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Believe and Achieve!

Today, a teenager told me that he hated me. He said that I was pathetic and that, while I might be able to fool 5,000 other kids, I couldn't fool him.

He didn't actually tell me this to my face. Instead, he posted multiple tweets about how he couldn't stand "my kind of people." He went on to say that the problem with "my kind of people" is that we don't work hard enough to attain our dreams and that we give up too easily. He couldn't believe that I had the "audacity" to tell students at a leadership conference that I was being realistic about life when I was nothing more than a quitter. He further explained that he had contemplated rushing the stage and grabbing the mic to speak on behalf of the people who are go-getters—the ones who turn their dreams into reality and won't settle for anything less.

My presentation began innocently enough when I told the audience of student leaders that I didn't like the phrase, *"If you believe, you can achieve!"* In fact, I shared my conviction that this particular mantra is a big, fat lie. No one can simply believe and achieve every dream. But for years, adults have inundated children with this message. In return, teenagers are conditioned to accept that if they will *only* believe in themselves, then they can do and be anything they want. All it takes is sheer will and determination.

It's a nice theory, but it's too simplistic.

I wish it were that easy. I would have accomplished a whole lot of goals and dreams in my life including earning a much higher letter grade in ninth grade algebra. No one, and I mean *no one* better tell me that I didn't believe in myself or try hard enough. I can't even think about it today without cringing. I went through two tutors, hours and hours of instruction, extra help after school, fights with my parents, and buckets of tears, and I *still* received a mercy grade of a D from my teacher. I believed. But I couldn't achieve.

"If you believe, you can achieve!" The adults that plant this seed have the best intentions. But they also sow unrealistic expectations, and the blanket use of this statement can have unexpected consequences.

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That particular day at the conference, when the teen unleashed his anger on Twitter, I began by telling the students how I had always wanted to sing like Mariah Carey. Every time I heard her sing, I was mesmerized. I imagined myself hitting those crystal clear high notes. I dreamed of duplicating her pitch perfect range. But one day, I awakened from my dream with a very sad heart.

I knew that I would have had had the support of my friends and family. I even knew that my parents would allow me to take voice lessons. It wasn't the fact that my lucky break just hadn't come along yet. It wasn't even because I didn't believe in myself.

Nope. The real problem was that I simply could not carry a tune. Minor detail, right?

No one in their right mind who had ever heard me sing would encourage me to continue with the dream of being a pop star unless they hated me and wanted me to be the brunt of a cruel joke. To continue with this dream would have been ludicrous. Giving up was the most compassionate move for everyone—me and my potential fans! There wasn't any amount of training or any measure of belief in myself and my abilities that would change the facts. The only thing that would help was talent, and in this critical area, I had none. It was that simple.

When we tell young people that if they believe, they can achieve, we forget the massive amount of details that must be added to the mix in order for dreams to come true. We neglect to mention that it takes hard work, skill, talent, clear vision, and focused intention to achieve your dreams. There is no easy path leading directly to what you want in life.

I have a friend who dreamed of being a Navy SEAL from the time he was a small boy. He practiced military moves and worked on his physical fitness every day. Anytime someone asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, his answer was always the same. He was passionate about his goal. Nothing could stand in his way.

Until one day it did.

Jeremy couldn't pass the vision test. He flew through the physical fitness requirements, but his eyesight did not meet the requirements. There was no amount of hard work or determination—and no dream big enough—to change the result. Jeremy's dream of being a SEAL was over. ***"If you believe, you can achieve!"*** Not for him. Not then. Not ever.

I spoke at a school where a very smart girl named Paige was super excited about her application to Harvard University. She had dreamed of going to Harvard for a long time and planned to carry on a

family tradition that started years ago when her dad had become a Harvard graduate. Paige was a very accomplished student who had been named the senior class valedictorian, and her SAT score was in the top one percent of students in her district. She was more than a viable candidate. All that was left for her to do was wait for that acceptance letter.

As fate would have it, the letter arrived the day I was visiting her high school. Her mom and dad delivered the letter to the school and into the leadership class where I was working with student council members. Everyone was excited and cameras were poised to capture Paige's expression as she opened her acceptance letter. But the letter wasn't *congratulating* her. Instead, it stated that Harvard had a certain number of spots for incoming freshmen, and unfortunately, Paige wouldn't be a member of this particular year's freshman class. She had believed that she would be attending Harvard. She was a winner. But she didn't achieve her goal. What went wrong? The answer was simple—fierce competition.

When we tell children that all they have to do is believe and they can achieve, we set them up for potential heartbreak. Sometimes, no matter how hard we work, no matter how fabulous our action plans are, no matter how much we believe, we still don't achieve all of our dreams. That's reality. And it hurts.

Does it mean that we don't try? Does it mean that we should always play it safe and refuse to take risks because we might fail? Does it mean that we dream just a little bit instead of dreaming big? Absolutely not! We have to believe in ourselves and we should take chances to make our dreams come true. It's just that we shouldn't take the song lyrics, "I Believe I Can Fly," literally!

Life is a balance. Sometimes, we win and sometimes, we don't. Sometimes, we work hard and we want something desperately—a goal, a relationship, a dream—and we still don't get it. That is LIFE.

So what should you do if you want to make your dreams come true? I believe that you should take a good, long look at what you do well by realistically assessing your strengths and your weaknesses. If you have potential, then you can work hard to make that potential a reality. If you have talent, you can develop that talent so you can do great things with it. If you have a dream to achieve, then you can begin the hard work and make a conscious choice to keep going until you say you are done.

Through my work with all kinds of people, I have discovered that there are a lot of well-intentioned individuals who are focused on one, specific dream—even when they don't have the talent or the skill to fulfill it. They have such an intense desire to achieve this one goal that they obsess over it when, all the while, other wonderful opportunities are passing them by. Then, after they have worked relentlessly but still not achieved success, they become depressed or dejected. They believe that something is wrong

with *them* when they might not be the problem at all. I think these people are simply pursuing the wrong dream.

Knowing when to walk away is part of being a grown up. Admitting that something isn't a good fit takes maturity. Discovering how to tweak your dream into a realistic goal could be the bravest and most powerful action you will ever take. I could *still* be waiting for the day when I finally take the stage as a pop star. Instead, I fine-tuned my dream and became a speaker. I still get to be on stage in front of a live audience, and I still get to make a positive impact on lives. But in my chosen career, I present an effective message without having to worry about staying on pitch... and no one's ears get hurt in the process. Trust me. I made the best decision.

Don't call me a quitter. I know what I do best. Don't say that I give up too easily. Finding a creative way to use my abilities and still fulfill my passion is not the same as throwing in the towel. It is wise. Instead of pouring my heart into something that wasn't really going to work out in the end, I took my unique abilities and made other dreams come true. I acquired knowledge along the way and put it into action. Instead of trying to put more *into* who I am, I pulled *out* what I already possessed and made it better!

That tweeting teen who disapproved of my message missed the entire point. If he'd not put on his headphones and tuned me out when he got angry—as he indicated in his barrage of tweets, then maybe he would have heard the rest of my message. I absolutely believe in reaching for your dreams. And I don't believe in giving up. But I do believe that all of us should take a second, third, or even fourth look at whatever dream we are working on, and then twist and tweak it so that it's achievable.

Life is short and working for the wrong dream can waste a lot of time and energy. You might even miss out on another dream that is actually right for you. Understanding that some dreams don't come true is a part of life. Most fairy tales end with happily ever after. Your life can be happy too, but it doesn't mean that everything you try will be 100 percent successful in the way you first dreamed it would be.

So don't be afraid to dream big. But before you do, make sure that your dream is the right dream for you. Holding on to one dream without exploring others may limit what you really *can* achieve!

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