



Smug is Slow: How I Learned NOT to Measure Success

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I'm not a distance runner. I'm a sprinter, and when I was a kid, I was *fast*. I could out-run other kids, adults, the tortoise and the hare...you name it. In fact, I was the fastest girl in the second grade, and almost the fastest kid...*almost*.

I remember the day I was almost the fastest kid in the second grade like it was yesterday. It was a cloudy day. It was field day. Field day was a special day at the end of the school year when all the kids in the school went outside at once for an entire day of recess! There were games like kickball and horseshoe, and everyone got ice cream. Sounds like a pretty memorable day, right?

I was excited about one event and one event only that day; the big race. Here's how the race worked. Each grade held three races. First the boys raced to determine the fastest boy. Then, the girls raced to determine the fastest girl. Finally, the fastest boy and the fastest girl raced against each other to find out who was "the fastest kid in the grade," a very important title, I might add.

I was absolutely, hands down, determined to win that very important title. With what felt like little effort, I breezed in front of the other girls in my grade and across the finish line. The crowd roared as I complacently took my place at the starting line next to the fastest boy.

His name was Timothy and if I had my way, he was going to stay plain old "Timothy" and not advance to "Timothy, the fastest second grader." I took a few breaths. I took my mark...and I took off. As the wind gushed by me I felt unstoppable. Things were going flawlessly. But then something happened. I *noticed* that I was in the lead! I assumed I was, anyway. I could not see Timothy in front of me, and I couldn't, using my peripheral vision, see him next to me, either. So, that meant he was behind me! Of course he was. I was destined to win, remember?

However, for some reason, I felt the overwhelming urge to know just how far behind me that poor soon-to-be loser was. So, I committed one of the biggest mistakes a runner can make; I looked back. I looked back to see just how far behind Timothy was and as a result, I slowed down just enough to lose my lead, and a few short seconds later, the race.

As a second grader, I learned a tough, but very important lesson on that particular field day. I learned that smugly comparing oneself to another is futile. You see, I wasn't focused on winning that race; I was focused on beating someone else. I wanted to see how far behind he was so that I could enjoy my own success even more. I wanted to know just how far he would have to run if he was ever going to catch up to me...and as I focused on his performance, I stopped focusing on mine, slowed down, and lost.

Unfortunately, the world comes equipped with a plethora of rulers designed specifically for measuring our status against others. We are taught that we must "keep up with the Joneses." We are bombarded with "how-to tools" for climbing the corporate ladder. "Why can't you be more like your brother?" The real question is: "Why should you?"

Don't get me wrong. Success is fantastic! However, we must not define our own success in terms of where we stand relative to others because in reality, *we are all running different races*. We have different goals; different dreams. Success looks different depending on what our goals are.

In order to succeed, we must:

1. Set our own goals based on our personal vision, mission, and values.
2. Measure our progress using our own rulers.
3. Evaluate where we stand, so that we can determine if we need to run faster (or slower), or in an entirely different direction.
4. Adjust our goals and actions as appropriate so that we are making progress towards accomplishing our goals.
5. Repeat.

When we do this, we are able to let go of the assumption that we must maintain a certain “leg-up” on those around us. They are running their own races and we must run ours. If we devote ourselves to setting our own goals and measuring by our own ruler, then we will find ourselves celebrating with one another as we meet at our own finish lines, and always, in first place.