

YOUR PERCEPTIONS WILL CONTROL YOUR OUTCOME AND LIFE

"You should try out for the basketball team," she told me.

I had never been good at basketball. In fact, it was my worst game and not something I really enjoyed. However, the more I started hearing about this basketball team and what a big deal it was, the more I realized I needed to try out for it if I had any hope of hanging on to my girlfriend. It was a little bit more complicated than that.

I had just left elementary school and come to this new school, and because my girlfriend happened to be popular, I was meeting a bunch of new guys and sitting at the right table in the lunch room. Unfortunately, I realized all of the people she was friends with were also basketball players. I am not sure how it happened, however, I was hanging out with the basketball crowd. We were all very clean-cut and got good grades and sat at lunch looking like good kids. These kids were pretty boring compared to the sorts of kids I would eventually be friends with, but I was tolerating it. Their mothers typically packed their lunches, for example, and they bought milk in the cafeteria. Their sandwiches would be neatly wrapped in wax paper or little plastic sandwich bags and they would have an apple and maybe some chips. My mother had never packed lunch in my life. I would sit there at lunch with a couple of Ho Hos I bought from the vending machine with some change I'd scooped from the bottom of my mother's purse. I have no idea how I fit in with these kids to this day.

I went home and told my mother about this dilemma. I told her I needed a basketball net built immediately over the garage because tryouts were in three weeks. My mother grew up in a town where athletics were very important, and she had a strange history with obscure sports. I think she'd actually been a state champion in ping pong when she was younger.

My mother reacted in a way I've never seen when I told her I needed a basketball net. For example, once I told her I needed a desk in my room and she told me that was nice but I could study on the floor or on the kitchen table. When a spring came through my mattress that was a hand-me-down from my mother's mother after she died, my mom told me to flip it over. The basketball net was different.

"Oh my! There is no basketball net for you to practice on? We need to fix this right away!" She grabbed her cigarettes, made a drink, and started calling her friends to get recommendations for contractors and so forth. She found one that would come over in the afternoon. I was incredulous because I had never seen my mother react to anything this way. I went to my room to watch re-runs of Three's Company. An hour or so later she popped her head in my room:

"Hurry!! The sporting goods store closes in 30 minutes. Let's go." I've got some blue collar roots and my mom was very aware of what was important in life. When we got to the store she purchased me the most expensive basketball backboard they had. The next morning I got home from school and there was the most professional contractor my mom had ever hired putting the finishing touches on the basketball backboard. He was going around with a leveler and making sure it was perfectly installed. My mom usually cut corners with contractors but not this guy. I was old enough to know he was really good at what he did.

My mom came home from work early to make sure the backboard was installed properly. She even demanded the contractor install some lights so I could practice at night.

For the next couple of weeks I must have practiced at least three or four hours a day. I hit shots from every direction I possibly could, I practiced layups and every conceivable type of shot. I was getting really good at making shots and starting to really enjoy basketball. Meanwhile, not only did my girlfriend make the cheerleading squad, she was chosen to be the captain. She rode her bike over to see how I was doing with my practice one Saturday afternoon.

"We'll both be captains!" she told me with approval.

When the day of the tryouts for the basketball team finally arrived, I felt I was ready. While I had gotten very good at making shots, the thing I had not prepared for was the fact that none of my shooting abilities mattered if I could not make it to the net. Basketball is as much about footwork as it is about making shots. The most damaging aspect of my tryouts came when I was running defense against a very good player and instead of slapping the ball I slapped his nose by mistake with the palm of my hand. Hard. He fell down to the gym floor with blood pouring out of his nose. After that I realized I probably would not make the team. Kids thought this was funny and word of this quickly got around the halls of the school. I remember walking to class and people jokingly getting out of the way like I was going to clock them in the face. The guy I had hit showed up with a giant piece of tape across his nose the next day. I did not make the team.

How we feel about ourselves is all due to what we tell ourselves certain things will mean. I told myself if I did not make the basketball team my girlfriend would no longer like me. I told myself my friends would no longer want to be friends with me if I did not make the basketball team.

When you are thinking about your life, you need to ask yourself a few things:

1. Is how you feel determined by the economy?
2. Is how you feel determined by how others treat you?
3. Is how you feel determined by how you think others perceive you?
4. Is how you feel determined by the things you own?

The truth is how you feel is determined by how you direct your mind. The ability to direct your mind and control your emotional and psychological states is about the most important tool you can possibly have. Very few people have the ability to control their minds and their states. You need to be able to control how you feel about yourself and your emotions. I read the papers every day and most of the human interest stories I read are about people who are not able to control their minds and their states. Lately I have been reading a lot of stories about people who have been committing suicide due to dire economic circumstances. These people are not controlling their states. We also continually hear stories about stars and others who die due to drug overdoses. These people are using drugs to try and control how they feel, and it ends up killing them. When I think about people like Chris Farley and Marilyn Monroe, I am thinking about people who, despite an incredible amount of success, could not control how they felt. One of the best writers of all time, Ernest Hemingway, ended up killing himself. He, too, could not control how he felt. Despite a wonderful world around him he did not care.

You really need to control the meaning you give things and the meaning you allow things to have. The meaning you give things will control the quality of your life.

When my girlfriend found out I did not make the basketball team, she did not appear to care at all. She was really nonchalant about the whole thing and told me she was sorry about this. Unfortunately, the meaning I gave this was quite severe. I immediately assumed she would no longer like me at all. The next day I told her that I needed to go to school at a different time and did not ride my bike with her to school. At lunch I felt really out of place with my new friends who had all made the basketball team. That was all they talked about at lunch. In class, several of my teachers started talking about the first game. Despite some decent friendships, I started to feel like I did not belong with this athletic crowd because I hadn't made the team. I felt like I'd failed horribly. I started blowing off my girlfriend more and more. I started sitting at other tables at lunch and associating with different sorts of kids.

My girlfriend broke up with me. I did not really like her all that much so I was not too upset. I knew it was coming. I had allowed myself to get really depressed when I did not make the basketball team. The real low came about a week after the breakup when she called me one day after school and told me she'd bought me a Christmas gift when we were dating and still wanted me to have it. She showed up at my house with half the cheerleading squad who all watched me open the board game Yahtzee.

"Wow Yahtzee!! I have always wanted this." What a pathetic sight it must have been seeing me open that board game. I could not hug her. I could just stare at this board game with 6 gorgeous cheerleaders standing in my messy bedroom with my ex-girlfriend looking on smiling.

In retrospect, I now realize that not much would have changed with my friends, my relationship, and more if I had not told myself my failure to make the team represented something it did not. Like people who kill themselves because they cannot control their emotions, I, too, could not control my emotions and what I was telling myself. The thought that crossed my mind was the head of the cheerleading squad would only want to be with someone who was also the captain of the basketball team. On yet another level, I thought the basketball players would only want to be friends with someone who was also a basketball player. The more I thought about all this, the less worthy I felt and the more I felt like I needed to fit in somewhere else completely.

Within a short time of not making the basketball team I had made new friends who were not athletes and who were more dedicated to getting into trouble than anything. My grades plummeted and were so bad the next year my parents enrolled me in a different school. Most of this happened because of what I told myself not making the basketball team meant.

I remember one public high school I attended had a small enclosed courtyard where students were allowed to smoke between classes. These kids wore jean jackets or leather jackets and grew their hair long. These were the bad kids. They also would get stoned out there, and the school must have known about it. These were all kids who at some point probably had dreams, too, but gave up somewhere along the way and looked for a way out of their presumed failure. They started smoking and using drugs and living a life of which they could never be proud. Who knows what sent them over this edge. It could have been a bad grade in an important class, it could have been the divorce of their parents, it could have been a nasty breakup. What I do know is that in the year I attended that school, I witnessed kids who were normal and clean-cut go over to the other side and join this group in the courtyard.

People look for things outside themselves to help people control their states and how they feel. Many people feel like they cannot control their emotions and so they start looking for stuff outside of themselves to help them feel good. You pay a hefty price when you are not able to manage your states and how you feel about yourself. There are huge rewards when you know how to manage your states. The rewards for managing your states are happiness and the ability to control your destiny and what happens to you and your life. These rewards are something that can pay huge dividends.

The problem most of us have is we tell ourselves something means something it does not.

You may have lost a job and represented to yourself that the reason you lost the job was because you are a bad person. You may have lost the job because the company had no money to pay you.

A relationship may end and you may represent to yourself it is your fault when, in reality, the person who broke up with you is working through some psychological roadmap that existed long before you came along.

You cannot **find a job** and you represent to yourself it's because you are not good enough instead of the fact the economy in the area of the country you are in is horrible.

High school kids become "stoners" because they represent to themselves they are losers instead of just normal kids suffering through problems.

I sabotaged my friendships because I represented to myself that not making the basketball team meant I would be rejected by my girlfriend and friends.

Even if something does mean the worst, it does us little good to hold on to this representation. Instead, we should represent the events in our lives to ourselves in a way that empowers us. How could I have reacted differently to not making the basketball team? I could have decided I was cool enough I did not have to play basketball every day to date the captain of the cheerleader squad. I could have told myself despite not being a good basketball player, I could continue to be good friends with the most popular kids in school. All of these interpretations would have empowered me. Instead, I represented the opposite.

The meaning you give things is crucial for your career success. Whatever happens to you in your career you need to choose meanings that make you stronger and not weaker. Bad things happen to everyone and the messages we receive from the world are often not positive. The most important thing you can do is choose meanings that are going to allow you to succeed and do even better. This is what you need to be doing with your career and job right now. You need to ensure you interpret things in a way that serves you and does not hurt you.

Don't fail to reach your full potential or mistakenly classify yourself as someone who is not fit to succeed at the level at which you're capable. This is not what you want for yourself. You need to take charge of your mind to have the career and life you are entitled to and deserve.

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