

The Top Two Sources Of Self-Worth

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We humans have always been social. We cherish being loved and liked, and crave society's acceptance. This craving is so entrenched in our psyche that even without realising it, we go to great lengths every day to ensure people think highly of us.

From how we dress (Honey, how do I look in this dress?), to the way we measure our words (Can you please read this email before I send it, and let me know if my tone comes across OK?), to the actions we take (What will people think if I do that?) we are always measuring our thoughts, words and actions using a societal lens. Since the advent of Facebook and other social media, our obsession with being liked by others has become greater than ever before in human history. Come on, admit it, how often do you check Facebook after you post a status update to see how many likes or comments you've received? And how do you feel if certain people don't react to it?

Per se, there is nothing wrong with the human need for love and belonging. Who wants to be lonely after all? But if all you do is measure your success in terms of what people think of you, you're in for a lot of disappointment and insecurity. You will probably leave the planet after a long life without leaving even a trace of legacy. The good news is, it is possible to feel deeply happy and successful without surrendering your life to the likes and opinions of others. To understand how, let's first meet Jim and Jenny.

Jim went to a competitive school where you either had to be very popular yourself, or belong to a group headed by a popular student. An average student with no exceptional



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talent for sport or anything extracurricular, Jim realized early in life how important social perception was, and did everything in his power to project himself correctly. After high school, Jim went to college and acquired a degree in economics and statistics because he was told it was a good course to pursue. Upon graduating, he applied for several jobs across industries and managed to join the young professionals program in a prestigious and powerful government agency. Over the next few years, he steadily worked his way through the ranks up to middle management. He now has a lot of power over the people and organizations his agency regulates, and is not shy of using it. It is not easy to work with him because he always tries to find faults in applications that come to his desk for approval. Constituents seeking approval need to be extremely patient with him because he has a reputation for being difficult and loses his temper quite easily. If you manage to upset him, you can forget about getting your application approved, without which, you cannot continue business.

Jenny too started out in a similar school environment (most schools, and most kids at that age, are about popularity and acceptance), and pursued a similar career as Jim in government. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get Jenny upset about anything. No matter what the circumstances, Jenny always has a smile on her face, and rarely ever loses her temper. Furthermore, she goes out of her way to help her constituents, and is forever thankful for the opportunity

to serve. Jenny has taken it upon herself to understand the pain points of her constituents, and even though it is not part of her job responsibilities, she is currently fighting a hard battle to facilitate a change in legislation that will make lives significantly better. She has strong forces working against her, but she is unrattled. She continues to strive, and without worrying about possible negative consequences to her personally, plans to keep going until she succeeds. Strangely, even though she works long hours in a stressful job where the pay is ordinary, Jenny is genuinely happy and comfortable.

The difference between the two is the source of their self-worth.

Jim derives his self-worth from what others think of him, and from how much power he can wield over others. The formal authority of his position is the main source of his self-esteem, and so he is ever ready to attack anyone who questions it. In fact, you don't even have to question it. Often, Jim imagines injury when there is none. He also has a difficult relationship with his spouse, and without knowing it, often pours out his personal frustrations on his constituents by being unnecessarily difficult with them.

Jenny on the other hand, derives her sense of self-worth from her personal values, and a values-based purpose. Somewhere along the way, she realized that the whole point of living a life is to make a positive contribution to society, and that the joys of giving are far greater and longer-lasting than the temporary pleasures of receiving. So, she has now made it her life's purpose to facilitate the change of legislation she is working so hard on, and until she is able to achieve that, she goes out of her way to help her constituents in every way she can. She considers her position and authority as a gift – a gift that must be used

to help others, not to maximize her own pleasure or net-worth. Like Jim, Jenny too cares about what others think of her, but she does not allow that to run her life. She makes decisions based on her values and purpose rather than through the societal lens. As such, she is much more comfortable in her own skin, and does not allow criticism and opposition to hurt her personally.

I have been studying human behavior and leadership for almost three decades now, and I find most people, with varying degrees, are either a Jim or a Jenny. I have also noticed that there is hardly any correlation between power/material success and true happiness. As such, I meet a lot of very unhappy Jim's who are difficult with people for no rhyme or reason. Their frail ego easily gets hurt, and they become nasty to retrieve their self-esteem (*How dare you talk to me like that?*). In fact, [recent research confirms that power can damage the brain](#). One neuroscience study found that some brain functionality, like the ability of 'mirroring' which enables empathy, gets anesthetized in powerful people. Another study found people under the influence of power become more impulsive, less risk-aware, and, crucially, less adept at seeing things from other people's point of view.

I also meet a lot of Jenny's who are happy and content even without the trapping of material success. It's not that I don't meet rich and successful Jenny's - there are plenty of them around too. But their sense of well-being and success does not depend on money or authority. Jenny's are so happy pursuing their purpose, and so entrenched in living their values that they don't feel the need to compare themselves with others, or to use power indiscriminately, to feel good about themselves.



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Which one are you, Jim or Jenny? Where do you derive your sense of self-worth from? To find out, try reflecting on the statements below as honestly as you can.

	Rate the following statements on a 1-5 scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree	Rating
1	I am 100% clear about my deeply held personal values	
2	I have the right values	
3	I never compromise my values, no matter what the consequences might be	
4	I am 100% clear about my purpose in life	
5	My purpose is a worthy one	
6	My purpose stems from my values	
7	I am making progress towards my purpose	
<i>Answer 8 or 9 as applicable to you</i>		
8	My kids are (or will be) proud of me because of who I am and what I stand for	
9	If I had kids, they would be proud of me because of who I am and what I stand for	
10	My sense of self-worth stems from what I can give to the world	
11	I have discovered the true joy of giving	

Use your responses, particularly those items you rated 3 or below, to reflect on your own happiness and success.

As Tim Cook, CEO of Apple said in a speech at the 2017 MIT commencement, “Measure your impact on humanity not in likes, but in the lives you touch. Not in popularity, but in the people you serve.” In one of the chapters of my next book, [Open Source Leadership](#) (McGraw-Hill, Oct 2017), I describe this concept in terms of Leadership Energy, which is the intrinsic strength that keeps real leaders from giving up despite hardship and resistance. The book explains in a lot of detail how one can develop long-lasting leadership energy, but essentially it is made up of the two things that Jenny has and Jim doesn’t: clarity and conviction in a set of personal values, and a values-based purpose.

The good news is, it is never too late to start reflecting on one’s values and purpose. Jenny wasn’t born that way. She proactively looked for, and finally uncovered her leadership energy. We all owe it to ourselves to do the same.