

Detroit Car Washes, Cash, Drug Dealers, and the Character of Your Goals

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, I used to run an asphalt business out of Detroit, Michigan. I use the phrase "out of Detroit" loosely because in the eight years or so I was in the business, I only did a few asphalt jobs in the city of Detroit. Most of my work was in the suburbs. The reason I did so few asphalt [jobs in Detroit](#) then is that the city was in ruins and very few people could afford to maintain their asphalt. I did, however, keep my equipment in the city of Detroit because it was much cheaper to keep it there than elsewhere.

In the course of storing my equipment in Detroit, I would go through the city each day and stop at gas stations and other locations to fuel up, purchase sodas, and so forth. I would always ask the gas station owners if I could do any work for them and they would always say no. However, I very quickly learned that abandoned or out-of-business gas stations were always a good place to find new work. Once a gas station closed, very often it would be converted into a *hand car wash*. There were two classes of hand car washes back then. One class was run by working-class men who seemed to have been in the business for decades; the other was run by men who were incredibly flashy and looked like they had never worked a day in their lives.

The flashy men were the only ones in the entire city who would allow me to do work for them. They would typically have thousands of dollars in hundred-dollar bills in their wallets, and they would always pay me in cash as soon as the job was done. When I first discovered these hand car washes, I felt like I had discovered a diamond in the rough. The owners were often young men in their 20s who dressed very, very well and had gold watches and drove expensive new German cars. Inside, the men had private offices that were furnished in a palatial sort of style with expensive televisions and furniture. The funny thing about these car washes, though, was that they never appeared all that busy.

The challenge of these hand car washes was that they would typically go out of business very quickly. One would open and then a year later it would be closed. I would rarely deal with the same man twice. It was confusing but a worthwhile effort to find these little car washes run by flashy young men, because they paid so well.

After being in the asphalt business for several years, I started going out and selling services to various types of customers at different times of the year. For example, I might try to sell to automotive dealerships around Detroit one week and to car washes the next.

In one of my last years in the asphalt business, I hired a man to professionally paint lines in parking lots for me. He had a little line-painting company that he ran on his days off from being a Detroit police officer. I had done line painting myself for several years, but I did not enjoy it as much as working on the asphalt itself. This was a serious guy with a big attitude, who wore his uniform even when he was not working. He would often put his line machine in the back of his patrol car and go out and paint lines on a parking lot after ending a shift as a police officer. I would typically call this guy and give him the addresses of the places where he was to work the following week. I usually wound up leaving a message on his answering machine, since he was difficult to reach; as I understood, he was frequently buzzing around in a patrol car.

I will never forget when I left him a message about the hand car washes where he was to do lines the following week. I gave him the names of at least five hand car washes all around Detroit. For the next several days he drove around in his squad car with a line machine in the back of it, pulled up to the car washes, and gave them new lines. We finally connected on the phone the next week:

"You are probably the most feared asphalt guy in Detroit right now," he said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"The list of places you gave me to do line striping was like a *Who's Who* of Detroit drug dealers. You got most of the big guys. I pulled up there in my police car and did all of the work. They probably think you are a cop. I'd actually arrested one of them once before, and I told him hello."

The cop then explained to me that the guys who owned the hand car washes used them as a front and often ran cash from their drug-dealing businesses through them. Apparently, the hand car washes were easy to open and since so many people purchased car washes in cash, they were very popular among drug dealers. Drug dealers also liked to convert the abandoned gas stations into car washes because the stations tended to be on corners, which meant the owners could watch all sides of the location at once. In addition, the drug dealers could isolate themselves behind the bulletproof glass with which most of the gas stations were readily equipped. The police officer also explained that the reason the car washes always went out of business was that the guys who ran them usually either got killed or went to prison.

"They get killed a lot more often than they go to prison," he told me.

All around Detroit I saw so many people who were suffering and living very difficult lives. The people who managed to rise out of all of this were the drug dealers I came across, running hand car washes, hiding behind bulletproof glass all day. Even the bulletproof glass could not protect them, however, and within a year of my meeting most of them for the first time, they all would end up killed or in jail. The idea that their efforts to grow rich and to become successful could end so quickly really struck me. What is the point reaching an *ideal* if one cannot stay on top for very long?

I have seen countless people I know become successful only to lose everything very quickly. I know of people who have become incredibly wealthy and then lost everything. I know of people who have risen to very important positions, only to lose those positions in shame. I know of people who have done incredible things with their lives, yet the success simply does not last. What is the point of striving toward success and a goal if you cannot hold on to it? In my opinion, growing to a new level in your life and/or career should entail growing and then growing some more--not getting to a point and falling backward to

whence you came.

The quality of our achievement and the duration of our successes are directly proportional to the character of our goals. The men I met who ran the hand car washes all had goals and desired to be very successful. Their goals, however, revolved around nothing more than making money. These people were not interested in anything other than making money. And in the course of their pursuit of making money, these men were also harming other people. They were harming the people to whom they sold drugs; they were probably harming other drug dealers; they were harming the society at large, and more.

A goal that involves harming others, which is more on the side of evil than good, will never take you far in the long run. This is why people who have purely selfish and often nefarious goals never stay on top for long. It comes down to the character of their goals.

I have met countless people whose goals are motivated almost exclusively by simply making money. Money is good; however, it is simply a goal related to the accumulation of material things. A monetary goal is something that can help people achieve up to a point; however, this type of goal is, for the most part, very limiting. When you find people who are making an impact on the world and achieving important things that have real staying power, you will generally find people who have goals that are strong and positive in character, not monetary.

In the employment arena, companies and organizations are typically motivated by goals as well. The better organizations, the ones with staying power, generally have goals that are good in character. The goal of a company could be to spread happiness, make extremely well-built electronics, or create very good-tasting and inexpensive food. The better defined the goal and the better the character of the goal, the better the organization will do. When you find organizations that exist simply to make money, you find that this goal is not generally enough to sustain them over time.

We can point to all sorts of religions based around good character goals, which have lasted for thousands of years. However, how many companies have managed to stay in business for even a hundred years? Companies and salespeople have come and gone for as long as religions have existed, but only religions have had staying power. This all comes back to the character of the goals of religions, which are getting people closer to God, helping people, making the world a better place, and so forth. Goals that are based on high ideals and character are what are able to sustain people and groups.

When you look at the history of countries, you can see that goals of good character also survive and prosper in that arena. The United States had goals of allowing independent thought and action, freedom of religion and speech, and other goals of good character. As a consequence of achieving these goals, this country has grown and done very well. In contrast, Nazi Germany had goals that encompassed oppressing various groups of people, inequality and extermination of groups of people. Despite an incredible expansion in a short period of time, these goals of bad character ultimately brought the country and the regime down.

What is the character of your goals? When we examine the people who have accomplished the most in the world, who have sustained accomplishment, more often than not we will find that their goals are of excellent character. The goals of a Gandhi or a Mother Teresa are certainly of a different character than the goals of a simple industrialist. The goals of a president seeking to better the country are better than those of a pimp in New York City. The character of our goals will determine our accomplishments, the quality of our lives, and our impact on the world. If your goals have good character, then your life will have good character.

It makes me sad when I think about the lives of drug dealers and others who are capable of so much but end up getting killed or going to prison, and hurting so many people. It makes me sad when I see very talented people concerned with nothing more than making money, who oftentimes get very far in their careers and then fail. I am sure you know countless people who had incredible abilities, who could have gotten very far in their careers, but who failed.

The world respects people who have goals that are of good character. Having goals of good character will also motivate you to go forward and achieve incredible things. This will also **make your job** and life more fun.

For example, if you were a bank teller, you could say your goal is to make money. If this were your goal, you would probably do *okay* in the job. However, if your goal were to make the world a better place by making everyone with whom you come into contact smile and glow with happiness, you would get more enjoyment out of your job. Since this goal is motivated by good character, you would probably advance through the bank as your customer service skills improve and you bring in repeat business.

Many attorneys I have known are motivated purely by making money. If this is their goal, then they typically have unhappy careers: "I am just doing this for the money!" they will say. Conversely, many attorneys out there might be motivated by things like getting justice for the wrongly accused. When they have goals like this, everything is different. These individuals are more empowered, are happier, and perform better in their careers in all respects. These sorts of goals can make a giant difference in your ultimate success and happiness. The quality of your career and life comes down to the character of your goals.