

Rocky Balboa, J. Alfred Prufrock, and Little Miss Sunshine

By Jeffery Greb

What does it mean to aspire? Looking at the word itself, the verb *aspire* means *to have great ambition or desire* and *to direct one's hopes or ambitions toward achieving something*. Its origin is the Latin word for *desire*: *aspīrāre*. The primary Latin root is *-spīrāre*: *to breathe*. The direct connection of *aspire* to something as vital for survival as breathing connotes the essential quality of aspiration to those who coined the word. Obvious implications include desiring something so much that going without it will cause death and that desire is an elemental quality of life. The definition and etymology alone, however, are not enough to fully explain the qualities of something so fundamental and pervasive to human nature. Fortunately, things as important as aspiration are reflected throughout our culture, and exploring some of these reflections helps add to our understanding of what it means to aspire.

The story of the individual persevering against the odds to achieve a dream is one that people never seem to tire of seeing. It speaks to us on such a deep level that the dream itself is immaterial to our enjoyment. In the film *Rocky*, Rocky Balboa aspires to be something greater than the over-the-hill club fighter and loan-shark enforcer he is.¹ He miraculously gets selected to fight heavyweight champion Apollo Creed, a perfect proving ground to test his mettle, and achieves his dream. Although he loses the fight, Rocky's aspiration is *not* to win (he recognizes that is beyond him); rather, he aspires to "go the distance" with Creed, something no other fighter has done. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, Olive Hoover aspires to win the fictional beauty pageant of the film's title, even though she is plainly not pageant material.² She performs the routine her grandfather taught her with enthusiasm, but the staid pageant crowd rejects her. Her father comes to her rescue, and Olive achieves something far greater than winning a beauty pageant, which the film audience recognizes for the empty prize it is. Instead, her quest heals her fractured family, who have been entirely self-absorbed until the film's climax. (The fact that Olive is not upset by her loss reinforces the depth of her achievement for the audience.) Both *Rocky* and *Little Miss Sunshine* were box office and critical successes; in fact, both won major Academy Awards.³ On the surface, they seem completely different, a boxing movie and a family road-trip comedy respectively. However, the theme of aspiring for something greater unites them and accounts, at least somewhat, for their collective appeal.

Aspiration is not passive. A prime literary example of desire combined with inaction is found in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."⁴ In this dramatic monologue, Prufrock guides his listener through "[s]treets that follow like a tedious argument/ [o]f insidious intent" while complaining of the women whom he believes will judge and reject him. Although attracted to them, he does not act out of fear of this assumed rejection and so dooms himself to failure. To want something but do nothing to achieve the desired end may be an example of hope, but it is not aspiration.⁵ Prufrock's excuse for his inaction, for not approaching these women who "come and go/ [t]alking of Michelangelo," is not convincing:

For I have known them all already, know them all –
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons . . .

He claims to know what they will say and how they will react to his presence. His rationalization is so absurd (*e.g.* he cannot have known them *all*) that Prufrock may elicit our pity, but he does not deserve our sympathy. The reader may wish to grab him, tell him today is a new day – try again, and shove him into the room, but not really sympathize with him. Since the source of the word *aspire* suggests a compulsion to act, Prufrock's implied earlier failures have driven his desires from aspiration into an entirely different domain.

Is success the criterion by which to measure an aspiration? In other words, is Yoda correct when he admonishes Luke Skywalker, "Try? Try not. Do or do not. There is no try?"⁶ While this may be an effective Jedi training technique, it is not how aspirations should be judged. Aspirations are a personal expression of the self, and the self does not remain stagnant; it evolves and changes as the conditions of life change. Not only does one risk falling into the Prufrockian trap of aspiration morphing into something less healthy if aspirations do not change, but the potential for even greater bitterness exists. As Langston Hughes asks:⁷

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

While Hughes is obviously referring to the delay in realizing the collective dream of an end to racial injustice, his words are also applicable to personal aspirations. For example, consider the character of Uncle Rico in *Napoleon Dynamite*.⁸ Although a comedic portrayal, the character's obstinate clinging to his aspiration of football glory born in high school is every bit as pitiful as Prufrock's inability to act.

Abandoning an aspiration can be the wisest course of action. No one belittles a child for changing from wanting to become a pirate to wanting to become a doctor. While adults generally do not shift their aspirations quite so radically, adjustments and modifications to aspirations should naturally occur as situations change without fear of Yoda-like admonishment of failure. (As Dirty Harry's tag-line in *Magnum Force* points out, "A man's got to know his limitations."⁹) Ralph Waldo Emerson observes, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."¹⁰ When what one aspires to achieve becomes unrealizable, to continue down the same path becomes foolish. Far from being a mark of simple failure, Emerson goes on to note:

Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day. — "Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood." — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.

Besides, "Stay the course" may have helped George H. W. Bush get elected, but it did not help him get re-elected, since changed conditions during his term necessitated changing course.

If an aspiration is big enough, failure can be no disgrace. To quote Longinus, "In great attempts, it is glorious even to fail." England's attempt to quickly end the war with Germany came to a crushing halt at Dunkirk, but the defeat only further steeled the populace and strengthened their resolve. In the cinematic telling of the retreat of the British, a soldier we've been following makes it back to England where an aid-worker congratulates him on a job well done. The soldier is perplexed and says, "All we did was survive." The aid-worker replies, "That's enough."¹¹

In any aspiration, success or failure may simply not be under the control of the aspirant. All sorts of factors beyond an individual's control, seen and unseen, can affect the outcome of an aspiration. Humans enjoy the illusion of being masters of their fate, but it is not as true as we

often think. Physicist Leonard Mlodinow explains how success or failure is most frequently a trick of random chance, rather than ability, effort, or merit, in part by examining the success of people as disparate as Bill Gates and Bruce Willis.¹² We tend to ascribe success or failure to an individual's exertions or insert terms like "destiny" to mask the vagaries of chance; however, the truth is we are oftentimes more pawns in the game of life than anything else.¹³ Realistically, chance plays a major role in the events of both *Rocky* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. Apollo Creed's original opponent suffers an injury just weeks before the fight, which is scheduled to occur in Philadelphia on America's bicentennial. Creed's unwillingness to postpone the bout due to its enormous financial potential leads him to search for a replacement. Rocky is picked solely because ranked fighters will not agree to it. Creed selects him because he is local to Philadelphia and has the catchy nickname of "The Italian Stallion," which he believes will salvage his payday. Olive is invited to compete in the Little Miss Sunshine finals after the winner of her local pageant drops out of the competition just two days before the finals begin. Both make the most out of their improbable opportunities.

Abandonment of an aspiration, however, need not be due to potential or realized failure; an aspiration may merely be replaced by a new one. When we first meet Romeo Montague, he is passionately pursuing Rosaline, not Juliet.¹⁴ That changes from the moment he lays eyes upon Juliet Capulet.¹⁵ There would be no classic love story if Romeo continued to aspire for the hand (or whatever) of Rosaline, and he perfectly embodies Emerson's advice cited above regarding contradicting oneself. (Unfortunately, focusing his attentions on Juliet also means the star-crossed lovers are doomed!)

While it is counter-intuitive to argue in favor of abandoning one's aspirations even when circumstances change, achieving what one aspires may not be crucial to the entire idea of aspiration being a fundamental human need. In his book *Affective Neuroscience*, neuroscientist Jaak Panskepp argues that the mammalian trait of seeking is the most important of our core instincts.¹⁶ "The human desire to seek can help make sense of studies showing that achieving major goals, or even winning the lottery, doesn't cause long-term changes in happiness." Rather, happiness comes from the act of seeking itself; it comes from aspiring.

These cultural reflections support and enrich our understanding of what it means to aspire. They help us to understand that to aspire is to be human. John Steinbeck asserts as much when he says:

For it is said that humans are never satisfied, that you give them one thing and they want something more. And this is said in disparagement, whereas it is one of the greatest talents the species has and one that has made it superior to animals that are satisfied with what they have.¹⁷

To be human is to see the horizon and seek that which lies beyond, whether it is the literal horizon or metaphorical. This is what it means to aspire.

Notes

¹Avildsen, John G. (director) (1976), *Rocky*.

²Dayton, Jonathan & Valerie Faris (directors) (2006), *Little Miss Sunshine*.

³*Rocky* was the highest grossing film in the U.S. and Canada in 1976 and second highest in 1977. It received Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Film Editing, and was nominated for seven others. *Little Miss Sunshine* had the highest per-theater gross for the first 21 days of its release and was in the top ten for the first ten weeks, then dropped to 11th. It received Oscars for Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor and was nominated for Best Picture but lost to *The Departed*.

⁴Eliot, T. S. (1917), “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

⁵The vulgar aphorism “Shit in one hand, hope in the other, and see which fills up first” is apropos here.

⁶Kershner, Irvin (director) (1980), *The Empire Strikes Back*.

⁷Hughes, Langston (1951), “Harlem” in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

⁸Hess, Jared (director) (2004), *Napoleon Dynamite*.

⁹Post, Ted (director) (1973), *Magnum Force*.

¹⁰Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1841), “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays: First Series*.

¹¹Nolan, Christopher (director) (2017), *Dunkirk*.

¹²Mlodinow, Leonard (2008), *The Drunkard’s Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*.

¹³As Thomas Hardy observes in the poem “Hap”:

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

¹⁴Shakespeare, William (1595), *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*.

¹⁵Of course, Romeo is not truly in love with Rosaline, as Shakespeare shows in several ways. Mercutio uses overtly sexual imagery both on the way to the Capulets’ party and after while searching for the missing Romeo to tease Romeo by implying it is not true love Romeo feels; rather, all he wants is to bed Rosaline. (E.g. “I conjure thee by Rosaline’s bright eyes,/ By her high forehead and her scarlet lip,/ By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,/ And the demesnes that there adjacent lie . . .” II,i,17-20.) Also, when Romeo laments about Rosaline to Benvolio, his language is dead, full of tired Petrarchan conceits; however, when Romeo and Juliet speak for the very first time, their words combine into a sonnet with each speaking a quatrain alone and then splitting the final quatrain and couplet between them, demonstrating their love’s truth and purity through the language they use.

¹⁶Goldhill, Olivia (15 May 2016), “Neuroscience confirms that to be truly happy you will always need something more.” *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/684940/neuroscience-confirms-that-to-be-truly-happy-you-will-always-need-something-more/>

¹⁷John Steinbeck, *The Pearl* (1947).