



Finding Forrester: Two Important Obstacles to Realizing Your Talents

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It is commonly supposed that if a person has a talent for something, the talent will express itself to good effect no matter what, that the person will find that he or she can do something either better than other people, or easier, or faster, or with more flair or self-assurance. It is also typically supposed that once a person discovers his or her talent, the road to success based on that talent becomes broad, welcoming, and straight and contains no switchbacks, cul-de-sacs, or dead ends. The movie *Finding Forrester* dramatizes the fact that, while grains of truth are sprinkled among these typical attitudes, each of them considerably oversimplifies reality.

As he was growing up, Jamal Wallace (Rob Brown) gradually came to realize that he was fundamentally different from his mother and brother and friends, in that the things that he was interested in and thought about were different from those that occupied these people. Jamal found his soul mates in books. He also valued his inner life more than the people around him did theirs, and he felt compelled to get his thoughts, feelings, and imaginings down on paper as accurately and forcefully as possible, a preoccupation that once again was neither shared nor understood by those around him. For Jamal, his talents initially presented themselves not as glorious opportunities, but as a set of burdensome quirks that he needed to keep hidden from others if he wanted to be fully accepted by them.

So Jamal initially hides his abilities from his friends and mother and brother by getting average grades in school and by devoting much of his time to basketball. When a teacher asks him in class whether he read Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven," he says that he didn't, even though he probably did, since this was the type of answer his classmates would have given. He allows himself to live fully as himself only in secret, only while squirreled away in his bedroom or during odd moments of privacy.

As it happens, those who believe that a person would instantly value talents as glorious opportunities limit their attention to a special case. This would have likely been true of

Jamal had his parents been highly educated. If, for example, Jamal had been born to Professor Crawford (F. Murray Abraham), the talents and interests he displayed in the movie would have been welcomed and nurtured to their utmost, and there would have been no need for a double existence.

Jamal's nurturing environment could have been better, but it could have been worse, too, particularly, say, if he had had repressive parents who forbade him to own books and spend long private hours in his room. Jamal said that he began writing after his father left the household, which may indicate that his father was such a repressive force.

Parents who devote their lives to tending their own inner gardens will often prize and nurture talent in an offspring the instant it reveals itself. On the other hand, a parent like Jamal's mother, who spent her life struggling desperately to merely survive, will probably not know what to make of Jamal, but will be tolerant of whatever talent takes root, in the hope that it will eventually lead to something great. Other people, however, who spent their lives denying the existence of their own native talents would be much less tolerant. Such a parent—perhaps Jamal's father—would tend to do everything possible to uproot, crush, or poison the germinating seedling until it was as dead as the sprout the parent found growing in himself. Had Jamal's father remained in the household, Jamal would not have needed to pretend to be ordinary, since everything about him that was extraordinary would have found itself under attack the instant it emerged.

As the movie opens, Jamal is on a track to becoming a knowledgeable and highly articulate bus driver or maintenance man or automotive mechanic or some other kind of tradesman. That's because Jamal's tendency to hide his true self is rooted in more than merely the desire to be accepted by those around him. Jamal's life at this time is dominated by something called separation guilt.

When we form attachment relationships with other people, we become sensitive to how well we fit in with them, in the sense of how completely we share their likes, dislikes, and values. Think of attachment bonds as invisible bungee cords that keep people's minds and emotions linked to one another. The cords allow a person to stray from the group only so far; afterwards they tug the person back. What does the tugging is separation guilt, which operates at the level of feelings, inhibiting a person from taking steps that would result in the person straying too far from his or her social group in some way. Separation guilt is an unfortunate term because it rarely manifests itself as conscious feelings of guilt. It may surface as merely an inability to muster the energy to do whatever is necessary to reach an important personal goal. Or it may operate as indecisiveness or as listlessness or even depression.

At the start of the movie, Jamal felt his life being tugged in opposite directions by two different sets of bungee cords. Tugging against his social attachments were his talents whose full expression would separate Jamal from his circle of friends and family members in unpredictable ways. So whenever Jamal became motivated to pursue his talents, separation guilt would kick in, undermining those motives in one way or another. Jamal's way of reconciling these opposing forces was to hide his talents from public view. This afforded him a degree of self-expression, but it represented only a stopgap

solution, since living the life his talents demanded required that he emerge from hiding, which his separation guilt was preventing him to do.

Actually Jamal suffered from another sort of unconscious guilt, too. This is called survival guilt. The term originally referred to the guilt suffered by people whose parents or siblings had died. It is now recognized that people who have the chance to achieve better lives than their living friends and relatives are held back by the same thing. As with separation guilt, survival guilt is rarely expressed as conscious guilt. Survival guilt may be seen operating in the movie in the short scene in which Jamal checks with his brother to see if his going to a private prep school would be all right with him. Jamal's older brother was initially seen as the "brain" in the family who was destined to achieve academic greatness, which would catapult him out of the ghetto. He, however, turned his back on his opportunities, so Jamal feels the need to check to see if it is okay with his brother that he surpass him.

Survival guilt, like separation guilt, becomes particularly inhibiting when those around a person indicate that they would be seriously harmed by being surpassed or cut off in some way. Jamal's brother tells Jamal that it is fine with him that he make the most of this academic opportunity, and he seems to mean it. Jamal's mother also seems to genuinely support the move, so there doesn't seem to be anyone in Jamal's life capable of triggering crippling survival guilt. If, however, Jamal's father had communicated to Jamal that he didn't want to see Jamal turn out better than him, that would have been enough to intensify the survival guilt to pathogenic proportions. It makes no difference that the father is no longer around. It would make no difference even if the father was dead. The intensification would remain in force just the same.

William Forrester (Sean Connery) is also hiding his true self at the start of the movie. He has imprisoned himself in a little rundown apartment building in the Bronx, spending his days making videos of birds and watching kids play basketball through binoculars. Years ago, he wrote a novel that was widely acclaimed, having won the Pulitzer Prize. Then he wrote virtually nothing else, even though publishers clamored for something—anything—from him. The reason the movie gives is that his brother died about the time the book came out, as did his parents.

When something bad happens to those we are attached to, we tend to lose focus on our own lives and become preoccupied with wanting to help them. This altruistic impulse can be a wonderful thing, but because it is instinctively driven, it can go haywire. Rational or not, the survival guilt that enforces it creates feelings and attitudes to the effect that the person not touched by calamity does not deserve to have a life better than those who are. These feelings support the desire to help, but operate even when help is not possible, as when a loved one has died.

It is natural and normal that William Forrester became depressed at the death of his family as a part of his grieving process. It would be natural also for him to temporarily feel that he didn't deserve to have much of a life for himself afterwards. We would all have such feelings under similar circumstances, but the feelings would diminish over time as we made adjustments in our attachment relationships in order to gradually build a new life. But the survival guilt apparently didn't diminish in Forrester's case, prohibiting him from developing new attachment relationships to compensate for those he had lost.

As a result, he became a recluse having no life at all. The reason the movie gives why normal temporary survival guilt became a permanent pathogenic reality is that Forrester felt that he caused his brother's death because he allowed him to drive a car even though he knew he was drunk.

Is it credible that Forrester would have wasted his life simply because of his questionable involvement in his brother's death? Actually no. It does seem to be an overreaction. Interestingly, the movie provides a justification. Jamal notes that Forrester's novel was about how life has a way of turning awry, which would argue that Forrester had pathogenic beliefs about the promise of life before the incident occurred. The incident seemed to confirm the validity of Forrester's longstanding pessimistic beliefs about life. This confirmation worked in conjunction with survival guilt to put Forrester's life on hold.

People stuck in a holding pattern need help from the outside to give the positive forces in inside them more strength than the inner forces holding them back. More often than not, outside help requires new attachment relationships. The person stuck in a holding pattern instinctively knows this, but is prevented by the balance of forces from consciously seeking outside help. This balance of forces, however, doesn't prevent the person from developing unconsciously driven strategies aimed at attacking the impasse in tiny ways.

The initiative Jamal takes involves answering questions on an SAT test honestly so that the test scores accurately reflect his abilities. This was done not with any clear goal in mind, but merely to put himself out there to see what might happen. What happened is that school officials took notice and took steps to get him into a much better school, a private academy, one that would train him for a future that was much more in accord with his abilities and would permit him to develop attachment relationships with people more like his true self. These attachment relationships would make for a new support system that would encourage him to overcome whatever remnants of separation guilt remained. The support offered by these people would give Jamal the courage to trust in himself, and thereby become more committed to the kind of life his talents define.

By the time Jamal meets William Forrester, he is becoming acquainted with this new world. His future, however, is not as assured as it may seem, since Jamal could still turn his back on all of this, as his brother did, out of unconscious guilt, which would express itself as conscious rationalizations to the effect that he does not really fit in and has sensed prejudice against him. Jamal is teetering when Forrester comes into his life.

Forrester comes into Jamal's life because of an unconsciously driven initiative on Forrester's part to break his own inner impasse. After reading Jamal's notebooks, Forrester seizes the opportunity to reach out to him by critiquing his writing and then dropping Jamal's backpack at his feet, thereby in effect offering to become Jamal's mentor. Jamal jumps at the chance to become involved with someone who knows something about writing. Forrester helps Jamal by confirming his worth as a writer and by helping him deal with problems that arise during his first months in the new school.

It might be supposed that Forrester's relationship with Jamal helps him to overcome his own survival guilt by showing Forrester that he is capable of doing good for someone, and therefore is not a bad person. Such a rational approach is actually not the primary way Jamal helps him, because Forrester's survival guilt is itself irrational. Jamal helped

just by being himself, by allowing Forrester to experience his hunger for life and his burning desire to write better. Forrester comes to see himself in the young boy, thereby reawakening those aspects of himself that have long lain dormant. Jamal also helps him by getting him out of his apartment, thus enabling him to combat his irrational fears born of decades of isolation. As a result of all this inadvertent therapy, Forrester becomes a world traveler and ultimately writes his long-awaited second novel.