

## OPINION

### Success in Context

by Boris Baly



Boris Baly in his studio leaping with joy over a new 5 x 16' worktable, 2003. Photo: Curti Ark.

It has taken me almost 30 years of working as a metalsmith to begin pondering the meaning of the road I have chosen and its impact on my life. Maybe it is fatherhood that has forced me to ask these questions now. Or maybe it is my graying hair? Eventually, I will want my children to feel successful. And I want them to be proud of me. Life is a gift and for some this is success enough. As comedian Steven Wright tells us, "You can't have everything; where would you put it?"

A metalsmith's lifestyle is such an unpredictable, unconventional, and innovative one. How can we define success and how do we even realize when we have made it? Somewhere there must be a mysterious list of flaming career hoops that we learn to jump through, eventually mastering these tricks while hoping to remain untarnished by the time we finally earn status. No, the journey must culminate in a series of doors that

miraculously open after a predetermined period of hustling. In fact, the key appears to be living with an eye to equilibrium: balancing life with the making of art. It also involves the momentum of a slowly growing inner strength developing along with an artist's commitment, passion, and hard work. A critical mass is reached when head, heart, hands, and chutzpah mix to create a rich stew, well-seasoned with the proper education, experience, environment, skill, persistence, daring, and, of course, pinches of luck.

So what are our own definitions of success then? It seems so cliché to say that the more we have done, the more there is left to do; the more we learn, the more is left to know; the bolder we become, the more inner fear surfaces. Obviously, success has something to do with balancing such extremes. I set out to find out how other metalsmiths felt about this topic, and specifically how

they defined "success" in their own personal terms. I solicited metalsmiths from a wide variety of backgrounds to address the subject. Some of them are young and some more experienced; all are outstanding members of either our academic, artistic, or business communities. While many of their views conflict, most of them are astonishingly similar.

In the opinion of industrial artist Ries Niemi, who makes large-scale, big-budget work in an enormous shop adjoining his home in Bow, Washington, the real measure of an artist is someone who can't help themselves and simply must make "things." Niemi believes success is irrelevant, "Can you be successful at eating? at breathing?" he asks, echoing the views of many of the metalsmiths I polled. Success is being able to continue doing artwork while making enough money to support ourselves, continually learning new things and challenging boundaries. As with many of us, the changes in Niemi's life have mostly been self-initiated, his life evolves by following his interests. He explains, "I get interested in something, figure out some way to sell it so I can buy tools and materials, learn more, and make more."

A more psychological perspective comes from Johanna Dahm, artist and professor at the University of Applied Sciences in Pforzheim, Germany, who lives and works in Zürich, Switzerland. Dahm suggests that success is something the insatiable ego chases. The ego feels satisfied only in short moments when it has been able to succeed while competing with others or oneself. Therefore, there is always a loser left behind, the next loser inevitably in sight. But the ego, which lives for the fascination of the moment or for the creative pause, has no time for charm and should not be trusted.

Dahm also suggests that every society has a few outstanding thinkers whose brilliant contributions did not happen because they wanted to feel successful. Rather, an excellent idea kept them restless. This idea had the luck to be accompanied by the right mind and soul at the right moment and place. If an idea is weak, no strategy or tactic will do the job. More love will not help either, as good ideas can be chased away with too much.

Keith Lewis, associate professor of art at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, is also suspicious of commercial viability as a measure of success. He believes that true art requires investigation and doesn't yield instant satisfaction. Because the image reaches far more people than the object can, success has also meant seeing his work published, for if the work is shown, it gives people something, positive or negative, to talk about. "Often missing from our field, is seeing one's work vigorously critiqued through provocative writing or

engaging theory," Lewis claims. "The fine arts have benefited from often brutal critical discourse and so would we."

With an interesting networking metaphor, James Thurman, associate director and assistant professor at the School of Visual Arts, Penn State University, thinks of his involvement with the arts as a stone thrown into a lake. "I am only at the surface of the water for an instant, but that instant creates new ripples that spread and intersect with other waves and ripples, to create something new. In the process I try to make a splash whose effect spreads as much as possible. Maybe if we approach it just right and our apex is not too steep, we can skip along the surface, producing numerous other origins of ripples." Thurman wrestles with two very different ideas of success, which can be in opposition yet sometimes strongly reinforce one another. The philosophical, "loving what you are doing and being present and aware in each moment," and the professional, "being gauged by financial achievement, personal recognition and reputation." It seems that the more these ideas can be in alignment, the more you will be happy and satisfied with your life.

Phil Carrizzi, assistant professor and chair of the Metal/Design Department at Kendall College of Art & Design in Grand Rapids, believes success is attaining an equilibrium between living and interpreting life through his work. His formula is whimsical, "My success quotient is measured by squaring the average hours of sleep I get per night and subtracting the number of jabs my wife takes at me for being so absent at home, where my age is more or less the maximum integer."

Although it is a highly personal, often difficult path to "success," it is remarkable how optimistic we seem to be as a group. Most of us wouldn't change a thing or have done anything differently in our lives or careers. We can't imagine doing anything else save devoting additional time to travel or family, often hoping this will lead to further inspiration. We do not welcome retirement, at least in conservative terms. By becoming more selective and learning how to budget our time better, we strive for more opportunities to create personal work, always hoping to improve and explore. We feel fortunate and positive. Our biggest aspirations seem to be health, happiness, and stability, although there also seems to be a common desire to be remembered, to achieve immortality through the fruits of our labors. ■

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