

# The nature of nurture: why no-one can claim to be self made

by Roze Phillips

“  
if hard work is directly  
correlated with  
wealth, then all  
African women  
should be  
billionaires.”

Prof. Bonang Mohale  
(SA Businessman and  
Academic).



'Self-made' is a myth that reinforces individualism and ignores systemic barriers that exist in society particularly for marginalized people and poor communities.

**S**elf-made " refers to someone who has achieved success or wealth or both entirely through their own

efforts, rather than inheriting it or marrying it, or receiving it as a result of luck or circumstance or through support or the work of other people – those living and those who came before them. Bill Gates dropping out of Harvard and starting Microsoft with Paul Allen in a measly garage is not the full story. The Rubert family starting life as poor South African immigrants is not the full story. The late Dr Richard Maponya's rags to riches story under tough Apartheid conditions is not the full story. Usain Bolt did not become the fastest runner on the planet on his own. They all had help. Aliko Dangote, the wealthiest man in Africa received a loan from his uncle to start his business ventures.

Of course, I am not suggesting that those who have achieved success, who were in the right place at the right time, who had the courage and tenacity to pursue opportunities and have worked hard for it, do not deserve their success. Far from it. Nor am I suggesting that these individuals are claiming to be self -made. But buying into a 'self - made' myth creates an impression that success and wealth are achieved purely by the sweat of your brow


– a solitary pursuit – Like the American Dream. And of course, the nail in the proverbial coffin is that by implication we also believe the corollary – that if you have not achieved wealth or success working hard by your lonesome, then it is your own fault, and you are a failure. And that is just not true. It is a flawed narrative that reinforces individualism and ignores the systemic barriers that exist in society particularly for marginalized people and poor communities.

I have three arguments against this notion of self-made.

1. Relates to our genetics (nature)
2. To the environment (nurture)
3. To other people (community, which is a subset of nurture)

## **Nature (or genetics):**

William MacAskill wrote a book called: "What we owe the Future". In it he argues that we owe a debt of gratitude to our ancestors for the benefits and progress we enjoy today. Just think of the luxuries we enjoy today – from advances in healthcare, to progress in education, reduction in maternal and child mortality, the fact that we have eradicated smallpox, are living longer with 100 being the new 60, are at the top of the food chain,



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help along the way.

(a place occupied previously by predators like lions against which many of our ancestors did not have a chance). We have tamed heat, we insulate against the cold, we learned to cross oceans, discovered fire, forks, fridges and Facebook – all this thanks to the progress made by our ancestors. “I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams” may be an expression by visual artist Brandon Odums who used this phrase in the context of “Black Lives Matter” to represent a powerful statement of black identity, heritage, sacrifice and pride. But in the statement, he reminds all of us that none of us are on this earth by our own making. We all are who we are because of others. Even Isaac Newton wrote in a 1675 letter that “if I have seen further [than others], it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

#### **Nurture (or environment):**

Today we can all agree that our psychological and behavioral differences result from a complex interplay between the genes passed down to us from our parents and their parents, etc. and the environmental conditions that surround us. But although we have now successfully mapped the human genome, we are yet to fully map the human *environome* which is environmental factors such as diet, stress, toxins, and social factors like education, family make-up, etc.

Essentially we cannot yet fully understand the nature of nurture. But we have the technology now to start doing so. You are going to struggle to find much about the *environome* in Google, as the data is sparse. But there was one interesting recent study that shows what we are beginning to learn about nurture.

A father, Deb Roy, who also happened to be an MIT scientist started the Speechome project around 2009. He installed cameras and microphones in his house that recorded everything that happened to his son from the day he was born lasting for the full first 3 years of the boy’s life. 100,000 hours of recordings later, this Prof and his scientist friends discovered interesting things as it pertains to how the boy acquired language. It showed that the boy learned words that were constrained to particular times and locations, for example regular mealtimes in the kitchen. He learnt these words earlier and faster than words used in multiple contexts. Although only confined to 1 child, it is easy to see how data like this helps us understand environmental conditions that influence how easily and how fast children learn words and language. In this particular case, one conclusion drawn is that children who grow up in homes where meals are eaten at irregular times, where there is little routine and where rooms in the home are used for multiple purposes acquire

language slower. Just think of our poor communities where multiple people share small spaces and these spaces have multiple uses. Now couple that with mobile sensors, all sorts of wearable devices that monitor pulse, movement, sleep, breathing in real time. And couple that with air quality studies, geo-location, etc. and you can literally start mapping the *environome* of all humans and start drawing correlations and see patterns. With quantum computing we will likely have the computational power and ability to do just that. And when we have this information, we can more fully appreciate what it takes for humans to thrive and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. We can be more empathetic and compassionate towards the vulnerable and marginalized of society and help where help is needed – as businesses and as individuals.

#### **Other people (community):**

The most important message for each one of us who aspire to success or significance, or wealth or just even mental health and wellbeing is “don’t be afraid to ask for help”. There is a video making the rounds of Steve Jobs who talks about his 12-year-old-self phoning Bill Hewlett for spare parts for a frequency counter. Mr. Hewlett sent him the parts and gave him a summer job at Hewlett Packard. He says that most people never pick up the phone and call.



Most people never ask and that's what separates those who do from those who dream about doing. He says he never found anyone who said no or hung up the phone when he called. I guess no one would say no to Steve Jobs. But more importantly, when the shoe was on the other foot and people asked him for help, he tried to be as responsive to pay back that debt of gratitude. Steve Jobs understood the power of community.

In the second year of Medical School, we as medical students get given a cadaver on which we learn human anatomy through dissection. Our cadaver was a woman who donated her body to science so we could learn from her. We called her Stiffany. To this day, I am reminded of her thoughtfulness and sacrifice in the interest of my education – me a total stranger. And of course when I think of Stiffany, I also think of all those who contributed to my being who and where I am today – from my parents who gave me the gift of an education, to teachers who visited my parents in the evening to strategise about my promising future and literally forced my parents to transition me from Afrikaans medium education to English medium in grade 9 so that I was ready to go to UCT and study Medicine in English. To those who offered me Scholarships that literally paid for my education – money without which it would have been an impossibility for me to study. The list of benefactors in my life goes on and on and on.

Here are 5 ideas to try – in addition to hard consistent work, the bedrock of all success:

1. **Build a support network:** You can build a network of colleagues, friends, and family members who we can turn to for help or support when needed. This can involve creating strong relationships with people you work with, joining professional or community organizations, staying in touch with friends and acquaintances and importantly having mentors and sponsors or for the well-heeled – executive coaches.

I personally found that having a very supportive spouse or partner makes a world of difference.

2. **Be open and honest about your needs:** It's important to be transparent about your needs and limitations, both professionally and personally. This can help you get the help you need and avoid burnout or other problems that can arise from taking on too much. It is ok to not be ok.

3. **Seek professional help when needed:** If you are struggling with a particular issue, whether it's related to work or your personal life, it's important to seek professional help. This can involve talking to a therapist, or coach who can provide guidance and support.

4. **Offer help to others:** Pay it forward. Whether it's a colleague struggling with a project, a friend going through a tough time, or a community organization in need of volunteers. By helping others, you can build community while at the same time strengthening your own support network.

5. **Practice self-care and self-compassion:** Finally, take steps to take care of yourself, both physically and mentally. This can involve getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, eating a healthy diet, practicing mindfulness or other stress-reducing activities and avoiding negative self-talk – ban “I am useless. I am a failure” from your vocabulary. Replace it with “Everyone struggles. I am human. Struggling is part of our common humanity”. Self-care is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

### **How do we remain compassionate?**

I spoke a great deal about what we owe our ancestors and what we owe our fellow humans who willingly and sometimes even unknowingly help us to thrive (by being our mentors, our sponsors who speak on our behalf in rooms where we are not present, the taxes from taxpayers, those who contribute to clinical trials, those who sweep the streets, those who care for our children so we can be at work, philanthropy, scholarships, etc.

My message to each of us – It is not enough to be good descendants. We also have to be good citizens and good ancestors to those who will inherit the consequences of our decisions and actions today. We have to stop discounting the interests of others and of future generations. Remarkably hard to do, especially if you are one of those who believe in individualistic self-made success.

At *Abundance at Work Pty Ltd*, we created a learning immersion called “My Ancestor Moment”.

Go to, Products | Abundance At Work, click on Work on Your Future Now and Start Course. There you will find a short learning immersion called “My Ancestor Moment” that you can access free of charge. It promises to be a lightbulb moment.

The point is this – your actions WILL impact the future of others – good or bad. The choice you get to make, the choice you have to make, is WHAT those actions are going to be. So my question to you as listener: Are you a good citizen and ancestor?

*Written by Roze Phillips.*