

Security and Progress

Two Very Personal Viewpoints

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There are many terms we use every day that have distinctive meaning to us. Success, wealth, love, care, and happiness are some good examples. We use these terms frequently, and we rarely wonder if others possess the same interpretation of them as we do. In recent years, I have found that security and progress are also among those terms that depend heavily on personal interpretation.

We talk about security in the context of our jobs, homes, and/or families. In reality, however, does security mean the same thing to everyone who uses the term in association with these factors? Similarly, we use the word progress to indicate some kind of movement ahead, but does one person's determination of progress always align with others' perceptions? This article presents a brief scenario and discussion related to both of these terms.

The Illusion of Security

A number of years ago a colleague suggested that I should accept a full-time position. A position recently had opened, and he felt that I should apply—not only because I had the right credentials, but also because he felt that I would “be more secure” as I would receive primary and secondary benefits if I became a full-time employee.

I couldn't help but smile because the expression “being secure” always has that effect on me. Why do we always want to be secure? Admittedly, seeking security is an ingrained human tendency. On the other hand, how many of us have learned that security is a farce? If even our next breath isn't secure, how could any process, position, or relationship be?

We often live with the idea that our jobs provide security. In real life, however, how secure are our jobs? Even if our supervisors promise solemnly that they will not release us because we're such valuable workers, who guarantees that the promise will remain unchanged? They may move somewhere else tomorrow, change their minds, or the company may merge with another firm causing

everyone to be dismissed. The list of potential circumstances that might affect the supervisors' commitment is almost endless. At the same time, we may choose to do something else with our lives and leave our jobs proactively.

Not long ago many experienced the deception of economic security. In a concise, but strong piece, P. O'Sullivan reminds us that our world is not a risk-free place. Even “risk-free bonds” were so risky in the recent financial crisis that banks turned to bailouts to avoid collapse. He then reveals the interesting other side of the coin; when people are released from a false sense of security, they become more careful and get into less trouble. The example he provides is Drachten, a small town in the Netherlands, where all traffic lights and road signs were removed, which promptly led to a zero-rate of fatal accidents, due to the heightened caution of drivers and pedestrians alike.¹

In private matters, security is also a slippery subject. People get married and promise to love and cherish one another till death parts them. Then, within five years, many go their separate ways. Although some of the couples who experienced a change of heart may decide to stay together for a variety of reasons, they remain bitter for the rest of their lives. Of course, there are the precious few who truly remain happy together for an extended amount of time, which is beautiful.

The point remains that when we stand at the commencement of a personal or private situation, it always seems so promising, and we think that it will be a “sure, lasting shot.” This happens through a combination of two factors—being captured in the moment and carrying a deeply embedded longing for security. Nevertheless, humans are interesting creatures who don't differ that much from animals. Fundamentally, we are just as capricious as other living organisms, which leads to us discovering that as time goes by, our desires and interests subside or disappear

in one area and emerge or increase in another. In the meantime, however, we may have secured ourselves in relationships or contracts. So we find ourselves going through tremendous pains to exit those situations without experiencing too much peril. In these situations others may criticize us as being unreliable.

This internal tension between a yearning for security on one hand and a natural mental/emotional flux on the other can be very confusing and difficult to deal with in many circumstances. The internal ambivalence can be befuddled further by an increased pace of change around us.

In an eye-opening article Dragan Staniševski examines the general sense of “ontological security” which we embrace naturally. Ontological relates to being, becoming, or existing. This article explains that we may be aware that illness, unemployment, social unrest, or other commotions can strike at any time, but we continue to yearn for a sense of security because it helps us function. After all, to perform we need a certain level of trust in the continuation of previously experienced events. We are confronted with many anxieties that begin in childhood and continue throughout our lives, but we learn to detect recurring patterns that provide a sense of stability. As we grow, our expanding social contacts enhance our understanding of societal do’s and don’ts. These help us build a defensive barrier as well as a national self in which we learn to identify with our culture, nation, the many groups to which we belong, and everything they represent. Staniševski warns, however, that we live in an increasingly interconnected world where instability seems to be the new normal. Although it might be difficult, if not impossible, to release our longing for security entirely, we may find that embracing a more multidimensional self-perception works better than maintaining the traditional individual notion of who we are. This is particularly important as we experience increased exposure to members from other societies and deal with almost continuously accelerating, heightening change and instability.²

The Confusing Notion of Progress

A while ago an old friend called from the Netherlands. He owns a small factory there and seems satisfied with his life. Although he calls

regularly to make small talk, he had a special reason for contacting me this time. He had been speaking with a mutual friend, and together they concluded that I should visit them to explore options to immigrate. Both friends felt that I could do fabulous things and experience tremendous growth in the Netherlands.

Just when this proposal started to sound really good to my sense of adventure, my friend made a comment that stirred me from my daze of fascination. He stated that after 14 years of running stationary, it was time for me to get into some “real action” again. I was stunned! After all, during that time I had earned advanced degrees, published books, had written more than 400 articles, given lectures and presentations, organized conferences and workshops, and co-founded nonprofit organizations and scholarly journals. So I asked what he meant by the phrase “running stationary,” and he summarized his opinion by restating the word “stationary.” I pondered his comment and realized that my two friends had a different perspective—their focus probably was based on financial growth rather than intellectual or spiritual development.

Indeed, in the first 20 years of my working life, I had focused on finances by gathering as many assets as possible, intending to retire early at 40 and enjoy life. After 19 of those 20 years, however, I realized that merely gathering material wins was no longer a thrill, so I set out for a much more rewarding life—one with far less extrinsic incentives but with tremendously more intrinsic satisfaction. The trade-offs made sense to me—no expensive cars but lots of elated moments, no impressive mansion but a tremendous sense of serenity, no glamorous reputation that resulted in a massive bank account but numerous spirit-lifting projects that helped people from all over the world grow, less financial luxury but more peace of mind, less selfishness but more connectivity, and fewer spotlights but more enlightenment.

Our personal perception of progress drives what motivates us. Progress is not necessarily manifested in the level of external change that becomes visible; it also may involve major spiritual evolution.

In a 2002 article about futures studies, Marcus Bussey highlighted the difference between change

and progress, explaining that change mainly involves material developments, while progress is of a spiritual nature, intertwined in our own conscious evolution.³

In that same year, four researchers led by Doug Newburg, developed a model in which they described how resonance can make us aware of the type of progress that will be meaningful to us. In this case, resonance occurs when there is a seamless fit between the internal self and the external environment. The process of achieving resonance requires us to search ourselves and understand how we would like to feel about ourselves. We ask the critical question, "What is preventing us from becoming resonant?" Once we have formulated our analysis of these critical concerns, we can work toward eliminating the barriers and achieve our desired feelings, which the authors refer to as "the dream." They clarify that freedom and responsibility are important prerequisites to having this dream because these two factors drive the process of resonance.⁴

When I considered these authors' descriptions of the components of progress—particularly the spiritual factor—it became clear how the misunderstanding between my friends' perceptions and my own had occurred. Although my friends still perceived that material development equated with progress, I had evolved toward a new focus—identifying and realizing my dream through resonance.

Concluding Notes

As the two scenarios in this article demonstrate, security and progress have very individual, personalized meanings.

Our desire to establish security may have a negative effect on our sense of happiness. In our quest for security, we create social structures that may curtail our natural passion, placing us in unhappy positions where *others* are dictating what will be good for *us* (or not good for us). This may result in an increasing number of society's members stepping out of line. In times when there were fewer changes and those changes were more local (less international), we created a sense of overall durability, which is now obsolete.

Today, more than ever, nothing is secure—our jobs, positions, statuses, relationships, or even our lives. Everything may be different tomorrow. So security is a paradox; although many of us consider it to be important and continually pursue it, in reality it is unattainable. If we perceive life as being naturally in a state of flux, we will be better prepared, avoiding disappointment. We can be more relaxed in our approach toward everything. We can view each relationship as a gift to cherish as long as it lasts, understanding that we may have to let go at some point in the future because nothing is permanently secure.

In regard to progress, it should be clarified that although it is not necessary to avoid material advancement totally, we need to remain vigilant about over-emphasizing this as a priority, which may result in the loss of far more important essentials, such as peace of mind and personal gratification. Treading a more balanced path is the key to real progress in life.

The conversations with my colleague and my overseas friend taught me to think differently. Opinions associated with terms such as security and progress vary greatly, depending on individual perspectives and experiences. Others may view the security and progress associated with our lives much differently than we do. In the end, however, these different perspectives should not be a problem because security and progress are assessed by our personal definitions—the decisions we have made as individuals regarding their application to our lives.

References

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