Several years ago at the Berkshire Hathaway annual shareholders meeting in Omaha, Neb., a precocious 10-year-old investor stood bravely in front of a microphone and posed a weighty question for the investment maestro: “How do you define success in life?”

Warren Buffett didn’t hesitate—it was as if his whole life had prepared him for the answer. The world’s second-richest man replied in a matter-of-fact tone: “Success is when you reach the end of your life and you find that the people who should love you actually do love you.”

If you’re not so sure that the people who should love you actually do love you, then consider the life lessons of a wonderfully uplifting book and movie The Ultimate Gift, by the humanitarian Jim Stovall, who is blind. The Ultimate Gift is a morality tale about the hazards and benefits of wealth—and the important values that one generation hopes to impart to those that follow.

Stovall’s message is a powerful one; it may encourage you to reflect on your personal ethics, or change how you think about wealth and success. Lived experience, Stovall impresses upon us, is the most valuable asset we can hope to collect.

The wealth illusion

The story centers on fictional billionaire Red Stevens, a larger-than-life Texas oil and cattle tycoon who discovers at the end of his life that he has given his family all the material wealth anyone could want but has spoiled them in the process. In the opening scene, we sit in on the reading of Red’s will at a posh law office in Boston. Red has passed away, and his patrician heirs eagerly anticipate the massive fortunes to be doled out. But for one of Red’s descendants, grand-nephew Jason Stevens, the inheritance comes with significant strings attached: he must complete a series of 12 monthly assignments dictated through videotape by his late great-uncle.

Jason, a self-centered 24-year-old, resents that he won’t receive his inheritance right away. He thinks his great-uncle is playing a game with him and tries to convince the estate attorney, Ted Hamilton, to reveal what he stands to inherit if he...
submits to the tests. Hamilton, however, adheres
to Uncle Red’s instruction that Jason must follow
each step sequentially before learning the nature
of his inheritance.

Month by month, Jason’s life is transformed. Each
monthly gift conveys a different life lesson, one
that Red felt Jason must learn before he could truly
appreciate his inheritance.

Life’s true gifts
The Ultimate Gift brims with useful and thought-
provoking insights. Consider a few of Uncle Red’s
most important gifts to his young protégé. How
might they be applicable in your own life?

• The gift of work. In the first assignment, Red
required that Jason perform manual labor
on a Texas ranch for a month, as he himself
had done for years before he founded his oil
and cattle empire. The lesson comes as harsh
punishment for Jason, who takes his trust-fund
lifestyle for granted. Eventually, over the course
of 30 days working alongside one of Red’s old-
est friends, Jason begins to realize the true sat-
isfaction that comes from digging fence posts
and setting barbed wire. He comes to appreci-
ate the power of a job well done.

• Personal reflection: How often do I stop to
consider the gift of performing an honest day’s
labor? How frequently do I wake up with a
burning desire to accomplish something useful
that day? Do I feel I produce something of last-
ing value to someone else?

• The gift of money. Red knew that Jason had
always had money, but he was sure that he
never appreciated its true value. So he chal-
 lenged him to find five people over the course
of a month for whom even a small amount of
money could make a large difference. Jason was
given $1,500, a pittance by his standards, and
asked to distribute it in small amounts. Jason
wound up helping people who needed $300
to pay their rent or $500 to repair their only
means of transportation. Along the way he met
some surprising new friends and recognized
that his perception of money’s true value had
been skewed by his wealth.

• Personal reflection: In my rush to achieve
higher levels of success, do I sometimes fail to
appreciate how fortunate I am to be in the top
5% or 10% of income earners in the world? Do I
ever contemplate what life is like for the other
90% of the population?

• The gift of problems. In one of the more
touching assignments, Red asks Jason to find
people who were coping with truly devastating
problems, and to recognize the value of facing
these problems head-on. As Red put it: “One
of the great errors in my life was sheltering so
many people—including you—from life’s prob-
lems. I actually took away your ability to handle
life’s problems by removing them from your
environment.” Jason met individuals dealing
bravely with terminal illness, or handling the
loss of a job with dignity. He realized that prob-
lems and challenges often give life its meaning.

• Personal reflection: When I face large ob-
stacles—financial setbacks, for instance—do I
view them as a curse or a blessing, as defeat or
an opportunity to rise to the occasion? What
would I be missing if my life had no significant
challenges?

• The gift of dreams. Red believed firmly in the
power of dreams. Like Walt Disney and other
famously successful entrepreneurs, he knew
that the key to success lies in our ability to
work passionately toward the powerful visions
we create in our minds. Over 30 days, Jason,
who had never considered what he wanted to
accomplish in life, began to think about his ul-
timate ambitions. For the first time, he began to
sense clarity of purpose, something that would
drive him each day.

• Personal reflection: Do I have a compelling
sense of mission that spurs me on each day? Do I see my dreams so clearly that I can’t imagine not spending my entire life working toward these visions?

• **The gift of gratitude.** Having lived through the Depression, Red learned a lot about gratitude early in life. Traveling the railways looking for odd jobs as a teenager, he met a homeless man who taught him about “the golden list.” Each day this man would lie in bed—or wherever he was forced to sleep—and visualize a golden table on which he wrote 10 things in his life he was especially thankful for. He followed this routine daily and remained in good spirits regardless of whether he was wet, cold, or hungry. Red immediately adopted “the golden list” routine and began reciting his own top 10 blessings to start each day. Red’s assignment asked Jason to do the same. To his shock, the young heir discovered this: “There are so many things that each of us have to be grateful for, it is hard to limit it to only ten.”

• **Personal reflection:** How might my attitude be different if I reflected frequently on all the things I’m grateful for? Would I begin to appreciate and not take for granted the simple things in life such as health, friendships, and family?

• **The gift of love.** Ultimately, each of Red’s posthumous assignments was rooted in a deep love for his grand nephew. Red saw in Jason a glimpse of greatness that could be shaped by love and work—something Jason only began to appreciate near the end of his year-long odyssey. As he experienced firsthand the value of hard-won lived experiences, Jason came to love his great-uncle in a deeper, more meaningful way.

• **Personal reflection:** Do I agree with Red, Jason, and even Warren Buffett that a truly successful life is measured in the lives that we’ve touched and the love we’ve experienced?

Whether or not Jason completed all 12 assignments, and what, if anything, he inherited from wise old Uncle Red, you’ll have to find out for yourself. You can read the book or check out the movie. The questions that emerge are instructive food for thought at any age; a simple reminder to oneself of the inherent value in integrity, empathy and generosity can make all the difference in the world, leading to greater clarity of thought, better emotional balance and a more successful life overall.