

kled. The scientist who has spent decades trying to solve a problem may feel that all the effort went to nothing. The immigrant worker who spent long hours, day after day, year after year, cleaning homes, only to see her children drop out of school, may wonder what all that labor was for. The retired stockbroker who made himself a decent living but had longed to do something different all along may ask whether the money was worth it. In these cases, there may be nothing rewarding about the situation except for the questioning itself, which may or may not open the way to more understanding.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* can be regarded as a parable of the ambivalence of success and failure. The old man catches the marlin but loses the flesh; he comes home with the skeleton, proof of both his defeat and his victory. But the skeleton cannot tell the private part of the story: the conversations with a bird, with the fish, with himself. A tourist spots the skeleton tied to his skiff and asks a waiter what it is. He replies, "Tiburón . . . Eshark," meaning that the sharks ate it. The tourist misunderstands him and replies that she didn't know sharks had "such handsome, beautifully formed tails."²⁰ Already the history has been lost, through broken telling and misunderstanding. The old man is alone with his experience; be it success or failure, it is unknown to anyone but himself, and perhaps not even to himself. His explanation to himself is that he went out too far; perhaps this means that he has no explanation or that he went out to a place where there were no answers. Perhaps this is the nature of a serious endeavor: if we go very far, we reach a point of private conversation, where nothing is clear and where success and failure are no longer opposites.

What, then, might success be, if our current understanding is too narrow? It is not simply personal fulfillment; fulfillment in itself can be empty. One can take Prozac and feel fulfilled for a while, or at least less unfulfilled; does that make one successful? One can join a group of

like-minded people and shut out conflicts; is that success? One can be electronically matched to the things one likes, and only those things, but what happens, then, to ruggedness and adventure? Why not take a rougher route? Success may have to do with wending our way through swamps and clambering over logs. It may have something to do with living ourselves out, as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche suggested—becoming strongly and purely ourselves. But there is more. Success has to do with a certain empty-handedness, a willingness to do something out of love or dedication or curiosity, without predictable reward. That includes spending time with a partner, child, or close friend; it includes playing an instrument and hearing the tones grow fuller and clearer. Maybe there is grace in it too. Ferry writes, "What is the use of growing old? . . . To enlarge one's view: to love the singular and once in a while to experience the abolition of time that the presence of the singular permits us."²¹ We are not used to thinking in these terms, but perhaps true success is something we may achieve when false success falls away.

The preoccupation with outward success (money, image, power, and success itself) deceives us out of a harder success. Failure, our twin, becomes the exiled leper, so we come to loathe ourselves even as we buff and propagate our image. Whatever seems awkward, unformed, or tentative gets pushed aside. Confidence trumps competence; we hesitate to do things that we do not already do well. But in ridding ourselves of all unsuccessful things, we make a bleak utopia, an empty dome. Our internal misfits may be things in motion: ideas in formation, projects in progress, difficult challenges. They may be private thoughts or things for which we do not yet have words. They may be concerns and hopes for another person. They may be part of the human rumble: suffering, confusion, unexpected joy. They may not always shape themselves for job applications, promotions, or million-dollar prizes, but we do not live by such shapes alone.