

They Had It Made

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In the late 1930s, a group of 268 promising young men, including John F. Kennedy and Ben Bradlee, entered Harvard College. By any normal measure, they had it made. They tended to be bright, polished, affluent and ambitious. They had the benefit of the world's most prestigious university. They had been selected even from among Harvard students as the most well adjusted.

And yet the categories of journalism and the stereotypes of normal conversation are paltry when it comes to predicting a life course. Their lives played out in ways that would defy any imagination save Dostoyevsky's. A third of the men would suffer at least one bout of mental illness. Alcoholism would be a running plague. The most mundane personalities often produced the most solid success. One man couldn't admit to himself that he was gay until he was in his late 70s.

The men were the subject of one of the century's most fascinating longitudinal studies. They were selected when they were sophomores, and they have been probed, poked and measured ever since. Researchers visited their homes and investigated everything from early bed-wetting episodes to their body dimensions.

The results from the study, known as the Grant Study, have surfaced periodically in the years since. But they've never been so brilliantly captured as they are in an essay called "What Makes Us Happy?" by Joshua Wolf Shenk in the forthcoming issue of *The Atlantic*. (The essay [is available online](#) today.)

The life stories are more vivid than any theory one could concoct to explain them. One man seemed particularly gifted. He grew up in a large brownstone, the son of a rich doctor and an artistic mother. "Perhaps more than any other boy who has been in the Grant Study," a researcher wrote while he was in college, "the following participant exemplifies the qualities of a superior personality: stability, intelligence, good judgment, health, high purpose, and ideals."

By 31, he had developed hostile feelings toward his parents and the world. By his mid-30s, he had dropped off the study's radar. Interviews with his friends after his early death revealed a life spent wandering, dating a potentially psychotic girlfriend, smoking a lot of dope and telling hilarious stories.

Another man was the jester of the group, possessing in college a "bubbling, effervescent personality." He got married, did odd jobs, then went into public relations and had three kids.

He got divorced, married again, ran off with a mistress who then left him. He drank more and more heavily. He grew depressed but then came out of the closet and became a major figure in the gay rights movement. He continued drinking, though, convinced he was squeezing the most out of life. He died at age 64 when he fell down the stairs in his apartment building while drunk.

The study had produced a stream of suggestive correlations. The men were able to cope with problems better as they aged. The ones who suffered from depression by 50 were much more likely to die by 63. The men with close relationships with their siblings were much healthier in old age than those without them.

But it's the baffling variety of their lives that strikes one the most. It is as if we all contain a multitude of characters and patterns of behavior, and these characters and patterns are bidden by cues we don't even hear. They take center stage in consciousness and decision-making in ways we can't even fathom. The man who is careful and meticulous in one stage of life is unrecognizable in another context.

Shenk's treatment is superb because he weaves in the life of George Vaillant, the man who for 42 years has overseen this work. Vaillant's overall conclusion is familiar and profound. Relationships are the key to happiness. "Happiness is love. Full Stop," he says in a video.

In his professional life, he has lived out that creed. He has been an admired and beloved colleague and mentor. But the story is more problematic at home. When he was 10, his father, an apparently happy and accomplished man, went out by the pool of the Main Line home and shot himself. His mother shrouded the episode. They never attended a memorial service nor saw the house again.

He has been through three marriages and returned to his second wife. His children tell Shenk of a "civil war" at home and describe long periods when they wouldn't speak to him. His oldest friend says he has a problem with intimacy.

Even when we know something, it is hard to make it so. Reading this essay, I had the same sense I had while reading Christopher Buckley's description of his parents in *The Times Magazine* not long ago. There is a complexity to human affairs before which science and analysis simply stands mute.

CAMP*AGN RESPONSE

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Dear David,

You have opened a Pandora's box; you have unwittingly exposed the den of a virus that has claimed far more lives than the disease du jour ever will. In reading your copy words suddenly appeared as if screened in lightly across the text.

Behind "polished, affluent, ambitious, prestigious, and promising," appeared, "isolation, secrecy, pressure, status, image, conformity, pretention." From your reference to, "lack of intimacy," sprung the word - distrust; "mental illness," - conflict; and from "dope, drinking, suicide, and running," - ESCAPE.

What you have given us, David, is not a list of characteristics to emulate, but to avoid. And, what you have taught us is this: the prevailing human perception of what it means to have-it-made is in truth diametrically opposed to reality. Simply put, it is tantamount to self-imposed schizophrenia.

In addition, you have confirmed the theorem that the further humans are removed from reality, the greater the level of disorientation, bewilderment, and despair. You have torn away the film covering the virus' lair. However, in doing so you have also exposed our grave vulnerability. What to do?

First, we must STOP. Pause for a moment to fathom that the complete tome of human understanding was constructed from what we have observed in nature, the habitat in which we were designed to function - our reality. To replace this with some unnatural, human construct is the neurological equivalent of imposing neck rings on a five-year-old girl: distortion and disfigurement are unavoidable.

All living organisms, plant and animal, have been infused with a quiet power of such enormous magnitude as to “move mountains:” The Survival Instinct. The giant sequoia bends like a hair in its presence: bends or dies. And of all creatures only we humans possess the wherewithal to harness the beast. But beware! If disregarded or opposed, it will ravage one’s mind and heart without remorse.

Herein lies the problem – Our problem. Imposing unnatural, or perverted, constrictions upon neurologically soft-wired children is like encouraging them to crawl through traffic. It is, in effect grooming a child so as to decrease, rather than increase, survival potential.

In light of your significant observations, David, we would do well to critique this warped have-it-made notion; and especially since The Camp*aign For American Kids has determined that “the pressures of modern society now exceed a young person’s capacity to withstand. The Camp*aign cites the shocking increase in campus shootings, incarcerations, dropouts, violent behavior, and classroom chaos.

In closing, it is my sincere hope that your closing remark, “There is a complexity to human affairs before which science and analysis simply stands mute,” was merely to engender discussion. For in light of the above revelations, if you truly believe that the only option before humanity is to stand and watch helplessly as more and more American youth are added to the “Grant-Study-obituary,” as it were, then the time has come to invoke the words of Pearl Buck: “If the American way of life fails the child, it fails us all.”

In light of these observations, perhaps the choice before us is have-it-made vs. heaven-made; hell-on-earth due to an unrealistic, twisted notion of what we need to be happy; or living in harmony with reality - a little higher than the animals, a little lower than the angels - reveling in the astonishing realities of life.



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