

What to do When You Screw Up

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Many people mistake me for a successful person, so I try to keep a record of all my failures, and for reasons that will become clear later in this essay. True failure and rejection didn't begin for me until late adolescence: when I applied for college, I got just one rejection letter, but it felt like getting kicked swiftly in the head. My first paper in college was in a Rhetoric class—this one felt like a ton of bricks, and so I saved that below-average paper, which still has that C- in the awful, stark handwriting of my TA. In my sophomore year, the girl I fell in love with dumped me by phone, and it was too bad that she hadn't sent me a "Dear John" letter because I would have kept that, too. It would have been a short letter, as her conversation with me lasted about two minutes. But things weren't always so bad in college: I did pretty well, so well that the Deans nominated me for the Truman Scholarship, the Marshall Scholarship, and the Rhodes Scholarship. I didn't get any of them, though, but the rejections came on super nice letterhead that still hasn't yellowed. Standardized tests weren't typically a problem, but the first time I took the LSAT, I threw up right before the exam, and so I scored somewhere in the neighborhood of a gifted fifth grader. Oh, I took more exams and I went to graduate school, but once I was there, I had to re-write my dissertation, twice. When I applied for jobs as a young assistant professor, I had graduate degrees from Berkeley and Harvard, and so I wasn't prepared, really, to be rejected thirty eight times. I only have 34 of these letters, because four of the Universities I'd applied to didn't bother to tell me no until I called to check up on my application. It's a sad thing when *you* have to call to learn you'd been rejected.

Though many students may not know this, professor is an occupation full of rejection. As a professor myself, I did get tenure, but both of my scholarly books were roundly pasted during their early drafts—blind review is wonderful because it's such a free-for-all. It happened like this: I finished my first draft for my first book, which took most of four years, and then I sent it to New York University Press; the Press took my name off of the manuscript and sent it to four senior professors who were experts in the fields where I was hoping to contribute; and then they

got busy. It's like willingly putting yourself in a dark room where senior professors with big egos, bigger paddles, and night-vision goggles get to whack you at will. I can't see them, they have no idea who I am, and who knows why they were so mean. All I know is that I got four, five-to-seven page letters, all anonymous; they listed everything I'd done wrong, some in excruciating detail. Truly, I'd never felt such rejection and hurt as when I tried to become a successful professor, thanks to blind review. One comment was so especially cruel that I don't need the physical letter to remember it: "The author writes reasonably well, but the manuscript should not be published without substantial revisions to chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7." The draft of my first book only had eight chapters. Ouch.

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Often in life, things don't go the way you'd planned, and sometimes, it's hardest on the people who typically get what they want, people who aren't accustomed to failure or rejection. Certainly, I had some academic troubles when I was a younger immigrant and still confused about English, but most of the time, I got good grades, I did well in school, my teachers liked me, and by the time I was in high school, I was maybe a little arrogant. I came to believe that I was "gifted" because I was told I was "gifted"; I expected that others should simply acknowledge this fact. Sometime after that first C-, though, I came to realize two simple truths: the first was that high school was not that challenging, even though I'd been to a pretty good school, and the second was that college was chock full of "gifted" kids like me, kids who were equally young, naïve, ambitious, and maybe less arrogant. They all had skills. My new peers were just as talented in one way or another, many were accustomed to working hard, and so was it surprising that I was below the new average?

My late mother was a Roman Catholic, but she had more Buddhist sensibilities and so was prone to telling me that life is suffering, and that the very things we want most in life are the ones that make us suffer. Everyone welcomes success, she would say, but failure is the better teacher and closer to what life is mostly like. It's not always the nicest teacher and sometimes the lessons are painful, but coping with failure, rejection, setbacks—what else can you do but learn a deeper truth about yourself and then plod on? You're going to be okay, John, just keep trying. You're a smart kid, but maybe you need to work harder and keep at it. Maybe you should try something

else. And no one's perfect. People are like rugs, mom said: no matter how clean they seem, beat them long enough and you're going to find dust. This type of advice sort of helped when I got dumped or when I almost gave up on my PhD, but only much later did I realize that she was right, and wise, too—what else could I do but re-evaluate and then plod on? I will never reach nirvana in my lifetime, but perhaps in that way I am like any other rug.

We lived close to campus and at my University, the professors literally posted grades outside their office doors, removing the students' names, but leaving the last four or five digits of their registration numbers. (This was before the Internet, you see.) I will never forget that first Fall, when my brother and I walked around campus, looked at my grades, and he bought me a slice of pizza to celebrate because I didn't get a C-. By that time, I was doing better, and this walk was a source of pleasure, but for reasons I didn't expect, and this is how he explained it to me: you're not happy about the grades per se, John, you're pleased that you did a good job in a subject that was hard, and because you worked your butt off and learned and did more than you thought you would. The grade is an outward manifestation of a positive change you've experienced as a result of having to earn the grade. (Huh? Ed was in graduate school then, and so he was liable to sound confusing.) Really, it's not about the grade. You are becoming a pretty good scholar and maybe you'll even become a professor one day. Doesn't it feel better, knowing you were a total doofus, to see where you are now, not nearly the doofus that you were? Doesn't that feel good?

Indeed it did. Ed was the best big brother ever.

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Over time, I've learned to take setbacks in stride, to appreciate that success doesn't and shouldn't come easily, and to accept my many imperfections. I'm no longer very surprised when I get proof of my faults, or when I don't get what I hope for or want or need. Professionally, I have been fortunate: no one has published a nasty review of my books (yet), for example, and I'm grateful to my blind reviewers for that. I revised 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 for the first book, and then changed a few things in chapters 3 and 8, too, just to be thorough. My critics made me better, and in this way, I've even learned to be grateful in general to all of my critics, including the ones

I'll never meet, as well as my mother, my brother, my wife, and now my children. I'm blessed that no one seems to spare me any criticism. More than anything, I've come to appreciate that whatever success I've had has been sweeter when it's come in the wake of failure, after re-tooling, hard work, anxiety, and struggle.

I keep a record of all my failures because I share them with my students, and because I'm pretty sure that they'll also be useful to my daughters some day, especially when the Inevitable will happen to them, too. My students are sometimes surprised that I've failed and been rejected so often—in conversation, more than one seemed to think I was not quite honest about how often I've fallen on my face, and so it's helpful to review the stack of letters and e-mails. Their surprise is flattering, I suppose, but I want to disabuse them of the idea that “successful” people are always successful. Unmitigated success does not describe me. I will say this to my kids one day, when the rejection letters come or when the test score isn't great or when the boys break their hearts. I'm sorry you are hurting, but you will be fine. You are like a rug that just got a good beating. This will pass. Keep at it, though, and when you do succeed, when you do get what you want through agony and perseverance, through rejection and failure, oh, how we will celebrate! I will buy you pizza.

I will try to explain that the best things are those that require some effort, and inherently, many of them bear the risk of failure, rejection, pain, and suffering, all of which force us to pause. The most difficult thing is to sort out what to do in the aftermath during this pause: should I continue, knowing I might fail again; should I try something else, a path more likely to lead to a better outcome? What is the lesson I am supposed to take away from this particular rejection or failure? Often, this isn't clear. In high school, I had to dissect a calf's heart and a sheep's head, and after throwing up on four separate occasions through both assignments, a B+ and a B, I thought I had enough evidence to decide that medical school wasn't in my future. I hear, though, that most people get past the queasy stage, and so I think I ditched an entire career because of my own immaturity and weak stomach, which is its own kind of failure. My sister in law is a physician now, and over Thanksgiving, one of my daughters tried on auntie's white coat and we took pictures. It's funny how we can see our own limits in the most casual and unexpected places.

The saddest people are the ones who stop trying, as well as the ones who come to disparage those things they once wanted, like the fox who couldn't have his grapes. The worst thing might not be failing per se, but not trying because you're too afraid of failing. And perhaps the most important thing that students can discover at the University isn't so much about learning how to succeed, but rather learning how to fail *well*—how to cope intelligently and honestly with rejection, dead ends, and setbacks—and to see these sometimes painful lessons as an integral part of achieving anything significant in life. Curiously, the most helpful people here in this regard are people who've failed a lot, including your professors, all of whom have been doofuses at one time or another in some way. They will tell you that brilliant scientific discoveries only come in the wake of years and years of failure, of theories that didn't pan out, experiments that didn't work, money and time spent in frustration. Failure crosses disciplines. All brilliant scholars waste a ton of paper and lots of electricity—for every sentence published, there are numerous sentences and phrases that didn't make it. Even the best artists and musicians only get there after hours and hours of practice, much of it painful. And social scientists spend thousands of hours poring over miles of data in attempts to understand and maybe predict human behavior or to design better human institutions, and the vast majority of the time, they get it only half right and some of the time, they are spectacularly wrong. Everyone fails.

What is most admirable about the best people is not that they are always “successful,” but that they've been smart and tenacious in the face of hardship and failure, and often *lots* of hardship and failure, and they've also learned not just from their own setbacks, but from other people's setbacks, too. It's that tendency to re-assess and to plod on—even though you've been kicked, your heart broken, your rug beaten, and even though failure is an ever-present possibility—that can make great things happen. Even as you read this, some of you may have gotten grades from the past Fall that were not so good. Some of you might be thinking of changing majors. Some of you may have done fine academically (so far). Maybe you also got dumped or ran out of money or behaved in an unfortunate manner when you were not quite yourself and there you are now on someone else's Facebook page where your parents can see you. Whatever setbacks you're dealing with now, please know that there are a lot of us at this University who can empathize and that we are here to assist as you cope, re-evaluate, and plod on. If you ever come to us for help, we'll not mistake you for a failure.