

Excerpt from Chapter 18 - The Trappings of Success

"It is not the destiny of Black america to repeat white america's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life." - Audre Lorde

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: The chapter begins with an explanation of the trappings of success, which has referred in the past to the ornamentations of a horse - the bridle and saddle. The more ornate, the more successful the owner. I then discuss how we can get confused by these trappings and have a false sense of what's important. The interview you read about here came about during a project in 2009 exploring how everyday Americans were coping with the Great Recession. We did a series of in-home interviews in different cities as well as intercept interviews which are not recruited and spontaneous. In the final hour on the final day in the final market we were in Indianapolis at the Circle Centre Mall on the Saturday of Indy 500 race weekend. It's been a long project and we've heard many stories of struggle as well as resilience as people cope with the fallout of the recession.)

And moments later, Gregory walked up. He was a mid-thirties, handsome Black man wearing a blue, short-sleeved polo shirt and

jeans. He might have had on Top-Siders or maybe sneakers. Well-groomed and incredibly pleasant. He sat down across from me, and we started talking.

Just like everyone else, Gregory started to tell me how the recession had affected him. He used to be a mortgage broker in Indianapolis. A bright guy eager to succeed, he rose through the ranks very quickly at the brokerage he was working at. He and his wife had two kids who were “lovely,” by his description. The family was able to buy a house with a four-car garage. I think he said it was on a golf course, or they had a membership at the country club. In other words, they acquired many of the trappings of success available as he moved up in the world.

In Gregory’s case though, once the recession hit, the trappings were more like weights, dragging him and his life down underwater.

First, Gregory lost his job at the mortgage brokerage. And once that happened, his friends at the club started to shun him. His wife, who was enamored of the lifestyle and all the trappings, wasn’t happy with this change. Their marriage started to dissolve, he said. He couldn’t keep up on the house payments. Or the car payments. Before he knew it, Gregory had lost the car and the house. Shortly after that, his wife left with the kids. He lost everything. He was, he told us, homeless.

Wow. That piece of information I wasn’t expecting. I’ll admit, I was a little incredulous at first. Gregory didn’t “look homeless” in the way that I encounter homeless people on the street. His clothes were clean. He was well-groomed and tidy. There was no evidence, visceral or olfactory, to indicate that this man was living on the street. But he was telling me that he was, and I couldn’t imagine why someone would lie to me on a spontaneous intercept interview. So, I pressed on to find out more.

As Gregory unraveled the workings of his now homeless life, my client, Mandy, and I followed along as best we could. I was trying to use my solution imagination to understand what it would be like to lose my home and have to live on the street. I imagined what I

might do if it happened to me and used that to form my follow-up questions. First, it was difficult for me to understand how someone didn't have friends that would help him out and give him a place to stay. Next, what type of spouse would kick him out and take the kids because he hit hard times? But that's what had happened. Gregory did tell us that one friend helped him out by letting him stay at their house shortly after he lost his wife and trappings. That friend let him stay in the garage.

Once the goodwill of friends wore off, Gregory went to his mom's house in downtown Indianapolis. Surely a thirtysomething man, down on his luck, could count on the support of his mom. But his mother had troubles of her own, and his pride was also getting in his way. So, Gregory told us, he stayed at his mom's house occasionally, but he was often on his own, out on the street.

I had all sorts of judgment going on in my head at this point, but none of it was blocking me from getting to empathy with Gregory. I was being judgmental toward the wife, the friend, even his mom a little bit. Who would abandon this nice man and let him live on the street?

But also, I was curious. What is life on the street like? Of course, my guard was still up, as this was just so mind-blowing. I tried to use solution imagination to see what this life must have been like, but I remained cautious, looking for holes in his story. Gregory had come upon us as he was walking the mall, dropping off applications to hopefully get hired at one of the stores. And then he laid out his story of being homeless. Throughout the interview, he was consistent. Each piece of his story made sense and fit into the next part or aligned to what he had told me earlier. And since this was a serendipitous meeting, not anything planned or prearranged, there was no way he could have practiced this. After a while, I decided to let go of my skepticism and go on the journey, no matter where he took me.

I started by asking more questions about what life was like on the street. As you can probably tell, my usual interview style is like

Oprah Winfrey or Diane Sawyer—chummy, like two friends talking over coffee. I find it helps respondents open up so I can get to the deep stuff with compassion, rather than cracking them open like a suspect in a criminal interrogation. I prefer this soft approach in my interactions with most people in my life, so it makes sense that I adapt it as part of my interviewing persona. With this interview, however, I was in full Lesley Stahl or Mike Wallace *60 Minutes* mode, challenging and playing devil's advocate to try to get to the bottom of Gregory's story.

On the topic of being homeless, Gregory shared that the greatest indignity he felt was when he was asking for money from people, and they wouldn't even make eye contact. He said it made him feel less than human when that happened. I immediately recalled the many times I hadn't acknowledged the panhandlers on the streets at home in San Francisco. Gregory's bringing that point up helped me use solution imagination to put myself in their shoes. I thought about the times when someone ignored me when I was asking for an intercept interview and how that rejection made me feel. Then I imagined what it would be like to be ignored repeatedly—to not be seen while asking for money or help, which you need to make it through the day. That ups the emotional stakes even further. That cognitive empathy made me realize that I could show a little more kindness and compassion; even if I had nothing to give, it didn't mean I had to ignore the homeless. I made a mental note to at least make eye contact with people asking for money, to help them remain feeling human.

An assumption I had about being homeless was that the money from panhandling was used toward food. Gregory said that was not the case. He told us it was relatively easy to get food when you are homeless; you just have to know where the good restaurants are. Apparently, steak houses throw out the overcooked cuts that are sent back to the kitchen. Unsaleable, out they go into the back with the trash, and into the waiting arms of the hungry. Gregory assured us that he ate quite well many nights, and that finding food was not the issue.

And I believed him. He didn't look malnourished. In fact, he looked relatively lean and fit.

The biggest fear, Gregory told us, was sleeping out on the street. "Rolling" is what can happen when you fall asleep outdoors. People, other homeless and those "up to no good," approach you while you sleep in your bag or on your piece of cardboard. Quietly, they grab the edge of your sleeping pad, whip-snap it, and roll you over. Disoriented from being asleep and suddenly tumbled, you aren't fully aware of what's going on. That's when they grab whatever valuables you have that they want for themselves. You are so discombobulated; you can't get your bearings in order to chase after the people who are making off with your stuff. In order to avoid "rolling," Gregory used the money he made each day to get a cheap hotel room where he could at least get a proper sleep and clean himself up in the morning. It seemed pretty smart and made sense. How can you get a job and change your situation if you aren't hygienic or at least clean-shaven? Staying in a cheap hotel let him do that.

Through this experience, Gregory said he reconnected with his faith so deeply that he had enrolled in a local theology program. And right there and then, Gregory reached into his backpack and showed us his textbooks, which he had just picked up earlier that day. His goal was to minister to the homeless, since he had such newfound appreciation for what people experience when they've lost everything. Seeing the textbooks gave me a deeper sense of trust in the story he was telling us. That was real.

When I'm presented with a respondent's information that doesn't add up or just seems incredible, I will circle back through the story over and over in my questions. What I'm doing is looking to poke holes in the story without saying, "I don't believe you; prove it." Circling back lets me ask a question from a different perspective. If I don't get an answer that aligns to the earlier one, then I'll know something is off and I can ask additional questions or try to clarify the discordant information.

With Gregory, there was no inconsistency. There wasn't anything that I could find that didn't line up, only sheer jaw-dropping "wow" at his situation. No job, no home, no car. Wife and kids moved out of state. Sees mom occasionally but she has her own problems. Shelters are limited in number of beds and aren't a desirable option, as your stuff isn't secure. Sleeping on the streets isn't desirable, as you aren't safe. We kept the conversation with Gregory going for forty-five minutes, well over the ten-minute length of most conversations for this type of intercept. Mandy sat with me through the entire interview. She was just as stunned as I was, curious to know more. And I could see, in her eyes and the expression on her face, the empathy she had developed with Gregory.

That final hour we had left at the mall went by quickly. We were still talking with Gregory while the other team was packing up. Finally, realizing how much time had gone by, I wound down the interview so we could let him go on his way and we could get back to the hotel. Mandy and I said goodbye to Gregory. I gave him his gift card and the little extra cash I had in my wallet to help him get a hotel room for the night. He was really appreciative. After he said goodbye and walked off, Mandy and I just looked at each other, stunned. What had we just experienced?

Gregory's interview was an intense moment of empathy with someone going through something we had never experienced or imagined before. This was already an intense project. We had heard so many stories of loss and concern about the future. The Great Recession impacted so many people in so many ways, but Gregory went through more than any of them in the study. The one-two punch of his work and home life falling apart was a lot for us to take in and integrate into our understanding, let alone put ourselves in his shoes. There was so much information that he shared with us, situations of life on the street—sleeping, finding food, panhandling, job hunting. Our brains were spinning, trying to process it all.

I find when I have intense interviews, like this one, that it can be difficult to stay in cognitive empathy, and I will drop into emotional empathy, dialing in on their situation and feeling what I imagine them to be feeling. I imagined what it would be like to be living his life. How would I handle being homeless? Could I face the constant rejection of panhandling? What would that feel like? What would I do to make sure I wasn't rolled while trying to catch some sleep? As we debriefed, we found all of those thoughts and feelings were running through my head and Mandy's—as well as our hearts. I had images of Gregory in various settings in my head. Mingling at the country club, driving the luxury car, the big house, the beautiful wife and kids, and now, nothing. And Gregory seemingly had made peace with it. In fact, he'd had an awakening from that experience in his decision to minister to the homeless.

WE MADE our way back to the Westin Indianapolis, wearing our "Tell Us Your Opinion" T-shirts and carrying our equipment and the scent of the day on us. As we entered the hotel, we encountered a well-dressed group of middle-aged Americans. They were gathering in the lobby of the hotel to head out to one of the gala events in honor of the race weekend. The men were in suits, women in dresses created by semi-reputable designers. Each and every woman was adorned with jewels as big as their hair was high, and the men sported belt buckles the size of dinner plates. Like the bridle and saddle of centuries ago, the trappings of their success were prominent.

My hands were completely full as we entered the hotel and worked our way through the crowded lobby. I was weighed down by my backpack, a long poster tube with our booth signage, and just the sheer enormity of what we had borne witness to in our interviews that day. Metaphorically it felt like I was dragging a cross through the town square. My emotions were right on the surface. I just wanted to get to my room and a hot shower that would allow

my tears over Gregory's story to flow, blend in with the soap and water, and be washed away.

There were so many small clusters of gala attendees sipping on cocktails and engaging in lively conversation, it was hard for us to navigate through the lobby. It felt so surreal, having just heard of someone's fall from a life of comfort and luxury, to walk in and witness the Indy 500 version of glitz and glamour. I marched on, emotions in check. My eyes were focused on parting the crowd and leading our troop to the elevators without my "cross" knocking a vodka cranberry onto a pretty white dress.

With the end in sight, a woman in an off-the-shoulder dress with her hair sculpted high and stiff was all that stood between me and the elevator bank. A thick layer of makeup was painted on her face. It struck me as a type of mask projecting the illusion of success and, therefore, happiness. Of course, there were the jewels too. A necklace, diamond earrings, multiple rings. I don't remember every detail, but she seemed to me like she was from Texas. My suspicion was confirmed when she honey-drawled, "What do you want to know my opinion on?" *What? Why is she asking me?* I wondered. *Oh. These damn T-shirts are still on us. I don't want to talk to anyone. Not now.*

Not one to be rude, I told the woman that we had been interviewing people at the mall to find out how the recession had been affecting them.

There was some glint of humanity in her eyes as she pondered the question. Beneath the makeup, the hairspray, and the jewels, she was still a considerate being. Before she could reply to us and share her thoughts, an older man, who I imagined to be her husband, turned around toward us and took over the conversation. He was probably fifty-something but looked sixty-something, thanks to the effects of life and too much exposure to the sun. I clearly recall the oversized silver belt buckle he had on. In my mind, his name was Tex.

“What recession?” Tex scoffed at us. “There’s no recession. It’s just a made-up story from the media and the liberal elite.”

Dumbstruck, I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. I think the wife sensed my shock. She certainly could have seen it on my face. My eyes were wide in disbelief. My mouth might have even opened. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He actually doubted the recession was happening? By this point, banks had collapsed. The stock market had fallen. Millions were out of work and were losing their homes. It was real. And I knew it was real. I had spent the past three weeks interviewing people about the recession, only to have it capped off by one of the most traumatic stories I had ever heard as a moderator. And this guy was doubting the whole thing? Negating the empathy I had established? And he could say it out loud, in public? Painting it as a figment of the imagination of a liberal media? What the hell?

The audacity of his statement seemed completely outrageous in 2009. How could someone say something so preposterous and with such braggadocio? Over a decade later, with our descent into bubbles and self-assuring media, such talk isn’t so surprising, but it still remains shocking to hear.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have much of a snappy retort. I was beaten down from everything that I had heard and seen. Oh, how I wished I could have channeled Julia Sugarbaker from *Designing Women* and delivered a short but eviscerating monologue detailing the stories of the many people we had met who were truly suffering from the recession and weren’t a figment of the imagination of the media or the liberal elite. It would be the type of monologue reserved for liberal TV shows and movies that would have torn him down while also opening his eyes to the errors of his way of thinking. But righteous indignation escaped me on that Saturday night in Indianapolis. “You’re wrong!” was all I could mutter as I squinted at him in disbelief. I then shook my head in disgust, pushed passed the Texans, and finished the walk to the elevator.

Make no mistake. The Great Recession was real. From what I was witnessing, the guy at the hotel with the silver belt buckle was more concerned in that moment about the trappings of his own success than about other people. He chose to be blind to the stories of other people's suffering that were everywhere in the media in those months. He even chose to be dismissive of a crew of people (us) who bore witness to the recession. It's not dissimilar to how the liberal elite were dismissive of the working class in the 2016 election. They too chose to be blind to the struggles of a segment of society they didn't really understand or have empathy with. Years later, I remain unconvinced that either side "gets it."

Many words go through my mind when I think about that man. *Ferk, fool, idiot, pig* are just some of them. It's really difficult for me not to go to a place of judgment about him based on that experience. He was so dismissive of the recession—and of us, by extension—that I felt like he was minimizing us. That made me feel like he didn't feel we, or our work, had any value. In turn, my internal reaction went to a place where I felt like he was being an asshole for saying what he said rather than *asking questions, listening, and considering* what we had to say. We could have told him the story of Gregory or one of the many others we had heard but Tex showed no empathy with us or curiosity to learn our perspective on the topic. Only his opinion counted, which he had to state as a pompous declaration rather than ask us to tell him more about what we had learned. That would have threatened his worldview if he were to question how real the recession might be. So in that moment, I could have no empathy with him. Instead of compassion for his ignorance and arrogance, my immediate reaction was to be judgmental back toward him. I know I shouldn't have, but it was really insulting to be dismissed like that, and I was too drained to engage further in conversation, so I stayed in my place of judgment.

This is the challenge with empathy. It's a two-way street. One person has to be willing to share, while the other has to be willing

to take the 5 Steps to get to a place of empathy. Gregory shared with me and I used the 5 Steps. When it was my turn to share, Tex wasn't able to get beyond Step 1 and so it shut me down. And just because you can build empathy with someone, such as Gregory, doesn't mean everyone else is capable of that same empathetic connection. My focus that day was to build empathy with Gregory and people like him. However, I still wanted someone to have empathy with me and my experiences. Tex could have had empathy with me or allowed me to have empathy with him. I needed the former in that moment in the lobby of the Westin. Because Tex had caught me off guard, the latter wasn't going to happen. I wasn't in a space to ask good questions and listen to him. I was so completely fried from our day in the field, my conversation with Gregory, and all the other people I had talked to. I just wanted a hot shower and a good cry. Had I met Tex in another circumstance, say he stopped by the booth in the mall, yes, I would have talked to him, dismantled my judgment, asked good questions, actively listened, integrated into understanding, and even used solution imagination to understand where he was coming from with his beliefs about the recession. But that's not where I was in that moment when he was dismissing me.

Because I didn't *have* to have empathy with Tex, nor was I in the mood to, I held my tongue and continued toward the elevator. I still don't know enough about Tex to get to empathy. I never gave him the chance. I only have my bias built up against him because of what he'd said and the way he presented himself. I will have to dismantle that bias at some point.

And then there was that belt buckle he was wearing. Big, silver, and gaudy, serving no real purpose other than decoration, it was a symbol of his perceived status. To me, that trapping of his success represented more than his rank in his community; it was emblematic of his blindness to the suffering of people outside his immediate life. The sparkle of the buckle, the shimmer of his wife's jewels, all glittering objects that distracted his vision and concentration. It kept him from focusing on what was really important.

Instead, he was just striving for that next trapping to adorn his saddle. Gregory had been chasing after a gaudy belt buckle of his own. The recession had thrown him off his saddle, though, and he'd found a new path where success is defined by service, not silver.

Gregory still comes to mind whenever I'm approached by a pan-handler in San Francisco who doesn't appear to have mental health issues or pose a physical threat. I think about what Gregory said and try to look the other person in the eye, even if for just a moment. I don't know if it helps them retain a sense of dignity as Gregory said or if it just makes me feel better. I do know, though, for that quick flash of eye contact, we are seeing each other beyond the trappings of our lives. For that brief moment, I am seeing them with cognitive empathy, aware of the struggle they are facing. We are connecting, one human to another.

EMPATHETIC REFLECTIONS

- How do you interact with people in need? When have you been ignored or not seen? How did that make you feel?
- Think about a time when someone has suffered a loss. How did you reply to them? Were you able to be empathetic or did you default to sympathy? What could you have said that would have shown cognitive empathy? "I can see/imagine..."
- How would you have handled the interaction with Tex and his wife? What would help you get to a place of empathy with them?
- How have the pandemic and the events of 2020 changed you? What types of changes are you seeking to make and why? What do you notice about the changes others around you are trying to make?