THE MYTHS OF MERIT

When we succeed, we tell ourselves **we deserve it.** When we struggle, we wonder if we aren't good enough. That's meritocracy—the belief that **success or failure** reflects our effort and talent alone, and not our circumstances. But what if merit is just a story we tell ourselves to make inequality feel justified? *Let's take a closer look.*

FAIR STARTS

1

A CLOSER LOOK

Two students are in the same college class. One has stable housing, no financial stress, and time to study. The other works late shifts to pay rent, commutes an hour each way, and struggles to find quiet space.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

By the end of the semester, their GPAs don't just reflect effort or ability—they reflect who had stability, time, and external support.

How can merit be real if some people begin with an advantage?

BUT...

But hard work can overcome disadvantages—plenty of people without resources still succeed."

HERE'S THE PROBLEM

Some do—but exceptional cases don't prove the system is fair. They prove how much harder some people must work just to compete. When success is shaped by external advantages, calling it "merit" hides deeper inequalities.

SOLO SUCCESS?

2

A CLOSER LOOK

A business relies on roads to transport goods, on public utilities to power its operations, and on government-funded education to provie a skilled workforce and subsidize research. Without these publicly maintained systems, even the most well-planned business would struggle to function.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Every success story depends on public infrastructure and trade policies that shape markets, access, and opportunity.

No one succeeds alone—every achievement is built on shared resources.

BUT...

Sure, infrastructure helps—but individuals still take risks, innovate, and put in the hard work; if they didn't, wouldn't everyone succeed? Personal sacrifice deserves the credit.

HERE'S THE PROBLEM

Individual success is built on shared systems and collective effort—most of it invisible or underpaid. If we isolate the business owner as the hero and ignore the resources and people who made that success possible, then we aren't rewarding hard work--we are rewarding ownership, and calling it merit.

UNEQUAL REWARDS

3

A CLOSER LOOK

Two people work on a large construction project. A developer secures funding and manages operations. A worker lays bricks and operates heavy machinery in dangerous conditions. Both work hard, yet the developer earns significantly more.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

No matter how hard the worker pushes, their pay stays mostly the same. But their effort makes the whole project run faster and cheaper—which means more profit for the developer. Rewards flow upward, regardless of who breaks their back to create it.

Working harder doesn't mean earning more.

BUT...

Isn't it fair for the developer to earn more? They make investments, manage complexity, and create jobs. And workers who excel can get promoted—doesn't that show hard work can pay off?

HERE'S THE PROBLEM

Workers also make investments with their labor—risking injury, exhaustion, and other opportunities—but unlike the developer, their rewards barely change. And while some workers might get promoted, the system always depends on others to do low-paid labor regardless of how hard they work. Calling these rewards 'merit-based hides how the system was never designed to reward hard work, talent, and risk-taking equally.

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HIDDEN WORK

4

A CLOSER LOOK
A worker finishes their shift and goes home to care for children, aging parents, or members of their community—which is all unpaid, unrecognized, and exhausting labor.

THE BIGGER PICTURE
Care work sustains entire families and communities, yet it comes with no paycheck, no benefits, and no security.

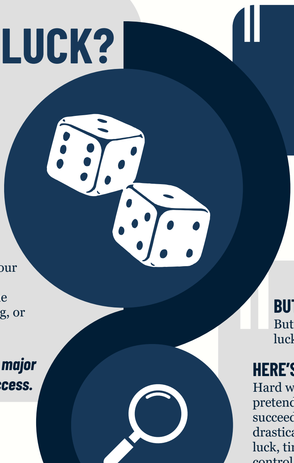
Some of the most essential work is the least valued.

BUT...
But caregiving is a choice, not a job—it's a personal responsibility, not part of the economy.

HERE'S THE PROBLEM
Calling caregiving a "personal choice" hides how much we all rely on unpaid care work. Merit tells us hard work and skill gets rewarded, but skilled caregivers work hard and get nothing. If merit doesn't apply to all work, including invisible labor, then do we live in a meritocracy?

MERIT OR LUCK?

5



A CLOSER LOOK
A recent grad enters the job market in a booming economy; another graduates into a recession. One lands a high-paying job, the other spends years in unstable, low-wage work. Same degree, same skills, different world.

THE BIGGER PICTURE
Your skills might qualify you, but actually landing a job depends heavily on timing, economic conditions, and factors beyond your control. Even the availability of job opportunities depends on luck—whether the economy is booming, your industry is hiring, or you happen to know the right people.

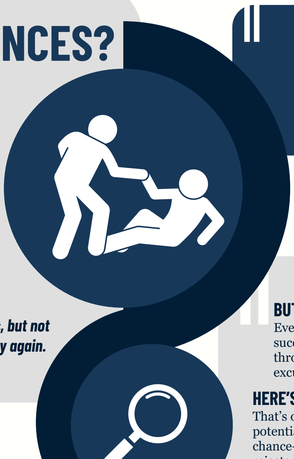
Every field requires skill—but skill isn't a major player in success.

BUT...
But people still have to work hard—luck alone doesn't get you a job.

HERE'S THE PROBLEM
Hard work matters, but meritocracy pretends it's the main reason people succeed. Yet equally talented people have drastically different outcomes based on luck, timing, and factors beyond their control. When we call this merit, we disguise chance as fairness, and inequality as deserved

SECOND CHANCES?

6



A CLOSER LOOK
Albert Einstein failed a school entrance exam at 16, struggling in language and history. He got another chance, studied physics elsewhere, and became one of history's greatest scientists.

THE BIGGER PICTURE
Some failures are treated as setbacks to learn from. Others are treated as proof of unworthiness—a reason to close doors, deny opportunities, and never look back.

We celebrate learning from mistakes, but not everyone gets the chance to try again.

BUT...
Everyone faces obstacles—those who succeed are the ones who push through failure instead of making excuses.

HERE'S THE PROBLEM
That's only true for some. How many potential Einsteins never get that second chance—written off, expelled, or rejected before they ever had a chance to recover? Some failures are forgiven, while others become life sentences.

MERITOCRACY IS A STORY

Throughout history, many **myths have been used to justify inequality**. Under feudalism, people were told their place—king, noble, merchant, peasant—was divinely assigned. Colonial systems defended themselves through claims of racial superiority. Patriarchy insisted that gender roles were determined by biology.

And when those stories stopped convincing us, others rose to take their place. **Today, meritocracy is one such story.**

It can be comforting to think that success is earned, failure is personal, and the system is fair. It makes our struggles seem meaningful when we overcome them, and our privileges appear deserved. But if our self-worth and quality of life depend on conditions—historical, political, economic—beyond our control, then success isn't about merit, and inequality isn't accidental.

And if the game is rigged, the question isn't how to play better—it's how to change the game.