

Why the Grass Is Not Greener on the Other Side of the Fence

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

There is a certain type of advertisement out there that has been repeated over and over again as long as I can remember. It always works, and people who have run this advertisement have consistently made millions:

- I saw it recently from a guy selling courses about how to get rich selling on the Internet.
- I saw the same advertisement 25 years ago from a guy selling a program about how to invest in real estate.
- I've seen multiple variations of the same advertisement in the interim.

The advertisement follows the same formula every time:

A guy is seen driving around in a Rolls Royce (or similar car, but it is generally a Rolls Royce). He pulls up in front of a mansion and talks about how he used to be poor and discovered some secret method of making money. He says, “**You do not need to live like you are living or have the life you have!**” He tells you that you can have his life too.

The same advertisement can also be done in a written form—and one version of it was so successful that it was run by the author of the advertisement's heirs for years after he died. The formula of all of these advertisements is simple, and they convince you that:

- (1) **you should be unhappy with your life,**
- (2) **my life is better,**
- (3) **give me money, and you can have my life.**

Unfortunately, whether you realize it or not, the odds are extremely good that you are falling for this form of manipulation in your personal and professional life. Most of our society is built on manipulating others with the promise of a better life (if only they would give you some money, or affection, or loyalty).

Most people look at other peoples' lives and think to themselves, “I wish I had that life!” In fact, supermarket magazines, television shows and advertisements throw this idea around constantly to us. The idea that there is a better life out there—something that we are missing out on—never ends. We are always being marketed to and manipulated to believe that we need to change in order to be happy.

The fact is, though, that your life is generally just fine the way it is. Making you believe that you can have a better life and that things need to change is usually in someone else's best interest. You can be sold a new home, get a new job, new car, new spouse, in a new city, with new anything if you are vulnerable to believing that (1) your life is not good enough and (2) you can have a better life with something else.

- A different career may look better than the one you have.
- A different house may look better than the one you are in.
- A different spouse may look better than the one you've got.
- A different car may look better than the one you drive.

One of the most powerful strengths you can develop is the power to not be manipulated to believe there is something wrong with your life and that you need to change. In fact, learning this is essential to your success and happiness. This is also, incidentally, something that most people never learn and a major reason so many people are unhappy, kill themselves and more.

With some exceptions, just about everyone out there is “fine” and should be happy. The problem is that we allow ourselves to be manipulated into believing there is something wrong with us. Interestingly enough ... the unhappiest people often:

- Went to the best schools
- Live in the best neighborhoods
- Work in the biggest cities
- Make the most money
- Drive the nicest cars
- Have the most desirable spouses

How could it be that the people who have the “best” are the unhappiest? A lot of it has to do with the fact that when you surround yourself with people concerned with “the best,” you are always going to learn about what is better. When you are hearing about what is better all the time, you are never going to be happy with what you have.

It can drive you crazy.

The smartest thing you can do is not give a shit. People who do not give a shit are the happiest people. It is as simple as that.

Yesterday, I went and looked at cars--again. There was really no reason to do so. I am perfectly happy with what I drive. In fact, if I am smart, I will drive what I have for the next 25 years or so because I do not drive that often and the car will be fine. I live a few blocks from the office. (I used to take a Segway to the office until kids started calling me “mall cop” and making fun of me. Since I was embarrassed—I now drive.)

Years ago, I found a car that I am happy with, and I really like it.

However, I keep seeing new models of this and that, and it always makes me curious. It makes me feel like I need to

“upgrade”. All around my neighborhood, people keep changing cars, and some of them look interesting. When I got to the dealership, I realized that there are all sorts of new features that I do not have—self-steering cars that stay in the lane using cameras to guide them, one car had a built in system that would emit pleasant odors of the forest throughout the cabin, another had a 600-horsepower engine that got 12 miles to the gallon--but also shut itself off at stoplights (to save fuel).

There was a car with 2,000 miles on it that had sold new for \$179,000 and was now “only” \$120,000.

“These cars really take a hit when you drive out of here,” the saleswoman told me. “The owner bought the newer body style of this car when it came out and turned this one in. He only drove it a few months.”

“You mean he lost over \$50,000 just because he wanted a new body style?” I asked her.

“Happens all the time ...” she told me.

If I had been stupid enough to purchase a new car yesterday, one year from now, there would be a car with even more new features—I cannot possibly know what those would be. That car would be something that I would want too. Then the process would repeat itself, and I would purchase a new car again and again.

The grass always looks greener for the things that we do not have. We want what looks better—and what looks better is always tempting us and messing with our minds. One of the principal ways to be happy and successful is not to fall for the “grass is always greener” trap.

A few of the more successful people I know drive cars you would not expect:

- One guy I know (who went to Harvard Business School and law school), took his company public and made hundreds of millions of dollars. He drives at 10-year old pick-up truck.
- Another guy I know has made incredible amounts of money in various businesses. He owns his own jet, lives in a \$12 million+ house and does extremely well. He drives a 15-year old jeep (without a top). In the winter, there are icicles on his face when he gets to work.

Why do you think these guys are driving such old cars? They clearly are interested in spending money on expensive stuff (the guy who took his company public has two \$25 million+ homes within a few miles of each other in Malibu).

Here is what I think: The cars they drive are a symbol of their self-control and show that they can stay focused, not be constantly manipulated to change and stay on course. A major part of them can be happy with what they have, and they cannot be manipulated to change for change’s sake.

The guy who drives the jeep has a company of over 500 employees in Los Angeles that takes up three floors of a high-rise building. I cannot imagine what all of the executives and others must think of him when he pulls up each day in his rusty old jeep with icicles on his face.

I once knew a man who sold an industrial company that made smokestacks and made tens of millions of dollars. He stayed in the same small house that he had lived in the past forty years and only changed one thing about his modest lifestyle: Once a year he would have the local Ford dealership deliver a new Lincoln Continental to his house and take away the old one.

He said that he always hated knowing that they added new features to cars each year and did not like driving around knowing he was not driving the latest Lincoln. So he allowed himself this one indulgence—and he was still a little embarrassed about it.

When you look at the most successful people out there, you will generally find that they have a profound ability to exercise self-control and not be constantly manipulated by the grass looking greener. They generally do not wear expensive Rolexes or drive the most expensive cars. They can stay focused and happy.

They are in control of the “grass is always greener” syndrome.

Several years ago, I was planning on moving to Las Vegas for business. I met a man rumored to be one of the wealthiest men in Las Vegas who had built a 30+ story luxury complex right on the strip. He also owned the Penthouse in the building which occupied the top two floors, and (by the looks of it) he had spent millions furnishing and finishing the space.

I went to meet him in his office. His office was in an old, run down strip mall with a take-out Chinese restaurant on one side and a dark bar on the other. His office looked like the carpeting had not been replaced in years. There was ugly, cheap art hanging on the walls, and the cheap furniture was so old it was both fading and falling apart.

He informed me that he had been in the same office since the 1970s. He was proud of this. If I was doing business with this man, I would think to myself that I was lucky to get anything I could out of him. The state of his office made me respect him even more than if he had put his office in a high-profile and nice location. Each day, this man was working in an office that clearly did not reflect his taste (if the condo was any measure). The office, instead, reflected his ability to remain focused and not obsessed by the grass being greener on the other side of the fence.

When I was in college and law school, for some reason I was always dating women who had a fascination with New York. It was quite annoying, actually. Since most of these women were from small towns, they saw New York as something “magical” that offered the promise of better everything:

- More “interesting” people
- Better dressed people
- More educated people
- More worldly people
- People with more money
- Better restaurants
- Better entertainment
- More cultural activities

You know what? This is largely true! However, just because all of this is true does not mean that New York is going to change anyone and make them happier. A car cannot make you a happier person, a nicer office cannot make you a happier person and living in a bigger city probably will not make you happier either. The only thing that can make you happier is you.

I’ve met a lot of people who have been married more than five times. I can see making a mistake once and maybe even twice. But ... five times? You see a lot of people getting married multiple times in big cities and in the entertainment industry.

Why do you think this is? Why do movie stars get married over and over? Someone “new” is always coming along, and the new person looks better than the current one—when in reality there is not much of a difference. This sort of thing just repeats itself over and over again, and people just continue marrying and divorcing.

The reason this makes no sense, and is sad really, is because people who fall into this pattern do not allow themselves to be happy. Instead, they can only be happy for a short time until something better comes along. Then they will want that. You can do this with friends, spouses, cars, jobs, houses—you name it!

Since I am in the [legal recruitment business](#), I see the “grass is always greener” phenomenon all the time. As a general rule, if I see someone who has worked at five law firms in five years, I know that they are going to work at the sixth law firm for one year or less as well—it is almost guaranteed. Why? Because they will get to their new firm, have a “honeymoon” period there, and then start finding reasons to dislike that firm and think that somewhere else is better.

- There will always be a more prestigious firm out there
- There will always be a firm where people work fewer hours
- There will always be a firm with better clients
- There will always be a firm that pays more money
- There will always be a firm with nicer people
- There will always be a firm in a better location
- There will always be a firm that is better for men, women, people of your ethnic group, religion, sexual orientation,
- There will always be a firm that will work with smaller clients or bigger clients,
- There will always be a firm that offers better advancement opportunities,
- There will always be a firm where you get to work more closely with clients,
- There will always be a firm where you can get more pro bono experience.

I hope you can see—quite clearly—that no matter what law firm someone works for, there is always going to be one that is better. It is as simple as that. If you want to look for fault and find something that is better, you can always do both. You can do this with anything—everything out there has a better counterpart (depending on how you compare).

The person who switches jobs, houses, cars, spouses and so forth is never really happy and satisfied—they are always unhappy. If someone cannot commit to a job, they are never going to be successful. If someone cannot commit to a person—they are never going to be happy and are likely to one day be alone. Nothing is more of a recipe for disaster than not being able to be happy with what you have.

Lesson

The secret to being happy in your career and in your life is to not always believe the grass is always greener—because it usually is not. The person who switches spouses, jobs and cars often realizes that not much changes, and that the person, job or car is not really much different.

The single smartest thing you can often do is concentrate on what is in front of you, do the best with what you have and be happy with it. Let others worry about the grass being greener. They will make themselves unhappy in the process.

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