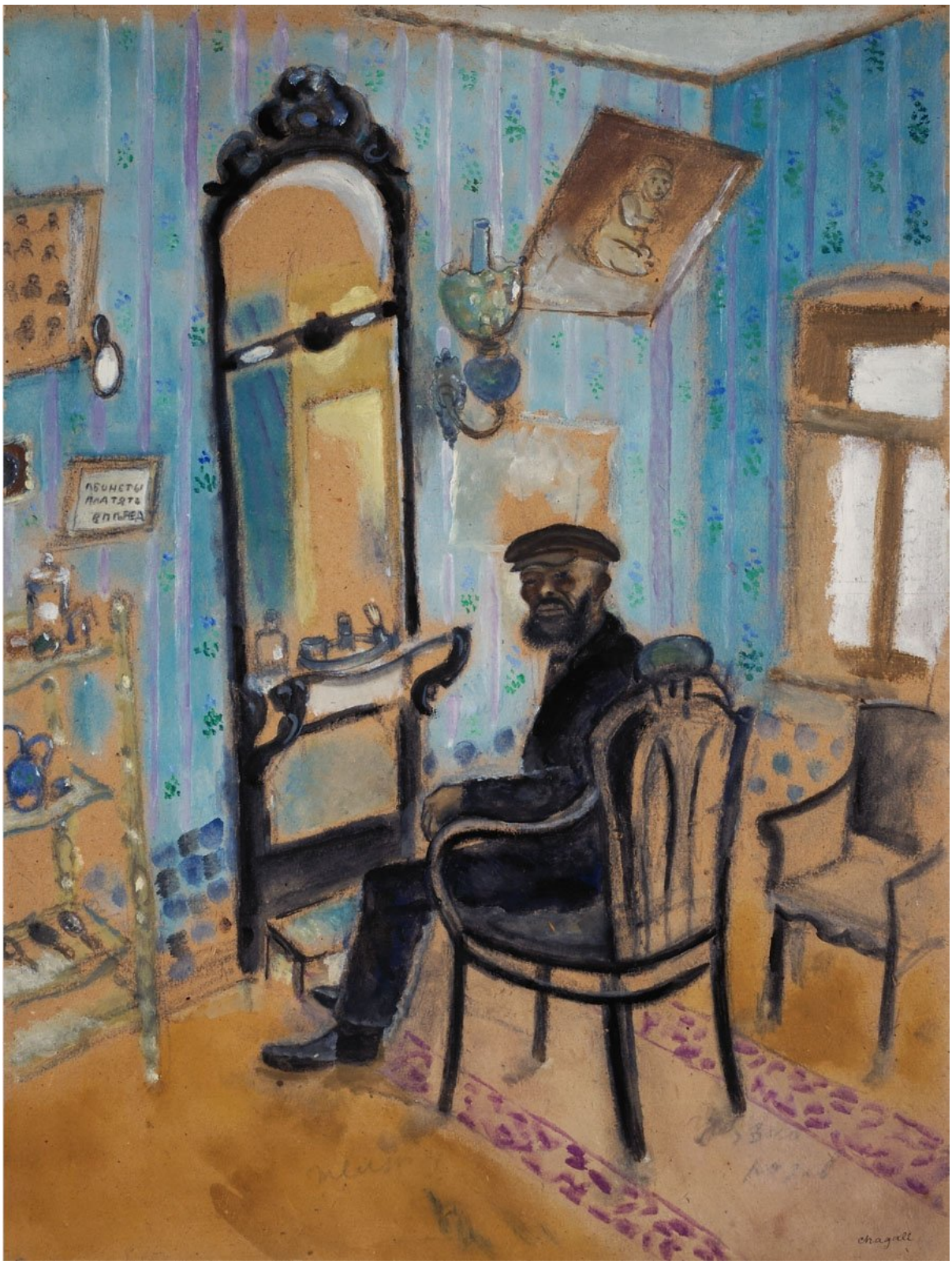
Preferring Failures

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (February 2019)



Barber's Shop, Marc Chagall, 1914

Some people are drawn to the successful, but I prefer failures. They seem to me more attractive, more numerous and somehow more human that the successful. They represent our race in a way that the successful never can.

Those who are drawn to the successful are often social-climbers or name-droppers. They like the successful so that they can tell others that they are associated with them, as if to bask in their reflected glory. Perhaps there is also an element of magical thinking in their taste for the successful: they believe (though they would not actually admit that they do) that success is catching, like an infectious disease.

Of course, a preference for failures also calls for an explanation. Failures are less threatening to our self-esteem than the successful. When we meet a failure, we can console ourselves that at least we are more successful than he. Furthermore, it is easier among failures to be ourselves without pretence. Among the successful, we are inclined to exaggerate our own achievements.

Failures have not necessarily failed because of any lack of ability. It is not *that* which has caused their failure, but often some quirk of character, not always a defect but rather an admirable moral quality such as a lack of ruthlessness, an unwillingness to trample on others, that success in so many fields requires. It is true that some success is achieved by sheer brilliance, but it is probably the explanation in a minority of cases. Behind every great fortune, said Balzac, lies a great crime, and if this is an exaggeration, it remains true that behind much success there has been a deal of

scheming or a host of petty underhand actions. The scramble up the greasy pole usually entails a willingness to push others down it.

Read More in *New English Review*:
Apeshit at the Louvre
When the Woke Reawaken
Some Devilry

These reflections were occasioned by a concatenation of recent circumstances in my life. First, I was re-reading Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. The failure of Mme. Ranevskaya and her brother Gaev, such that they lose their inherited estate, is caused by their frivolous fecklessness, and yet they remain attractive figures. More importantly, I heard of the sudden death of a woman whom I had met only on two or three occasions, but for whom I felt a natural sympathy on account of her gentle aura of failure.

She was a couple of years younger than I and, whatever Nature had made of her, she did not make the most of herself. She was overweight and ate and drank too much. She was not one of those objectionable noisy and quarrelsome drunks, but rather one of those quiet, persistent ones who never let the level of alcohol in her blood drop to zero. Whether her drinking was caused by her unhappiness, or her unhappiness caused by her drinking, I had no time to discover. Often, drinkers get the relationship exactly the wrong way 'round, but I cannot say that it was so in this case.

She was childless (and devoted to her dog), but was long married to a man also of gentle character whose career had been mediocre, all the more so because he had been a brilliant

scholastic success when he was young. He was clever but not ambitious, and certainly not ruthless. His brother, who had been far less successful at school than he, had had a brilliant subsequent career in business and had become very rich. Though he (the first brother) was not the envious type, this could not but have increased his awareness of his own relative failure. He had joined that great legion of Mankind, those who had failed to live up to their potential.

When I heard the news of her early death, caused in large part by her way of life, I felt something akin to survivor guilt. I used to think that this concept—survivor guilt—was manufactured, a figment of writers' imagination, the consequence of having to put the ineffable into words. It was first applied, of course, to the relatively few survivors of the Holocaust and, in my callowness, I wondered why anyone should have felt guilt about having escaped an appalling crime. It was almost as if they felt that they *ought* to have been killed, and this was surely absurd.

But, as I realised only a little in my life when my youth was past, man is not a rational calculating machine; the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of. And whenever something happens to us or to someone else, we are always inclined to ask, 'Why me?' or 'Why *not* me?'

The '*Why?*' of this question is not a call for a rational or empirical answer, but something deeper, as if we expected the universe to be just, to distribute or withhold its favours strictly according to desert. And when there is not such desert, we—or perhaps I should say *I*—begin to feel unease.

I never felt survivor guilt before, but then I knew hardly anyone who died at approximately my own age. When people died who were seventy, sixty or fifty years older than I, it seemed like a merely natural process: everyone knew that old people died. But when people died of approximately my own age—and the range of people who had approximately my age widened as I myself grew older, gone were the days when a boy in the year above me in school seemed enviably older than I—I began to worry 'Why them and not I?' What had I done to deserve survival thus far? The answer came back—nothing. And so, while I recognise the empirical reasons for my acquaintance's death, I still feel a slight guilt towards her, as if she died that I might live, as if some gods had demanded a human sacrifice and it was she that they chose rather than I. Though I know this to be nonsense, I feel it still.

The third circumstance that led to my reflections on the relative attractiveness (to me) of successes in life and failures was a visit to the hairdresser's I patronise when I am in Paris. I think he is in his early forties, and he runs his little shop on his own. He is slightly stooped, no doubt as a result of having bent over scalps all day for many years; he himself is balding. Of North African origin, and whether or not born in France (I suspect that he was), he seems perfectly integrated.

One of the things that I like about his shop, other than its proximity to my flat, is that he plays no music in it. This, to me, demonstrates that he is a man of taste, refinement and discrimination. It is surprisingly difficult to find a hairdresser's shop into which music—always pop music, often with the drivelling commentary of radio presenters between songs—is not pumped like poison gas into it, and which has—on my mind at least—an effect roughly similar to that of a food

blender on vegetables. (If you ask store managers why there is music, they answer ‘Because the customers like it.’ If you ask customers whether they like it, they say ‘No’. Thus, everyone gets what he doesn’t want.)

Read More in *New English Review*:
The Fascist Devil
Toxic Femininity Trumps Toxic Masculinity
The Perfect Story of the Perfect Father

When he has no customers, my hairdresser sits and reads the newspaper. He is an intelligent, though perhaps not an educated, man (the two things are far from synonymous, especially in the modern world). He has a slightly defeated air, not unhappy exactly but melancholy, as if life and the world were too much for him.

I arrived this time when he had no other customers waiting. This suited me perfectly, of course. And it was only natural, as he cut my hair, that we should talk of the *Gilets jaunes*, the yellow vests, whose movement at the time had profoundly shaken France and humiliated its young president, Emmanuel Macron.

‘I sympathise,’ said the hairdresser (whose name I don’t know). ‘I understand.’

‘But you’re not one of them?’

‘No, I have never been a militant. And one does not become a

militant from one day to the next.’

It was obviously true that he was no militant and never had been. It was easier to imagine him as a hermit in the desert than a placard-waving demonstrator braving the tear-gas.

‘I am not sure I understand what the *Gilets jaunes* actually want,’ I said.

‘They want more money. A higher minimum wage. Higher salaries. More money so that they can live correctly.’

‘But how? Where is the money to come from?’

‘They don’t know. They just want everything to change.’

Then he asked me what the minimum wage was in England. I was ashamed to have to admit that I did not know. ‘Not much,’ I said, hardly enough to make it economically worthwhile for someone to work who was receiving unemployment benefits. The problem with raising it too much was that it would render their labour more expensive than it was worth any enterprise to employ it.

‘So what is the solution?’ I asked him.

He thought for a moment.

‘To win the lottery,’ he said, smiling. He thought a little more. ‘Or rob a bank.’

We laughed. A less likely armed bandit than he could hardly be imagined.

‘I think it will have to be a lottery ticket,’ he said. ‘It’s safer.’

‘And if you won? What would you do?’

Strangely enough, this question had a strong effect on him. He dropped his arms by his side for a moment.

‘What would I do? I would buy a flat. At the moment, I rent, I don’t own one.’

‘Would it be in Paris?’

‘No. A small provincial town, somewhere quiet.’

He would be spoiled for choice: there are plenty of quiet provincial towns in France, quiet with the silence of the

grave. They once served local farming communities, but farms have become agribusiness, so the towns have lost their *raison d'être* and emptied. Young people, if any, leave as soon as they are able. Personally, I favour Richelieu, the home town of the cardinal of that name who, like an African dictator who builds a highway to his natal village and furnishes it with a preposterously unnecessary airport, gave Richelieu grandeur, now depopulated.

'And then what would you do?' Secretly, I suspected he might have ended up opening a hairdresser's shop. But instead of answering, my hairdresser, like the good psychiatrist he no doubt was, returned the question to me.

'What would *you* do?'

What would *I* do? I have no vocation for conspicuous luxury—I do not want to drink champagne for breakfast or bathe in asses' milk—but though by no means impoverished, I cannot claim to be entirely free of financial anxieties, which have a tendency to rise to meet the level of wealth they have to preserve. But, fundamentally, I knew no more than he what I would do. I have lost what little desire I ever had to cut a figure before my fellow-men. I don't want to turn heads as I drive by in a bright red sports car of enormous value (besides, I might have to call the fire brigade to extract me from it at the end of my journey). Perhaps I would buy expensive antiquarian books: but at my age, to collect anything at all is ridiculous. I should be disembarrassing myself of possessions rather than accumulating more.

The hairdresser has more to gain from the lottery than I. After all, I was already a *proprietaire*. There was something touching about his modest ambition or desire. He had no dreams, I surmise, to live in grandeur, he just wanted a place that he could call truly his own; and with prices such as they are in Paris, it was unlikely that, however hard he worked or long he continued, that he would fulfil this modest dream or ambition.

One thing is certain, though it would hardly be a consolation for him: I would rather have talked to him than to the President of the Republic.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd* (with Kenneth Francis) and @NERIconoclast

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