

Framgångsrik

The word is *framgångsrik* (fram/gongs/reek). A simple translation in English is “successful,” but a more literal interpretation would be “rich in progress,” or better yet, “rich in moving forward.” Rich in moving forward. Is that the same as success?

Steam from my microwavable bowl of instant noodles fogs up my glasses as I reflect. Thinking deeply about the complexities of language and translation is certainly not the task at hand, much less a midday analysis of my life choices, but I’m not in a position to stop myself from thinking. I’m 22 years old, sitting at my kitchen counter with what is technically my breakfast to one side and my water bottle to the other. It is 4:18pm. It’s not what a younger version of myself would have pictured the average weekend to look like at this stage of life. I can see her now in my mind's eye, traveling forward in time, and suddenly she appears in a puff of smoke beside me. She looks around disorientedly for a few seconds, regains her balance, and her gaze lands on me.

“Are those your pajamas?”

The confusion on her face is evident. According to her careful calculations, the laptop screen should really be the double monitors of my work computer. My Tribe Called Quest t-shirt should really be a lab coat and slacks, my kitchen counter should really be the inside of the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, and I am missing a sizable diamond on my left ring finger. The scene before her isn’t quite adding up. I look down at my years-old flannel pajama pants and then back up at her, not sure how to account for my appearance. Or the rest of my circumstances, for that matter.

“Yeah, I guess they are,” I say to her. This has clarified nothing, but it’s all I can come up with.

A beat, and then she tentatively pulls out the barstool next to mine, taking a seat. Her 12-year-old feet dangle above the floor, only a few inches higher than mine. She’s wearing a cardigan over her button-up shirt, with dark hair neatly parted to the side and combed into a bun. She’s tanner and smaller than I remember her being, but while she is clearly younger, she has an air of maturity that seems to surpass mine. We sit quietly for a few seconds, looking at each other and then looking back down at the floor.

“What are you working on?” she finally asks. The furrow in her brow has softened considerably, and it looks as if curiosity has replaced her initial confusion.

“It’s an essay for my history class,” I respond. “It’s actually a book report, on a novel I read about the roles and contributions of women in the Civil War.”

I can tell that this impresses her, if only just a little bit.

“That sounds fun,” she says, with a slight, reluctant smile. “You’re still in school, then?”

“Yes, it’s my junior year.” Knowing that a follow-up question is inevitable, I say, “I’ll have an honors degree in speech and hearing sciences.”

Silence, for a moment or two, then I hurriedly add, “I actually really enjoy it.”

I wait to see how this sits with her. I’m clenching my fist, and I feel the urge to bite my lip in anticipation when I suddenly realize what is happening, the absurdity of the situation. I’m an adult, a full-time college student, fidgeting and getting sweaty-palmed over what kind of impression I’ve just made on my preteen self. I prepare myself to glance back up at her, hoping to see some sign of approval. Another curious question, a nod of the head, perhaps even a real smile. I brace myself for the opposite, knowing that more blatant criticism is well within the realm of possibility. I steel my nerves and look up, but the chair next to me is empty.

As quickly as she had appeared, the apparition was gone. I’m still sitting in my kitchen, and I’m no longer being interrogated, but her absence has done little to curb my anxiety. It shouldn’t have made me this nervous, what a child thinks of me. But she’s not just a child.

I’m left alone with my now-cold cold noodles and my thoughts, which are just as cold and tangled. They drift back to the confused face of my smaller self. Her expectations that I clearly hadn’t met, and the look on her face as she realized it. She was young, smart, sanguine. She had every right to be surprised. I was not the scientist I’d once hoped I’d be; I wasn’t working at a prestigious lab or university. I was neither an independent woman with a career nor a caring mother with a loving husband. I don’t think I could be described as anything other than what I was at exactly that moment. Alone in my kitchen, staring blankly at my laptop screen through

smudged glasses, chipping fruitlessly away at an essay that was due two days ago. The word comes back to me. *Framgångsrik*. Successful. Rich in moving forward.

It is, ultimately, what we're all chasing, isn't it? Success? That's the end goal, right? The feeling of arriving at the summit, the ability to look down at the valley below and know that you've made it. You pull yourself along by your bootstraps and end up at the place where you're supposed to be, the right place. It's a different place for everyone, of course; we all get there at different times. Obviously, everyone has their own path or journey or whatever you want to call it. But it's still a summit; it's still a peak. A final destination.

I remember that she'd done a project about this, her future, her life plan. Probably only months before she had paid me a visit. She had a laundry list of hopes and dreams, but they weren't grown from passion alone. A presentation was assigned, research was done, a google slideshow was made. It had all fit perfectly into place for her, though. At the JPL she'd be using her big brain, which surely couldn't be allowed to go to waste. It was an important enough place for her to know that she mattered and interesting enough that she wouldn't grow bored. Her children were just as important, of course. There was the question of balance, but she was more than capable enough to do it all. Other wives and mothers didn't have the capabilities that she did. She laid it out in front of her, and it was perfect. It checked every box, met every expectation. Best of all, it got her an A+ on the assignment. It was exactly like everything she'd done and everything she planned to do. Exceptional, gifted, advanced, headed for success.

That's the mountain I was meant to climb, whose summit I've never seen. The kitchen counter fades away and I sit now at the bottom of it, mountain range in view, cross-legged in the dirt at the trailhead. Every speck of dust is a choice I didn't make, every pebble in my shoe is a goal I didn't reach.

I sit for a while, waiting to feel my barstool back under my feet, but the scene hasn't changed. I start to take in my surroundings. It may be the bottom of the mountain, but it's certainly not a wasteland. The air is crisp, it's quiet and shady, and there are wildflowers growing at the edges of the trail. The dust isn't so bad once I stand up, and I'm able to empty my shoes. Free of the pebbles and with laces tied nice and snug, I walk for a bit. Not up the steep part of the path, just around the trailhead. I'm reminded how much I like to hike, how good it feels to be outside. I

take the deepest breath I possibly can, and spring air fills my lungs. I remove my glasses, wipe them gently with the bottom of my shirt, and things instantly become much clearer.

Framgångsrik is a Swedish word, one of my favorites. As a person who loves words, learning a new language was akin to unlocking a parallel dimension. Twice the vocabulary, twice the expression, twice as much meaning to find in things. The journey of becoming fluent has probably been one of my most intense intellectual endeavors, and it's one that I've never received a grade for. I wasn't tested on my abilities at any point in time, which was difficult for me. Any progress that I made was only ever evaluated in real time, in conversations with strangers and friends. It's hard not to have a score, a level, or a rating. No report card to show to my parents, no GPA that would secure an admission or any kind of acceptance. If I wanted a grade, I was the only one who could give it to myself. It didn't take long to realize this was not something I wanted to do. What took much longer was letting myself accept the progress that I had, accepting an ambiguous sense of achievement, and accepting that this was an assignment that might not have a clear rubric or even a due date. It was at around that point that one of my favorite Swedes had explained the word to me, and I decided that I had become framgångsrik in the language. I hadn't reached an ultimate point of perfection, I wasn't at the top of any mountain, and I wasn't a success. But I was rich. Rich in my progress, rich in my moving forward.

While it wasn't my younger self's intended path, my current field of speech and hearing sciences actually lends itself very well to this lifelong love of words. The new horizons of a second language have blessed me, and so has an expanded knowledge of the components of language. The smallest unit of meaning in a language is not a word, not even a letter, but a sound. They call it a morpheme, and it's represented by a symbol in an International Phonetic Alphabet. This is, in one sense, a third alphabet that I've learned in the past 3 years, but in reality, it's a bridge that connects all languages. Words in Swedish that often include the symbols "ö," "ä," and "å," and even languages with non-Latin scripts like Japanese or Cambodian, are spelled exactly the same through IPA. Framgångsrik, for example, would be written as /framgøŋsrik/. Success is written as /sæksəs/. "Disappointment" is written as /dɪsəpɔ̃ntmənt/. It feels almost like a secret code, and I think briefly how cool 12-year-old me would think that is. I laugh inwardly at the thought that I'm still trying to impress her.

That's a point in time that seems very far away from where I am now. More than a year of struggling through school and being alone in the struggle has blurred the memory. But still standing near the trailhead, I look again at my surroundings. What once felt and looked like the bottom of a mountain, the deepest of valleys, comes into focus as a truly beautiful meadow. There's more grass and less dust than I remember and the sun is shining brighter than I had noticed. If I squint far enough, I can see an expanse of hills and dales that stretches far beyond what I saw before, far further than I would have expected. The field slopes softly under my feet as if gently encouraging me. It's beautiful. I feel a glow in my chest at the sight of it all, and my mind suddenly thinks back to 12-year-old me. She'd enjoy a view like this.

Another puff of smoke clouds the corner of my eye as I'm taking in the scene, and I turn to see an old woman standing there. A long grey braid climbs over her shoulder & trails down her front, creating a silver snake that shimmers against her fuzzy blue sweater. Glasses frame her wrinkled brown eyes, and it's only when she grins at me that I recognize her smile as the one I've been staring at in the mirror my whole life. Her gold necklace- my gold necklace- seals it in truth. I'm staring at a version of myself from far in the future.

It's a surprisingly simple greeting, but I don't know what I had even expected.

"How do you like the view?" she asks.

I think for a moment, then reply, "It's different than I thought it would be. It feels different."

"I know it does," she smiles. "Don't worry though. It won't look like this forever."

"I think I've realized that," I reply.

We stare at each other for a few moments and I get the sense that, unlike my younger incarnation, she's getting just as much out of this as I am.

"I feel like this is where I'm supposed to ask you for advice," I say sheepishly.

She smiles wryly. "What do you want to know?"

“I don’t really know,” I stumble. She looks so happy, I think. That was one of the first things I noticed about her- the glow in her face, clearly visible despite the lines that age has carved in it.

“What’s the best part of your life?” I finally ask. “What should I focus on, what- ” I hesitate, briefly. “What’s worth worrying about?”

I can see her think. She takes a breath in while her eyes drift upward, a mannerism I recognize from countless hours of wracking my brain during exams.

“I’m pretty sure you already know this one,” she replies eventually. “It’s really not about the mountain at all. I don’t want to say that it’s more about ‘the friends you make along the way,’ but it is, in a way. The friends you make around you, the friends you make from your enemies, the friend you make in yourself. Any kind of fondness that you can have for the people and things around you, for every little thing you pass along your journey. That’s what you’ll remember once you slow down and eventually stop walking.”

She looks at me with a smile that is soft and sympathetic but not patronizing. Deep in my stomach I can feel the ways I both recognize the truth in what she’s said and the empty space that lets me know that she’s describing a reality I haven’t reached yet. My eyes begin to water as I consider what she’s said and how many times I wish she could have talked to me like this through my younger years. I start to blink the tears from my eyes, and somehow I’m not surprised when she’s disappeared by the time I open them fully again.

It’s at this moment that I find myself back on my stool, arms resting on the cool marble of the countertop. My laptop screen has fallen asleep and my noodles are still cold, but the paper waiting for me feels much more manageable now. The fresh air has cleared my head in more ways than one. Seeing myself in a form that hadn’t even come into existence was, strangely, as comforting as it was unsettling. I glance at the seat next to me, still empty, and my mind lingers on the thought of my younger self. She’ll hold tight to her laundry list for several more years and it will give her the peace of mind she needs to get through some of the uncertainty that lies ahead, but nothing that rigid is built to last. Time wears away even the highest of expectations and the firmest of plans, eroding in seconds what takes years to build. My older self, in all her aged glory, has solidified this perspective with her knowing smile and blissfully calm demeanor.

Letting go isn't easy, but it's not until you've left the comfort of the lists and boxes that the beauty of living truly comes into view. It's when I'm alone at the kitchen counter, speaking to my past and staring at the shape of my future, that I remember how to measure my life. It's the richness of moving forward. It's the richness of progress. I may not be successful, but I am *framgångsrik*.