

You Have To Be Lucky To Be Rich

[5/13/16 3:14pm](#)



[Getty Images](#)

In 2007, Cornell economist Robert Frank [wrote about](#) President Barack Obama's plan to let the Bush-era tax cuts for the country's top earners lapse for the *New York Times*. He wrote that critics who complained that they had uniquely earned the money that would be taken away by stricter taxes were wrong because, "Contrary to what many parents tell their children, talent and hard work are neither necessary nor sufficient for economic success." They were forgetting the major factor of luck.

Later that same year, Frank suffered an episode of sudden cardiac arrest, an

event which is almost always fatal. He survived because of a stroke of luck: An ambulance happened to be especially close at the exact right time. In a recent [Atlantic](#) article, he compares this to a man who was killed by a bale of hay that hit his car.

Most people will concede that I'm fortunate to have survived and that Edwards was unfortunate to have perished. But in other arenas, randomness can play out in subtler ways, causing us to resist explanations that involve luck. In particular, many of us seem uncomfortable with the possibility that personal success might depend to any significant extent on chance.

But, of course it does. Being born to a wealthy family—or even just a developed country—is no more a result of meritocracy than the timing of Frank's cardiac arrest. And even the slightest bit of scrutiny will reveal a vast array of luck behind every success story. You're lucky not just to know the right people (if you do) but also to be born in this century, or even just to have the genetic disposition towards a given talent. This is not nihilism, your actions still matter and Frank isn't arguing that life is *all* about luck. But the denial of luck, especially as it figures in economic success, has far-ranging societal implications—especially in modern America.

Frank, who has a new book out on the issue called [Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy](#), cites several reasons that people deny luck. The so-called hindsight bias encourages people to impose a luck-free narrative on their success in retrospect. The availability heuristic causes people to ascribe more weight to the work ethic they've had their whole lives than the abstract idea of being born in the right place at the right time. And when we do consider luck, it's often only the bad kind. Frank writes that, “events that work to our disadvantage are easier to recall than those that affect us positively.”

Maybe this would be okay if we were all participated equally in the fiction but, of course, that's not what happens.

According to the Pew Research Center, people in higher income brackets are much more likely than those with lower incomes to say that individuals get rich primarily because they work hard. Other surveys bear this out: Wealthy people overwhelmingly attribute their own success to hard work rather than to factors like luck or being in the right place at the right time.

That's troubling, because a growing body of evidence suggests that seeing ourselves as self-made—rather than as talented, hardworking, and lucky—leads us to be less generous and public-spirited. It may even make the lucky less likely to support the conditions (such as high-quality public infrastructure and education) that made their own success possible.

This is one of those obvious-under-any-scrutiny revelations that seem practically essential in the face of any cynicism. But having this kind of pedantic breakdown of human nature is helpful when it results in some sort of actionable advice. In this case, it's easy to recommend (albeit difficult to enforce): Gratitude.

(This is not to say that all financially successful people are inherently ungrateful of their positions, or unwilling to [act benevolently](#).)

There's no way to write this without sounding like the wrap-up of a moralizing children's television show but: Accepting their good fortune has repeatedly proven to make people more generous. Beyond that, further studies have show that grateful people are *themselves* more successful:

The newly grateful had less frequent and less severe aches and pains and improved sleep quality. They reported greater happiness and alertness.

They described themselves as more outgoing and compassionate, and less likely to feel lonely and isolated.

Besides, denying luck doesn't give you any more real control over your life—just the semblance of such control, and a high societal cost. So if you're reading this in relative comfort just lean into it; play the lottery or something, you lucky bastard, you.