

MOVINGUP

A GUIDE TO GETTING AHEAD IN AMERICA



By Bob McKinnon

*For more information, visit
www.movingupusa.com*

Up. After we sleep, we wake – up. When we fall, we get – up. When we feel low, our moods are lifted – up. When we are held down – we rise up. And when we start at the bottom, we move – up. Or do we?

Up seems natural. It's reflexive. It's how we want to be and where we want to go. But it is not easy. Up signifies progress. But it often means a long climb.

What is up with you?

1. IMAGINE

In my life, I have struggled with questions. How did I get here? Why did the American Dream work so well for me but not for others? How did it become possible for me to move from the bottom towards the top, when 94% of the time that doesn't happen? Was it hard work or dumb luck? Was it good genes or good grades? What major influences and minor moments led me to where I am?

What is my story? What is yours?

In these pages are fragments of truth collected over time and woven together, all driving towards some kind of answer. They include stories reflecting on the success of famous, as well as unknown, individuals, slices of science separating myths from meaning, and clipped moments seared into my long-term memory because they comport with a story I like to tell myself.

Taken individually, each offers a moment to pause, reflect, and maybe learn something interesting. Collectively, I hope they offer more than this – an opportunity to see your station in life in a whole new light.

Where do we begin?

2. WAKING UP TO SEE THE DREAM

Dreams are illusory. In the fresh haze of a new morning, they feel crisp and nuanced. And then, as if in an instant, they begin to recede. The details fade and we are left with a vague sense of what they were.

This is what the American Dream has become. It is a loose outline of what it once was, and we have forgotten the details.

If we want our dreams to have staying power, if we want them to be accurate, if we want them to feel as real now as they were in our slumber then we must tell a complete story. And we must do so with a sense of urgency.

If we don't narrate them before they fade, dreams lose their meaning and cease to resemble what they once were.

This is the story of waking up to see what really makes the American Dream possible.

3. A SIMPLE STORY?

In his book, *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams became the first to coin the term "American Dream" and define it.

"The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

Moving up is at the heart of the American Dream, yet ironically we rank below most other developed countries in class mobility. If you're born poor in America, you are very likely to stay poor.

When someone does “make it,” it is ascribed to hard work alone. But the reality is that there is always an invisible network of people, organizations, institutions, policies and services that create opportunities for that person to get ahead. In other words, we can work hard to climb the ladder, but someone has to build that ladder in the first place. What did your ladder look like? What rungs did you climb to get you where you are?

Learn more about what others think is essential for achieving [THE AMERICAN DREAM](#).

4. HOW DID YOU GET HERE?

It starts with you. Look around in your neighborhood, at your job, across the table at your loved ones. How exactly did you arrive at your station in life? Is everyone the same as you or are you the outlier? Did you rise or fall from your parents’ place in the world? Or maybe you’re exactly where you started – for better or worse. Did you leave others behind you? Or were you left in their wake?

We don’t often like to answer these types of questions. Not just because they make us think, but because the answers make us feel.

How do you feel?

5. WHO WOULD YOU THANK IN YOUR OSCAR SPEECH?

Imagine you are giving an acceptance speech for a major award, like the Oscars. Who would you thank? God? Your Mom? Your agent? Would the press write articles about how your hard work allowed you to overcome some struggle in your life to reach this pinnacle?

If this sounds familiar, it's because it is. It is a familiar script on how we tell our stories about becoming successful (hard work) and who, if anyone, we have to thank for it (the usual suspects).

Now check out [Kevin Durant's MVP speech](#). You'll be tempted to think that you don't have time to watch it right now. Avoid that temptation. You'll be happy you watched the whole thing.

He says towards the end, "I don't know about you, but when something good happens...I tend to look back at what brought me here."

You don't need a national stage to tell those in your world that you're thankful for them.

Take a few minutes today to think of five people who "brought you here." Give them a call, send a text or an email, walk across the hall. And say thanks.

As a bonus, research shows that when we express gratitude to others, we feel better about ourselves too.

Read more about the power of [SAYING THANKS](#).

6. ARE YOU A BEAR OR A SALMON?

In Alaska, salmon swim up to 31 miles upstream to spawn, while bears fresh from hibernation will take their young cubs on an equally incredible journey. The bears begin by walking two weeks without eating while avoiding predators and battling the elements until they get to the same final destination as the salmon.

The reward for the bear's hard work: feasting on salmon. The reward for the salmon's 31-mile swim: the chance to avoid being eaten by very hungry bears.

The lessons? One, as a species or as individuals, we don't own the corner on hard work. Two, at least for many salmon, hard work is hardly sufficient. And three, the best and perhaps ultimate reward for working hard is giving our offspring a chance in life.

Look around you today and notice the people working hard in all walks of life — the taxi driver, the construction worker, the waitress. Look also at the things you're using today — your laptop, your phone, your car — and imagine the workers behind them.

Do you think they are working for the same or different things as you? And who is the salmon and who is the bear?

Read more about the role of [HARD WORK](#) in our lives.

7. WHICH OF THESE CHILDREN WILL MAKE IT?

Picture two 15-year-old children. One has a strong family, but lacks ambition. The other has a strong work ethic, but an abusive family. Which of these two do you think would be more likely to achieve the American Dream?

We asked this question as part of our research project looking at the American Dream. Almost 70% of respondents believed that the child in the abusive family is more likely to achieve the American Dream. This defies all social science, which suggests the opposite.

Sometimes we conflate the possible with the probable. After all, thinking about what is possible makes us feel good. Thinking about what is probable, not so much.

For our children, do we work so their happiness is just possible? Or probable?

Right - now shouldn't we do that for everyone?

Read more about our state of [MOBILITY](#).

8. THREE SIMPLE QUESTIONS

Where were you born? What is your birthday? How much did you weigh?

Answers to these three questions might be more important than you think.

- Where were you born? Take a moment to look [at this map](#) to see how the county in which you were born affects income mobility, based on Harvard economists Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren.

- What is your birthday? In Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, he describes a successful Canadian Junior hockey team. What did most of these boys have in common? Birthdays in or around January. Consider that being born in December puts you at a disadvantage, while a January birthday gives you a full year of development over your peers with end-of-year birthdays.
- How much did you weigh? A new study from researchers at Northwestern University and the University of Florida and reported in *The New York Times* shows that bigger babies become smarter kids. And that higher birth weight can translate to higher grades throughout school. It is also worth noting that this correlation applies regardless of the parents' education level.

Again, ask yourself these three, seemingly random questions. Where were you born? What is your birthday? How much did you weigh?

Now think about the impact that comes with your answers. Read more about how [THE FATE OF BIRTH](#) influences where we end up in our lives.

9. [I HOPE YOU DON'T ACE THIS TEST](#)

Clinicians use a common tool to assess the extent of toxic stress a child experiences during his or her childhood. It's called the Adverse Childhood Experience test, or ACE for short. It's a simple tool made up of just 10 yes/no questions.

Please take two minutes and [take the test](#).

In his *New York Times* column, David Brooks succinctly summarized the adult outcomes associated with higher ACE scores.

“The link between childhood trauma and adult outcomes was striking. People with an ACE score of 4 were seven times more likely to be alcoholics as adults than people with an ACE score of 0. They were six times more likely to have had sex before age 15, twice as likely to be diagnosed with cancer, four times as likely to suffer emphysema. People with an ACE score above 6 were 30 times more likely to have attempted suicide.”

Does this make you rethink what a rough childhood really means?

Read more about how both good and bad [EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES](#) impact us later in life.

10. WHICH HURTS MORE? A CLEAN PUNCH OR ONE THAT'S BLOCKED?

Why do some kids overcome toxic situations while others don't?

Research has shown that one answer is “a single protective adult.” A child with a buffer is far more likely to succeed than one who is left to navigate these difficulties alone — no matter how hard that child may work at it.

Having a buffer does not save or spare us from all of the indignities and pain of growing up poor, or facing extreme or toxic stress, but it can lessen their impact, sometimes considerably.

Buffering can come in many forms. It can be a simple explanation or reassurance to a child that something is not his or her fault. Or it can come in the heat of the moment by stepping in and deflecting or defusing a bad situation.

It's the difference between experiencing something awful and thinking it's always going to be this way, and experiencing something awful and realizing it can get better.

Buffering creates a different narrative to frame our lives. It creates hope.

Have there been times in your life when someone stepped in between you and something awful? You probably didn't realize it at the time but these buffers did you an invaluable service.

Now step back and imagine what it would have been like if, instead you had to absorb the full severity of any of those blows, with no one there to step in before or after to help you up. This is a life without buffers.

If you get the chance today, call your mom, dad or that one person who stepped in for you and thank them — recognizing that not everyone has that same benefit. *Read more about the importance of a single protective adult in [PARENT\(S\)](#)*

11. MARSHMALLOWS & BASTARDS

When we look at successful adults, we often see a consistent set of character traits that were ingrained when they were children. For example:

- Seminal moments, called flashbulb memories, established important lessons early in life.
- Willpower developed when instant gratification was delayed for a long-term goal.
- Resilience taught by how to get back up after failure.
- Success momentum created by success breeding confidence and more success.

So what happens when these character building moments don't occur?

- Flashbulb memories are traumatic and teach you the wrong lessons.
- Willpower never develops because broken promises show that waiting doesn't pay off.
- Resilience never develops because you just get knocked down one too many times.
- Early failure creates insecurity instead of confidence, never allowing success momentum to develop.

Character counts, no doubt. But for some the math never adds up.

Thinking back to your childhood, who contributed to your character development?

Show some character and tell them today how much you appreciate it. *Learn more about how [CHARACTER](#) counts and what marshmallows and bastards have to do with it.*

12. WHO TAUGHT YOU THAT?

What is the first thing you remember learning? It's hard to say, right?

That's because from the moment we're born, our education begins. It's hard to pinpoint what and when we learn because in our early years it is non-stop.

Children arrive on their first day of school with varying degrees of readiness. Thirty million degrees of variation to be exact. By some studies, children born into low-income families have heard roughly 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers when they enter school.

From there it doesn't get much better for some. Learning is a lifelong process and there are countless factors inside and outside of the classroom that contribute to learning—or lack thereof.

Look back: at your preschool, your home life, your teachers, what you watched on television. Think about who, or even what, contributed to your learning. For some, it was a teacher in school; for others, it was Barney or Big Bird. Teachers come in many forms.

Have you ever really appreciated the value of that early “teacher” and told them how much they helped you? If not, give them a shout out on social media today. *Read more about the many ways [EDUCATION](#) shapes us.*

13. WOULD YOU PREFER TO BE HEALTHY OR SMART?

What would you say is more important for your success? Your health or your education? We asked Americans which five-year-old is more likely to be successful — one with access to a good education but no health care, or one who has access to a great doctor but poor schools?

People overwhelmingly chose education by a margin of four to one. But consider this:

- If a child is sick with untreated asthma, he or she will miss school and opportunities to learn.
- If a child knows someone who was shot, he or she will have more difficulty focusing in school.
- If a child's early diet includes more salty and fatty foods, he or she is likely to not only gain weight as a child, but also continue unhealthy weight gain as an adult.

- If a baby isn't breastfed for the first six months of life, it could mean an IQ that is 10 points less than a child who is.

There shouldn't have to be a choice between health and education. But in fact, it's a choice made by parents, communities and legislators every day. Think about a time when your health may have gotten in the way of your success. It could be something as simple as not getting enough sleep before a big meeting or missing important work while sick. Now imagine if that were a regular occurrence. Where would that leave you?

Read more about how central our [HEALTH](#) is to our success.

14. CONNECTING THE DOTS

The factors that contribute to our success work in concert, not isolation.

Our health impacts our ability to learn. Our ability to learn impacts our health. A single traumatic event from our childhood can have lifelong consequences.

When we don't connect the dots, we draw incomplete pictures that make little sense. This fosters multiple bureaucratic systems working in silos and frustrating systems that add to core problems instead of solving them.

This can create a situation, best described by one United Way director as, "Being poor is like a full-time job."

Try this. Get a picture of yourself. On the outline, create a series of dots. Now label them as different things or people that connect to you or your place in life. Finally, imagine erasing a few of these dots. Does this change who you are and how your life looks?

Learn more about why [CONNECTING THE DOTS](#) is so important.

15. WHAT'S YOUR GEORGE BAILEY MOMENT?

Consider this quote by Bill Moyer:

“I was one of the poorest white kids in town, but in many respects I was the equal of my friend who was the daughter of the richest man in town. I went to good public schools, had the use of a good public library, played sandlot baseball in a good public park and traveled far on good public roads with good public facilities to a good public university. Because these public goods were there for us, I came to realize the people like the Moyers had been included in the American Deal. ‘We, the People’ included us.”

What our community offers us is incredibly valuable to our own success — both as children and as adults.

Similarly, what we offer our community is equally important. In *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart’s character, George Bailey, feels as if his life has had little meaning. Unable to “escape” his little town of Bedford Falls for the big city of New York, Bailey feels as if he has not been able to have any significant impact on the world. Yet, as the film points out so beautifully, his actions have had a profound impact on his community and the people who live there.

How has your community impacted you and what you are doing for it?

Take five minutes to have your own George Bailey moment. Close your eyes. What does life look like if you aren’t in your community? How are you and it better or worse? *Learn more about our relationship to our [COMMUNITY](#).*

16. WHAT'S YOUR "SHAKY GROUND" MOMENT?

Have you ever accidentally missed a credit card payment or a bill? Had a medical scare or even found yourself in legal trouble? Even been laid off or had a child care situation that turned your schedule upside down?

Kirsten Lodal, founder of the non-profit organization [LIFT Communities](#), calls these "shaky ground" moments.

Some people seem to live perpetually on shaky ground. Jobs that have unpredictable hours. Transportation that is unreliable. Ongoing family health issues that must be addressed at the most inconvenient of times. And so on.

Kirsten encourages us to think of our own shaky ground stories. What happened when you were on shaky ground? Who was there for you? How did you stay on your feet?

Please remember and tell that story when someone chooses to pass judgement on someone else without appreciating how scary shaky ground feels, especially when their safety net may not be as strong as yours. *Learn more about the impact of fate and other uncontrollable factors in [LIFE HAPPENS](#).*

17. WHAT'S YOUR PERSONAL ECONOMIC STORY?

When we think about the economy, we tend to talk in the macro sense using terms like GDP. But economics is a very personal matter. Each of us has our own personal economic landscape that plays a significant role in how well we do in life.

When you enter the job market, the industries that rise and fall during your prime earning years, shifts in your local economy, the changes in tax policy, industry regulation — all of these factors impact your own personal economic story.

Just ask a steelworker in Pittsburgh in the 1960s versus one in the 1970s. Or a software engineer who worked at Pets.com during the Internet bubble of the 1990s versus one who joined Facebook during the current surge in the digital economy.

What is your personal economic story? How has your job market been? What wave did you catch or what undertow dragged you under?

Take a minute to check out the [Opportunity Index](#) created by Opportunity Nation.

When you get there, make sure not only to see how your own community is doing, but “travel” to other communities that perhaps aren’t doing so well.

Now imagine being a young adult starting out there. What’s different? *Read more about the role [FREE ENTERPRISE](#) plays in our lives.*

18. CAN YOU VALUE WHAT YOU DON’T SEE?

When asked in a national survey, Americans will tell you that the role of government is pretty far down the list of what is necessary to achieve the American Dream. Yet education, which is third on the list (behind hard work and a strong family) is largely financed and run by local, state and federal government.

During the recent debate over health care, many Americans expressed concern that the new Affordable Care Act would result in government-run health care. Ironically, some of

the most concerned were those who were already happily receiving Medicaid or Medicare (i.e., “government-run healthcare”).

These are both examples of what Suzanne Mettler refers to in her book, [*Submerged State*](#), of what happens when we can’t see the help we’re getting—we don’t value it.

Think about it: Has our government ever helped you? We traditionally think of social services such as food stamps or Medicare when we think of government assistance. But have you ever attended a public school, taken out student loans, applied for unemployment, filed for a mortgage tax credit, used a public road, or checked out a book at the library? When government works, it works—although we can barely see it.

It doesn’t matter if you’re a D or an R or an I. If you’re American, chances are your government has done something to help you get to where you are.

So the next time someone is bad mouthing your government, share what it’s done for you. Or better yet, share it on social media right now. Just click one of the icons below to post it on Facebook or tweet it to the world.

Learn more about our mixed views of [GOVERNMENT](#) and the American Dream.

19. HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

A nice house with a white picket fence has long been the embodiment of the American Dream. With home ownership comes pride and stability. A place to call home, raise a family, build a life.

In Washington, D.C. today, there is a 40-year wait for affordable housing. That’s not a typo. Forty years. It doesn’t take much to turn a rented apartment, trailer, or a house

into a home. But it does take something and that starts with a roof over your head covering a safe and stable structure.

Without this basic security, where are we?

When you look back at the home you grew up in or the one you live in now, what do you remember? For some, memories are dominated by loving exchanges and silly stories. For others, they describe the physical space as if it were something to be overcome.

What helps make these homes affordable for some is the fact that we are able to claim a tax deduction for our mortgage interest. This is an invisible benefit that we often take for granted, and we would never consider the homeowners who take it on their tax return as “takers.” Even though this benefit, in financial terms, is larger than the annual food stamps benefit that a family of four is able to receive.

When we have a good home to call our own, we simply live better. We sleep easier, we stress less, our children can study and play without unnecessary worry and distraction.

Tonight, go for a drive or a walk. Try and visit a few different neighborhoods. Check out the McMansions AND the row houses. Assume children in both types of homes receive the same amount of love. Now ask yourself: What is different? *Learn more about [HOME & FAMILY](#) and how it contributes to who we are.*

20. DOES “WHO YOU KNOW” EVER IMPACT “HOW YOU’RE DOING”?

While we may feel like we are “masters of our own universe,” most of us have a galaxy of friends and connections that impact our lives in a variety of ways. We call them our social networks.

There is the obvious way. We reach out to those we know for help. We have a legal question, so we ask a friend who is a lawyer. Our car has an issue, so we reach out to someone with mechanical experience.

Who we know dictates what we can ask for. If you are looking for a job for yourself or your child, who you can reach out to is critical. If your network is really well connected, chances are you'll have greater success. If you have a limited network, your opportunities may be limited also.

But our networks also impact us in invisible ways. Research from [Nicholas Christakis](#) of Yale University shows that the happiness of others is practically contagious. The Framingham Heart Study is one of the richest datasets ever collected on a single community, spanning over 60 years. In looking at this information over time, he found that if our friends are happy, then our own self-reported happiness increases by 15 percent. And amazingly, if our friend's friend is happy, then our happiness increases by 10 percent.

Think about your own social network. What benefits have they passed on to you? Now imagine if your network was completely different in its makeup. What would be different about you? *Read more about the impact of [SOCIAL NETWORKS](#) in our life.*

21. ARE YOU WRITING A RESUME OR A EULOGY?

This is a terrific question raised in a [TED Talk by columnist David Brooks](#). Are more of your actions something to talk about on your resume or for others to talk about at your eulogy?

In Linda Ellis' poem, [The Dash](#), she asks readers to reflect on that “dash” on your tombstone; your life's actions between birth and death.

So, when your eulogy is being read,

with your life's actions to rehash...

would you be proud of the things they say

about how you spent YOUR dash?

Take a minute and think about your recent actions. How you approached your day, week, month, or past year. How you spent your time and energy.

Was it to get the job done and score short-term points? Or was it to plant seeds for a long-term legacy? *Read more about [WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND](#).*

22. I REMEMBER, THEREFORE I AM

How has the idea of hard work become so prevalent that we have developed blinders to so many factors that affect our station in life?

Some may suggest it's a cultural thing. After all, it is relatively unique to Americans. We are the land of self-reliance and pulling ourselves from our bootstraps.

Sociologically, researchers like Paul Piff will point to this as a sign of Fundamental Attribution Error, which is our natural tendency to overestimate the role of the individual versus the situation. (As a perfect example, I suggest you watch his [TED Talk about his Monopoly study](#).)

All of this contributes to the story we tell ourselves about our self. Economics Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman makes this distinction as the difference between our “living self” and our “remembering self.”

If we reflect back on our own lives, there may be times when we “experienced” excruciating pain but our remembering self may instead recall the humorous circumstances surrounding them and therefore the pain as less than it really was. As Kahneman writes, “Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering self and my experiencing self, who does my living, is like a stranger to me.”

This may explain why two people who share similar life experiences that lead them to similar levels of success can see their paths so differently. It isn’t the path that matters. It’s how they remember that path.

How do you tell your story? Do you perpetuate the idea that you did it on your own? Or is there more than that? It may be the difference between your own story being fact or fiction.

Learn about what other [BELIEFS](#) affect our story of Moving Up.

23. WHY ARE WE HERE?

Isabel Sawhill from the Brookings Institution, one of the country’s leading thinkers on social mobility, recently said, “We do need a more nuanced conversation, and we need to get away from this sense that is being created in the political world right now that it’s either all about being a Horatio Alger or it’s all about government support to help you. It’s not either/or, it’s both.”

When I set out to write [Moving Up](#), it was an attempt to start this more nuanced conversation. Eventually, I came to realize that I only had three readers in mind — my three young daughters — and I knew that they wouldn't be able to read these pages and understand its content for at least another decade.

I know. Not much of a business plan.

The perils of publishing increasingly suggest that writing anything of impact is like catching lightning in a bottle. So I thought I would just light three little candles instead. I hope to shed some illumination on what has shaped my life and, by extension, theirs.

While I did work hard, I had many other things and people working equally hard in my favor.

While being self-reliant is important, it is not sufficient. Real happiness is found by being deeply connected to the people and places around you.

While you live in a land of opportunity, you have been more blessed than many others — a fact that no matter how hard you work and how many dreams you achieve, you should never forget.

And while there are many ways of defining “moving up,” it is most helpful to think of “up” not as where you go, but how you feel. Realizing that what we should be moving is not ourselves, but others. Always be moving up. *Always be moving up.*

Learn more about [WHY](#) this project was created.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Thank you for reading this guide to moving up in America. If you're interested in learning more, you can:

Read the full book, [Moving Up: The Truth About Getting Ahead in America](#)

Watch my TEDx talk, [How Did You End Up Here](#)

Explore our website, www.movingupusa.com where you can reflect on your own journey by finding *Your American Dream Score* and naming *Who is on your dream team?*