



Redefining Success

Studs Terkel, author of the classic history of the Great Depression *Hard Times*, passed away Oct. 31, 2008. Studs never saw most of this recession we are in now. His account of the Great Depression illustrates the stark differences and haunting similarities between 1934 and 2009.

In one interview, a San Francisco waterfront laborer told Studs that

*“Somewhere
over the rainbow,
skies are blue,
and the dreams
that you dare to dream
really do come true.”*

— E. Y. Harburg

when a sugar refiner posted a few jobs, “a thousand men would fight like a pack of wild dogs” over them at the gates of the refiner.¹ A Catholic social worker told Studs that in ’33 and ’34, there were so many evictions on the east side of New York, “you couldn’t walk down the streets without seeing furniture on the sidewalk.”²

Studs also wrote about the psychological toll the Depression took on Americans. “The suddenly idle hands blamed themselves, rather than society,” he recalled. “No matter that others suffered the same fate, the inner voice whispered, ‘I am a failure.’” Americans got so desperate they frequently resorted to violence. In Iowa, a judge considered too willing to order foreclosures was almost lynched by farm belt farmers.

But some Americans redefined themselves and took their lives down a whole new path.

Ira Gershwin’s friend, E. Y. “Yip” Harburg, for example, lost his family business in the crash. Gershwin told him to get a pencil and a rhyming dictionary. Harburg later composed the Depression anthem, “Brother

Can You Spare A Dime,” and won an Oscar for the lyrics to “Over the Rainbow” and the other wonderful songs in *The Wizard of Oz*. Harburg told Terkel, “When I lost my possessions, I found my creativity. I felt I was being born for the first time.”

Virginia Durr, an uppercrust southern belle from Alabama and wife of Alabama lawyer Clifford Durr, redefined her life through sensitivities she developed during the Great Depression. She told Studs, “It was the first time I’d seen the other side of the tracks. The rickets, the pellagra — it shook me up.” The experience had a profound impact on Ms. Durr, who fought the poll tax in Alabama and is remembered by many as the woman who bailed out Rosa Parks when she was arrested just before the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In her article “Redefining Success,” Meg McGowan writes, “To step outside of the world’s definition of success is to step into a void. It is like grappling with the unstructured time that looms when an all-consuming project has been completed, when a goal or a deadline has finally been reached. The tight focus that has comprised our view is suddenly pulled back to reveal a vast landscape of possibilities. Personal success cannot be defined in relation to others. Not by how our means compare to others, nor how our lives measure up to others’ expectations, nor even how they fit a



“When I lost my possessions, I found my creativity. I felt I was being born for the first time,” said E. Y. “Yip” Harburg. Photo courtesy the estate of Yip Harburg.

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Virginia Durr, left, sits with friend Rosa Parks. Durr is remembered by many as the woman who bailed out Parks when she was arrested just before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Photo courtesy Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts

philosophy or standardized ideal.”³

Mel Robbins began working as a public defender in Manhattan in 1995. She has redefined herself many times since then. She says, “Life is like riding in a taxi. Sitting at the light going nowhere or traveling 50 miles an hour — it’s all the same — the meter is still running. Your meter is running. So what are you going to do? And, more importantly, what have you been waiting for?”⁴ Michelle Hoskins, author of *Sweet Expectations*, observes, “Sometimes the key to your success is right in front of you — sometimes it’s something you’ve known since you were a little child. Sometimes life gives you the worst and the best it has — right at the same time. The journey to success is never-ending, because success is not a single destination.”⁵ Memphis lawyer Ann Langston, for example, who left Gerrish and McCreary 10 years ago to be director of the Church Health Center, says, “I found a way to use my skills in a way that fulfilled my passion.”⁶

Bernie Madoff was a Wall Street legend who at age of 22 took \$5,000 he earned from his summer job as a Long Island lifeguard and started his own investment firm. His “success” propelled him to the office of president of

the Board of Directors of NASDAQ. He and his wife, Ruth, were popular socialites in New York and in Florida.

He was turned in to federal authorities by his sons, Mark and Andrew, partners in his firm. On March 12, 2009, Bernie Madoff pled guilty to 11 felony counts after admitting to investigators that he had lost \$50 billion of his investors’ money.

Twenty years ago, Tennessee had its own version of Bernie Madoff in the person of Mark Steven Benskin, whose Ponzi scheme victimized over 600 investors in 22 states with fictitious customer account statements.⁷ Madoff and Benskin’s stories serve as poignant reminders that money, power and social status, in the end, have very little to do with true success.

The night that Madoff pled guilty, Justice Sharon Lee spoke at the 12th Judicial District dinner at Sewanee. She told the story of her late father, Charles Lee, whose heroic story begins as a young aviator in WWII. Charles Lee’s life was

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Charles Lee came home from World War II with a vision of what's important in life. Lee was the father of Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee. Photo courtesy Justice Sharon Lee.

saved repeatedly by his fellow American aviators and even by one merciful German pilot.⁸ Somehow he made it home in one piece, more or less, with a

crystal-clear vision of what's important in life. He was a service station owner, a road building contractor, and a Monroe County Commissioner. He had a wonderful marriage, three children, and the respect and affection of all who knew him. He never had the money or high society friends that Madoff and Benskin had in their heyday, but his life, by any measure, was a smashing success.

True success must be defined one lawyer at a time. Whether it be a job loss, a reduction in income, and/or the transformation of a 401k into a 101k, few of us will be immune to the greatest economic downturn in our lives. But our “hard times” present opportu-

nities to redefine our vision of success and to do a gut check on whether our daily walk is feeding our soul, or whether other people's values have

defined what we do with the time we have. Our educations and our life experiences qualify us for a myriad of journeys. True success is a journey that resonates deep within each one of us, not success as others would define it. Mr. Lee would tell us that every day is a gift and it's our job to make a success of each one. ✚

Notes

1. “Studs Terkel's Legacy: A Vivid Window on the Great Depression,” *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2008.
2. *Id.*
3. McGowan, “Redefining Success,” *Conscious Choice*, October 1999.
4. Robbins, “Changing Your Life Is Easier Than You Think,” *The Big Idea Blog*, June 18, 2008.
5. Hoskins, *Sweet Expectations*.
6. Interview with Ann Langston, March 25, 2009.
7. *United States v. Benskin*, 926 Fed.2d 562(1991)
8. *TBA Today*, March 13, 2009. Justice Lee also told the heroic stories of Chancellor Arnold Goldin's father and Judge Carroll Ross's father. See <http://www.tba2.or/tbatoday03-13-2009.htm> for the full text.