

John Pierpont by Robert Fulghum

(Underlined words are defined below.)

John Pierpont died a failure. In 1866, at age 81, he came to the end of his days as a government clerk in Washington, D.C. with a long string of personal defeats abrading his spirit.

Things began well enough. He graduated from Yale, which his grandfather had helped found, and chose education as his profession.

He was a failure at schoolteaching. He was too easy on his students. So he turned to the legal world for training.

He was a failure as a lawyer. He was too generous to his clients and too concerned about justice to take the cases that brought good fees. The next career he took up was that of dry-goods merchant.

He was a failure as a businessman. He could not charge enough for his goods to make a profit, and was too liberal with credit. In the meantime he had been writing poetry, and though it was published, he didn't collect enough royalties to make a living.

He was a failure as a poet, so he decided to become a minister. He went off to Harvard Divinity School, was ordained as minister and assigned a church in Boston. But his position for Prohibition and against slavery got him crosswise with the influential members of his congregation and he was forced to resign.

He was a failure as a minister. Politics seemed a place where he could make some difference, and he was nominated as the Abolition party candidate for governor of Massachusetts. He lost. Undaunted, he ran for Congress under the banner of the Free Soil party. He lost.

He was a failure as a politician. The Civil War came along, and he volunteered as a chaplain of the 22nd Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteers. Two weeks later he quit, having found the task too much of a strain on his health. He was 76 years old. He couldn't even make it as a chaplain.

Someone found him an obscure job in the back offices of the Treasury Department in Washington, and he finished out the last five years of his life as a menial file clerk. He wasn't very good at that, either. His heart was not in it.

John Pierpont died a failure. He had accomplished nothing he set out to do or be. There is a small memorial stone marking his grave in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The words in the granite headstone read: Poet, Preacher, Philosopher, Philanthropist

From this distance in time, one might insist that he was not, in fact, a failure. His commitments to social justice, his desire to be a loving human being, his active engagement in the great issues of his times, and his faith in the power of the human mind ---these are not failures. And much of what he thought of as defeat became success. Education was reformed, legal processes were improved, credit laws were changed, and, above all, slavery was abolished once and for all.

Why am I telling you this? It's not an uncommon story. In one very important sense, John Pierpont was not a failure. Every year, come December, we celebrate his success. We carry in our hearts and minds a lifelong memorial to him.

It's a song. Not about Jesus or angels or even Santa Claus. It's a terribly simple song about the simple joy of whizzing through the cold white dark of winter's gloom in a sleigh pulled by one horse. And with the company of friends, laughing and singing all the way. No more, no less. "Jingle Bells". John Pierpont wrote "Jingle Bells".

To write a song that stands for the simplest joys, to write a song that three or four hundred million people around the world know -- a song that every one of us, large and small, can hoot out the moment the chord is struck on the piano--well, that's not a failure.

One snowy afternoon in deep winter, John Pierpont penned the lines as a small gift for his family and friends and congregation. And in doing so left behind a permanent gift for Christmas--the best kind--not the one under the tree, but the invisible, invincible one of joy.

Thanks, John Pierpont.

Lyrics to Jingle Bells

Dashing through the snow
In a one-horse open sleigh
Over the fields we go
Laughing all the way.
Bells on bob-tail ring
Making spirits bright
What fun it is to ride and sing
A sleighing song tonight.

Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way,
Oh what fun it is to ride
In a one-horse open sleigh,
Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way,
Oh what fun it is to ride
In a one-horse open sleigh

Definitions:

abrade - scrape or wear away by friction or erosion.

"a landscape slowly abraded by the wind"

noun

dry goods - solid commodities traded in bulk, such as tea, sugar, and grain,

fabric, thread, clothing, and related merchandise, especially as distinct from hardware and groceries.

liberal - in this sentence it means he was too free with credit (he let everyone buy on credit, that is with a promise to pay later)

royalties - money paid to the author for each book sold

ordained - made a minister

Prohibition - the prevention by law of the manufacture and sale of alcohol, especially in the US between 1920 and 1933

crosswise -going against the grain of the material (in opposition to)

undaunted - not intimidated or discouraged by difficulty, danger, or disappointment

1-How do we define failure?

2-How do we define success?

3-Is making a lot of money the definition of success?

4-If you made a list of successes and failures, what would be included?