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Getting Ahead

By Mitch Anthony

I meet so many people who feel as if they are on the never-ending treadmill of trying to “get ahead.” My response is: “Ahead of what?”

Ahead of debt accumulated for things they don’t have time to enjoy or for houses that are too expensive? Ahead of some of the unrealistic expectations they may have placed upon their lives? Ahead of others’ opinions of how well they have succeeded?

Getting a clear head is a more liberating alternative to the frantic rhythm of getting ahead. And we would all do well to get a clear head in three areas:

1. Debt gets in the way of freedom.
2. I am where I am, and I’m going to enjoy it.
3. This is my life, and I’ll write the script.

Own or Be Owned

Own or be owned, boy

Own or be owned, girl

If you’re not saving CASH

You’re getting owned in this world.

(from the song “Own or be Owned,”

©2012 Mitch Anthony)

Some of you may be familiar with the financial literacy books I’ve written for children in the 6-12 year range. The first in the series, *The Cash in the Hat*, presents kids with the realities of credit and debt—and the lure of instant plastic gratification. If you are interested in the idea, you can view the cartoon edition online at youtube.com/watch?v=JzrO5RFdtn0.

As soon as children are old enough to realize that it costs something to get something, it's time to start teaching them about living within one's means. One of the great lessons my father taught me early in life was to always attempt to live on half of what I earn. That additional 50% provides a buffer against accidents, rainy days, health issues—against the unpredictability of life. People may say that this is an unrealistic goal, and my response is that maybe it's our assumed lifestyle entitlement that is unrealistic. What we consider to be a “starter” lifestyle in our culture looks an awful lot like sheer abundance to much of the rest of the world.

Once we clear our head by grasping the reality that unnecessary debt is a major source of stress in our lives, then we will be motivated to eliminate that burden from our lives. Do you remember a time when your money was your money—you could do with it what you wished? That was the richest point of your life. Even if you were making only \$1,000 a month—and \$750 stayed with you—you were experiencing abundance. I know people who make \$500,000 a year and spend every penny. In one respect, they are poor because they do not have options. The decision to “make sure your money is your money indeed” is what motivates people to stop buying things they don't need with money they don't have. This “lifestyle” decision pays rich dividends in helping people get back to the place where they “own” their time—and feel like they've got their life back.

Two Roads To Rich

“I only know two roads to rich. One, get more. Two, be happy with what I've got.”
—The Author

The next thought for helping us to clear our minds is to relax about where we are in life. So maybe we don't have the best-in-class car or truck or house yet. It doesn't mean we can't do it someday when the money is there. And even if the money never comes to buy that dream car or dream house, that can't keep us from living fulfilling lives. Life is about trade-offs. For example, maybe I don't buy the brand new luxury vehicle. Instead, I use the money to take my family on really cool vacations. Or maybe I decide not to upgrade my house payment because I don't want to feel stressed in my work. It's been said that true happiness is wanting what you have.

My conviction is that “contentment” in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in is a highly underrated path to abundant living. Life does not consist of the abundance of things but of the abundance of enjoying where we are and who we are with. A friend who is approaching retirement said to me recently, “I've had an epiphany lately about what makes life great—you simply cannot have enough friends.” It made me stop and think about how often I've walked past opportunities for building friendships in the

interest of “getting stuff done.” My goal in life these days is to amass wealth in the context of a “return on life” instead of allowing numbers to define “how I am doing.” “Return on life” is measured by how relaxed and fulfilled we are in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

“Wealth—any income that is at least one hundred dollars more a year than the income of one wife’s sister’s husband.”

—H. L. Mencken

Sometimes we put unrealistic expectations on ourselves about where we should be in the whole scheme of things at a certain point or a certain age. But these expectations only haunt us if we allow them space. We can begin by clearing our heads of any thoughts standing in the way of finding contentment today (such as the comparisons we make with others). There is a lot to enjoy right now—right where we are at, doing what we’re doing.

Too often, people treat their lives, careers and pursuit of success as if it were some sort of beauty contest that could only be won by virtue of comparison. What does it matter how well I’m doing compared with other authors? Does it really matter to one surgeon how well he or she is doing compared with other surgeons? Do teachers need to be compared with other teachers, or should they simply be focused on reaching those in their sphere of influence in the best way they know how? In the financial services industry, advisors are constantly measured against other “producers” (a term I loathe) and indexes (a ridiculous exercise) that do more harm than good. For quite some time, I’ve been mulling over an alternative to comparing clients’ portfolios with the S&P or any other index and establishing a more personal, self-determined benchmark, one I would like to call “Pi” (for “Personal Index.”) Just as Pi is used to calculate the area of a circle, my version would measure what is needed to support the sphere we live within. The point is to stop living comparatively and to start living contentedly.

The last path for getting a clear head is making sure you are not acting out someone else’s expectations for your progress or your perceived view of someone else’s expectations. This life is not a dress rehearsal, nor is it an audition. This is the real deal you are acting out, so you would best ensure that you write your own script and act out your own story—not someone else’s vision for your life.

Life is like a movie that plays out one scene at a time. One scene leads to another. Conflicts arise and conflicts are resolved. Each of us would do well to make sure the scenes we play out are those of our own choosing or the result of choices made of our own volition.

The script for your movie is up to you to write. Any expectations placed upon you by others should be left on the cutting-room floor. Live as well as you wish—within your means. By doing so, you make sure your time belongs to you. Be content with what you have right now. If you can't enjoy it now, you won't enjoy something better later. Live out your own script, and the odds are that the movie will end the way you want it to. That's not "getting ahead." That is being ahead.

Mitch Anthony is the author of The New Retirementality (Wiley), now in its fourth edition.