



WHAT I
LEARNED
ABOUT LIFE
AFTER
SPENDING
19 YEARS IN
SCHOOL

BY
JESSA

DEAR READER

Wherever you are in the
world,

THIS IS FOR YOU

When I was a child, I was taught to show up to class every day and study hard to get high grades. Obedience was drilled on me, even if it meant that there'd be less and less room for personal creativity. The most pressing question that gets asked every time was,

"WILL THIS BE ON THE TEST?"

And if the answer is yes, then it's where I should pour my time into. And I was led to believe that if I just continue to show up and study hard for 17 years, then I can get a decent job, enjoy government benefits, and be secured until retirement. (Yes, it works until it doesn't.)

But then finishing college was quite hanging for me. Because deep down, I know that I went to college because I am expected to be there. And that it's the only way for me to make it through the workforce of white-collared jobs. Finishing college felt as if society does not reward the things I have trained myself to be good at, which were not directly taught in classes.

And I thought grad school will lead me to finally find my niche...

...so I went in for another two years.



Yes, you're right about the math.

However, after 19 years of my life spent within academia's invisible walls, it felt like I still haven't figured out the work I should be into.

Probably, I was looking for something that's not really there. Or maybe, I was doing or seeing things the wrong way.

Collecting the dots isn't the point.



We enrolled in PhD programs, law school, med school, architecture school, education master's programs, MBAs. It wasn't because we were hungry for more knowledge. It was because we were hungry for secure, middle-class jobs — and had been told, correctly or not, that those jobs were available only through grad school.

[How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation](#)



We were rewarded for how many we could memorize and regurgitate during exams when we were in school. And because we were taught that getting high grades not only gives us short-term glory but also an attractive transcript of records for our future employers, we began the race of collecting data without regard for retention once the exams are over.

Collecting the dots isn't the point.

I am not sure about you, but it felt like I went to school to pass exams for me. For sure, I learned a couple of things, but most of the years I spent was about acing the tests and getting a good mark.

When I wanted to learn further, I chose not to because it steals the time I should spend studying for tomorrow's exam.

And this is not just about memorizing data we know we'll forget anyway. This is also about participating in knowledge-based programs, be it seminars, training, or online classes and specializations, partly for what we'll be learning from them, but primarily just for the certificates we'll gain.

I don't mean that you quit enrolling in online classes and stop going to school altogether. But the next time you do, you need to make sure that you're there because you are committed to being there and are determined to put to good use whatever you'll be learning from that class or that specialization.

Because I learned that unless learning is something you choose to do, it doesn't sound like learning at all.

The definition of success is up to you.

Why did you go to college?

Most probably, we share the same motivation, which is to get a high-paying job. And most employers ask for a bachelor's degree as a minimum qualification anyway, even if it can be dismissed in some cases. But yes, often, getting a college degree makes a lot of difference for ordinary people like us, especially when you're not born into a wealthy family.

And yes, the reason why we work is for us to get paid. Because no matter what your intentions are, you still need that inflow of cash to sustain your most basic needs.



The definition of success is up to you.

But sometimes, people around us often impose unrealistic expectations about how we should be doing right after graduating from school. For example, that getting a license automatically means high pay and that your success comes with the title you are currently holding.

Life isn't the same for everyone.

And as much as we want to be somebody people celebrate, becoming the person we want to become doesn't happen overnight. Getting there takes a lot of effort and work that we'd be proud to tell others about.

Yes, the pressure of meeting other people's expectations and the reality of how challenging it is to get a job is emotionally taxing. **But it's up to you whether to allow them to define what success is instead of allowing it to become what success looks like for you.**

Living a nonexistent ideal only leads to frustration.



We're all comparing ourselves to an ideal that no longer exists and beating ourselves up for not achieving it.

Life is in the Transitions



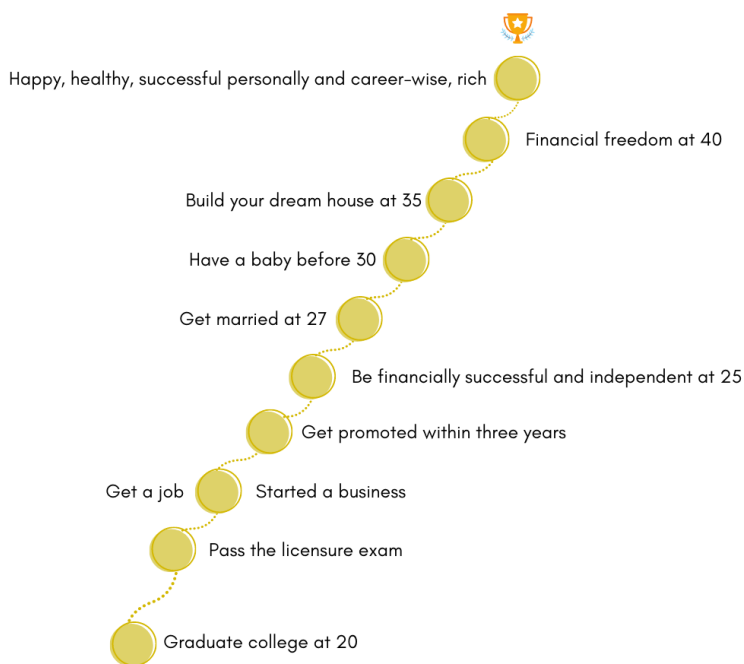
That if you only do this, you get that. Study hard and graduate, then jobs will line up for you.

And most of us were convinced about it.

A wishful thinking that we were fed with by our well-meaning families.

Living a nonexistent ideal only leads to frustration.

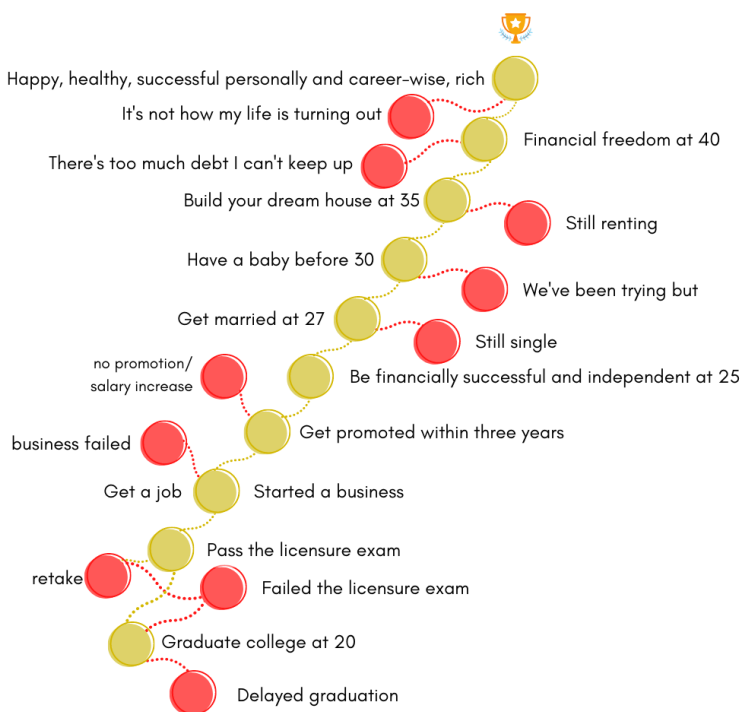
From [this](#) blog post, I wrote about how we work through invisible deadlines. And our expectations might look like this:



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Living a nonexistent ideal only leads to frustration.

However, we might end up having something like this:



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If we are not meeting these invisible deadlines, does it mean that we are a failure?

Living a nonexistent ideal only leads to frustration.

As much as we want to live a linear and predictable life, there are things that we simply don't have control over. But we have the power to manage how we deal with the situation we are going through.

The hardest lesson I gleaned from unmet expectations was this:

Life isn't about ticking off boxes. Life is about making the world you live in a lot better for the generations to come.

Life is about making meaning.



The difference between success and failure—between a life of fulfillment and a life of frustration—is how well you manage the challenge and making meaning in your life.

Life is in the Transitions



We used to only think about ourselves when we were young, and it's "selfish." But then, here comes growing up and responsibilities that are pushing us to the edges. And while they are at it, we begin to wonder whether the point of living life is just getting the things we want and doing the things we enjoy.

Living a nonexistent ideal only leads to frustration.

We thought that life is black and white, such that there is either success or failure, fulfillment or frustration, and nothing in between. However, the more we experience different seasons in our lifetime, we realize that we always have successes and failures.

Most of us are dumbfounded to find that our lives could be out of order. And because there are a lot of things we don't have control over, our attitude towards them matters. **So that instead of grumbling about all our unmet expectations right after college, we could choose to be grateful with every waking day.** And decide that life isn't about ticking off your bucket list. It's about making meaning and becoming the change you want to be remembered for.

Final Words

As I approach my 30s, I thought I figured out my life after spending 19 years in school. But I was wrong. However, I learned that life after school means you can go wherever you want. Where you need to begin creating something not only for yourself but for others around you, the culture you are in, and the generations to come.

Just a word of caution. **Your move always and will always affect others in ways you never thought possible.** So, therefore, in everything you set your heart to do, be your authentic self. Be a part of the interactions you want to create and the changes you wish to contribute.

Because finally, you can now choose to create things just because you're compelled to do them and not because of the grades you get for doing them.

Resources

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Acknowledgments

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