

The Great Ones Online Volume I

The Pursuit of Excellence

When we think of the term “excellence”, many ideas come to mind. Unfortunately, seldom do they include our own image of ourselves. Rather, “excellence” at anything, a craft or task or career, is more often associated with others, big time CEOs, high profile athletes, famous performers and so on. To succeed at the highest levels, this perception needs a major adjustment.

Webster’s Dictionary defines “excellence” as:

- “1. the state of possessing good qualities in an unusual or eminent degree; the fact or condition of excelling in anything; superiority.
2. any valuable quality; something in which a person or thing excels; anything highly laudable, meritorious, or virtuous in persons, or valuable or esteemed in things.”

Notice that the title of this Volume is not “excellence” alone, as in a state of being or a point in time. It is the “pursuit of excellence”, referring more to a mind set and an ongoing goal that any of us can decide to take on. To bring this point home, let’s look at the definition of “pursuit.”

Turning again to Webster’s, “pursuit” is defined as:

- “1. the act of following with a view to overtaking.
2. a following with a view to reaching, accomplishing or obtaining; an endeavor to attain to or gain; as, the pursuit of knowledge, the pursuit of happiness.
3. the thing pursued; occupation or the like ordinarily followed; as mercantile pursuits, literary pursuits.”

THE GREAT ONES

{ A B u s i n e s s F a b l e }

The Transformative Power of a Mentor

If we combine the two definitions and consider this language carefully, we discover that any of us, by simply making the decision to do so, can begin to “follow with a view to reaching or accomplishing” the condition of “excellence” as in “anything highly laudable, meritorious or virtuous.” You can substitute any aspects of the above definitions and reach the same result. The pursuit of excellence is not something reserved for special people.

It is a matter of choice.

The word “choice” carries with it the responsibility of all that any choice entails. This is discussed in detail in Edict III of the Code. Leaving aside the literary definitions (you can read those yourself in the book), let’s touch on the more practical aspects.

Quoting from the Code:

“If you run a business, you are expected to account for it—to yourself and/or others. It involves obligations and duties that must be performed in order for the company to flourish. You must be the cause or sources for your firm’s success; you must think rationally and differentiate between the right and wrong actions that drive it forward. For it to grow, you must become trustworthy, dependable and reliable; for it to initially survive, you must meet your business obligations.

In other words, without exception, the definitions for the term ‘responsible’ set forth a broad array of qualities needed for any major level of success; some of which address a mind-set, others that imply certain requisite behavior.”

Notice that there are two components, the decision or “mind-set” and the action or “requisite behavior.” These tie in directly with “excellence” and the “pursuit” of it.

Aaron goes into this again and again in his interview—his conversation about belief and the overcoming of obstacles, working on how he saw himself, parental imprinting and positive influences—so much there to absorb. I was particularly struck by his passion

THE GREAT ONES

{ A Business Fable }

The Transformative Power of a Mentor

regarding negativity and the need to eliminate it and get away from it at work, in social settings, everywhere that we can control.

Now let's turn our focus to where the rubber meets the road—Edict XI, the other aspect that Aaron goes into repeatedly—Paying the Price. As of the time of this writing, I am personally nursing a torn ligament in my right knee. I ripped it in a fight on the mats at my dojo (school). As a young 49 year old, I have many friends, loved ones and acquaintances who think that I am out of my mind for practicing an aggressive martial art at this stage in my life.

Here's my response: **they don't get it.**

They don't get that if one of the world's greatest living martial artists, Mark Barlow, happens to own a studio 45 minutes from my house and is actively teaching anyone willing to learn, then I need to be there. It's not even that complicated for me.

I found out about it.

I checked it out.

I signed up.

Because of this particular school and this particular mentor, in this area of my life, I am now engaged in "the pursuit of excellence" as a martial artist, instead of simply being an "average practitioner" at some average local school. The fact that I get an occasional injury is simply part of "paying the price" for the privilege of playing in an elite group.

Notice that for me, getting a black belt is not the objective. That is no more than a passing measure of an accomplishment. The privilege of "pursuing excellence" is an ongoing, living, breathing honor that lives inside me for as long as I make the choice to go after it. That is the true joy and pride, the more worthy goal that translates to all areas of life.

There will always be a "price" for "excellence". It is NEVER given away. As stated in the Code:

THE GREAT ONES

{ A B u s i n e s s F a b l e }

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“There are all kinds of possible prices that we may need to pay for success—missing our child’s sporting activity, arriving late to a family event, accepting an unfavorable handicap on the golf course, passing on the boys’ or girls’ weekend, foregoing the theatre or a night out of bowling—and so on. Paying the price means embracing the mental attitude to do whatever it takes at whatever the cost—and the highest levels of success will unquestionably extract a correspondingly high price.”

The question becomes two-fold: what level of success do YOU want, and, are YOU willing to pay the “correspondingly high price”?

Aaron started shoveling snow at 10 years old. He then created his Michelangelo fund and sought out mentors. He decided early on that he would get up earlier and stay up later to achieve his goals. When he wanted someone to blame for a failure, he’d look for a mirror. He did not allow himself trifle luxuries as he made his way up the ladder. In other words, he was always willing to pay the price, whatever that price extracted from him. Now, the results speak for themselves.

Here’s my final counsel. Watch this video again and again. Maybe even stop it to periodically to ponder what Aaron says. Aaron Young is a living example of the dogged pursuit of excellence and he offers much wisdom to any of us willing to listen, learn and apply the lessons.