



HOW TO HAVE A  
REALLY SUCCESSFUL  
FAILURE

Abigail Lipson



IN THE COLLEGE YEARS  
SELECTED PUBLICATIONS OF THE BSC

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## IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS is a collection of essays, teaching materials, and other publications from the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University. The collection adopts its name from the classic study, *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) by William G. Perry, Jr., the founding director of the Bureau.

# HOW TO HAVE A *REALLY SUCCESSFUL* FAILURE

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## Introduction

*When one door closes, another opens for us. But we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.*

*--Alexander Graham Bell*

Everyone fails.

I am addressing these remarks to you, in particular, if you have failed recently or spectacularly. Maybe you applied for, ran for, or auditioned for something that didn't work out. Maybe you did badly at something, or lied about something, or disappointed someone, or said something you regret, or did something you promised you wouldn't, or didn't do something you promised you would, or broke the law, or betrayed a trust, or publicly embarrassed yourself. Maybe you feel incredibly, abysmally bad. Maybe your heart is broken. Maybe your whole skin prickles with shame and you wish the ground would just swallow you up. Maybe you're glaring at Alexander Graham Bell's closed door through tears of frustration and anger.

Everyone fails, sooner or later, in one way or another. It is human to fail. My hope for you is that you will make *this* failure a really *successful* failure.

## Game Over/Game On

*Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.*

*--Winston Churchill*

*We didn't lose the game, we just ran out of time.*

*--Vince Lombardi*

When we fail, the failure has a way of grabbing our attention and not letting go. It looms so large we can't see anything else. The normal reaction to this experience is a heartsick feeling: "I'll never live it down. I'll never forgive myself. I'll never be forgiven. I can't bear to

think about it. But I can't think of anything else. I wish it didn't happen. But it did. But I wish it didn't. But it did."

These feelings are an especially common response to a *first* failure in an otherwise excellent record, a *repeated* failure that you promised, you swore, wouldn't happen again, or a *whopping* failure that strikes you as so out of character it makes you wonder who the heck you are. In all these situations, failure feels like a bitter end-point: game over.

Interestingly, the word *success* comes from the Latin, *succedere*, meaning "to follow." One thing succeeds another. Success doesn't really mean achieving perfection, which would indeed be "game over." At a Harvard University commencement, alum and writer/comedian Conan O'Brien described his colorful professional path and explained, "I've dwelled on my failures today because, as graduates of Harvard, your biggest liability is your need to succeed. Your need to always find yourself on the sweet side of the bell curve. Because success is a lot like a bright, white tuxedo. You feel terrific when you get it, but then you're desperately afraid of getting it dirty, of spoiling it in any way." He concluded, "Every failure was freeing, and today I'm as nostalgic for the bad as I am for the good. So, that's what I wish for all of you: the bad as well as the good. Fall down, make a mess, break something occasionally. And remember that the story is never over." Having a successful failure, as well as a successful success, means turning your attention to what *follows*, rather than just staring at the past or feeling stuck in the present.

As you direct your attention to next steps, you will discover that you are creating both a new future and a new past. You will be creating a new future with new motivations, new resolutions, and new goals. And as time goes on, you will also begin to create a new past, which will include this failure, yes, but will also include all that you have done to redeem yourself and all the successes that have followed.

So right now, turning your attention to what *succeeds* this moment means addressing questions like these: What can I learn from this? What step forward can I take from here – write an apology, make restitution, seek guidance, create some distance so I can get a new perspective? How can I take another try at this, but in a different way?

Mary Pickford, a movie star in the golden days of movie stars in

the early 1900s, said, "If you have made mistakes, even serious ones, there is always another chance for you. What we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down." Game on.

## The Future of Your Failure

*Every emergency, every crisis, reveals unsuspected resources of personal strength.... In speaking of the hero born of such a crisis, people say, "I didn't know he had it in him." But most of us, in fact, have a better, stouter-hearted, more vigorous self within us....*

*--John W. Gardner*

*I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.*

*--Louisa May Alcott*

Failure challenges us, and we learn from it, in a way that even hard-won success doesn't, and we don't.

For many years, Harvard University's Bureau of Study Counsel has run a workshop during which the students are asked to think of a truly important learning experience they have had, in or out of school; an experience that resulted in a deeper understanding of the world or of themselves; an experience of which they are most proud or most glad. It's not an admissions essay, there is no grade, there is no prize – students are free to write about whatever they like.

What we found is that students – very talented, highly accomplished, already very *successful* students – don't write about what you might expect. They don't write about the A+, about the brilliant performance that came off without a hitch, about the time they set their sights on the prize, headed straight for it, and triumphed. They have certainly had their share of such experiences. But when they are asked to write about a *truly meaningful learning experience*, these "success stories" aren't what come to mind.

Instead, they often choose to write about a time when they struggled through a course that was way over their head; a time when something went very wrong; a time when they were consumed with fear or doubt; a time when they came face to face with a loss, a re-

peated frustration, or a sudden terrible event – and came out the other side of the experience an abler, wiser, or humbler person, having discovered a “stouter-hearted” self.

In a recent Harvard commencement speech, J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, said this:

...Some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default. ...Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above rubies.

The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more to me than any qualification I ever earned.

One way to help make your current failure a successful one, is to try telling the story of your failure as though you are recalling it with a sense of gratitude or pride at some point in your future – like the students in the Bureau workshop, like J. K. Rowling. From this future perspective, the worst feelings you are now suffering have faded. You have survived and recovered from this event. And you are telling your listener just what made this a meaningful and important learning experience for you (rather than the abysmal bummer you actually feel it is at this moment). What will you say?

You might describe how you found the strength to behave with dignity in the face of shame. You might talk about the courage it took to admit your failing and the steps you took to address it. You might note how glad you are that you reached out for help and met a wonderful mentor and supporter. You might describe the things you learned from this experience that you had never known before, and

may *not* have learned if *not* for this experience – how to comfort yourself in a dark time, or that even your strongest feelings can evolve and change over time, or what it means when someone still loves you even though you have really screwed up.

Looking back at yourself now, you haven’t forgotten how shaken you were, how hurt you felt, how dark things looked, but you realize that you emerged OK, even strengthened. And as you engage in this thought experiment, notice that That You, in the future, is connected by an unbroken path of time and action to This You, now. All you need to do to “succeed” is to keep following the path from here to there, from now to then.

The founding director of the Bureau of Study Counsel, William G. Perry Jr., was asked how he could stand listening to students’ problems all day. “I don’t listen to students’ problems,” he replied, “I listen to their courage.”

## Twists and Turns

*Success usually comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it.*  
--Henry David Thoreau

*If at first you don't succeed, find out if the loser gets anything.*  
--Bill Lyon

A couple of years ago, I chaired a panel presentation for freshmen at Harvard, entitled “Your GPA: Myths, Risks, and Choices.” It was timed to take place right after the freshmen received their first-semester grades. The intention was to provide a safe space in which students could begin to critically question the role of grades in their lives and to explore the myths, risks, and choices that bear on the relationship between grades, learning, career, and issues of success and failure. But how to invite an open conversation about such a charged and sensitive topic?

Students piled into the meeting. The four panelists were introduced, highlighting their combined achievements: impressive titles and

positions; faculty appointments at elite schools; advanced degrees (quite a few from Harvard); clinical licensures; prestigious fellowships and grants; keynote addresses; numerous books and articles. Then the *same* panelists were introduced *again*, this time with their *other* resumes: multiple changes of undergraduate major; switches from one graduate field or institution to another; Cs, Ds, and a term of academic probation; several radical career changes; being flat out fired from a job; and... two high school dropouts! How could that be?! Grades, learning, career, success, failure – the conversation was off and running.

Students often think that there's a single, well-defined path to success. And you'd better get on it quick, and stick to it without wavering. The only alternative is the road to ruin. But when you ask anyone who's doing pretty well in their career how they *got* to be doing what they are doing, you will almost always hear a tale of twists and turns.

Al Gore didn't set out as a freshman in college to make a bee-line towards winning the Nobel Prize – he happened to take an elective course in climate science, outside his major, in his junior year, simply because he thought it might be interesting. It was that course that sparked his lifelong interest in environmental issues. And clearly, that was only the first, not the last, twist and turn he has encountered on his path!

Similarly, Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, dropped out of college and had no idea what his future would be. But he had admired the hand-lettered posters that appeared on the campus bulletin boards:

Because I had dropped out and didn't have to take the normal classes, I decided to take a calligraphy class to learn how to do this. I learned about serif and sans serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating.

None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life.

No one, including Jobs, could have predicted that years later this experience would return to him to inspire the beautiful fonts of the Macintosh. He recalls, "Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backwards ten years later. Again, you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever."

Twists and turns.

## Five Tips for Successful Failing

*Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.*

--Henry Ford

**(1) *Feel bad.*** If you feel bad about failing... good! Feel bad! Feel really really bad! Human beings are built to generate strong feelings in reaction to failure, because it is *adaptive* to do so. Strong feelings – even feelings of shame or regret or emotional pain – serve a very important purpose. They make us stop and pay attention. They push us to resolve or correct the situation in which we find ourselves. They motivate us to figure out how to avoid a repetition of the same painful experience in future. They move us to understand ourselves better, to reconsider who we are, where we have come from, where we are going, and why we do what we do. So be kind to your bad feelings (even *really* bad feelings). They will serve you well as important information to fuel your actions and motivations.

Coping with the feelings that come with a failure (or a success) tends to be an inherently and excruciatingly *private* task. The advice of others may be excellent advice and their caring for you may be truly genuine and perhaps essential to your healing and redemption, and yet *no one knows how you feel*. It is you and only you who lives your own life and makes meaning of your own experiences. It's natural to

feel existentially alone in these moments. And it is ironic that one of the most important things you can do when you feel at your worst is to reach out to another (imperfect and existentially alone) human being for support and understanding, whether a friend, a counselor, or a parent. *Especially* if you find that you can't emerge from some dark place, or you feel helplessly in the grip of hopelessness – this is when it is *most* important to reach out. Sometimes we need a little help just to feel merely really bad (which can be good), rather than deeply depressed (which can hamper our capacities to be resilient). In either case, it is important not to bear your pain in isolation.

**(2) Learn to see the signs.** There are almost always signs that appear in advance of any significant failure. In your recent failure, perhaps you didn't recognize, or didn't pay attention to, or simply laughed in the face of the signs. "Ha!" But there were almost certainly signs. Maybe assistance or alternatives were offered to you, but you turned them down out of pride or shame. Maybe you knew you were heading into a dive, but kept telling yourself you could pull out of it in time. Maybe you felt on some level that things were getting worse and worse, but you silenced your anxieties with drugs or diversions.

So think back. What were the first, early, trifling hints that perhaps something might not be quite right? And then, at what point were there indications that you were almost certainly heading towards trouble? And finally, what were the unmistakable, lights flashing, siren-blowing warning signals that you had passed "heading towards trouble" and had arrived at "big big trouble, right here, right now"?

Next time around, when you see these signs again, you'll recognize what direction they are pointing, and you will say, "No thank you. This time, I think I'll choose that *other* path. The path towards asking for help. The path towards making a more thoughtful decision. The path *around* the mucky mire into which I strode this time."

**(3) Admit the truth.** The word admit has two meanings. One is to let in, and the other is to speak plainly. When we are experiencing a failure, it is often very difficult to admit the truth. It is difficult to open one's heart or mind and let the truth in, and it's difficult to speak the truth plainly to others. Yet many a failure is brought about or made worse by *not* admitting the truth, and many a failure can be put

squarely on the path to resilience and resolution by admitting it.

Admitting the truth is painful because the consequences can be great. It might mean failing a term, disappointing someone, changing all your plans, losing something you value. But living a lie is no slice of heaven either. *Not* admitting the truth has its own stresses, problems, and consequences. And since the truth is a persistent little devil, and will usually catch up with you sooner or later, it is by and large better to go ahead and admit it, open the door and welcome it in, sit it right down and give it a cup of tea. Befriend that horrible truth, and you will find it is not the enemy you thought it was. Admitting the truth often means just admitting that we are human, in all our human imperfection.

**(4) Articulate what you have learned.** Spell it out. Write it down. Print it up. Post a blog. Tack it to your bulletin board. Make it into a t-shirt. Get a tattoo. Send a recurring text message to yourself that rings your cell phone every afternoon at three o'clock:

Pick your battles.

Alcohol is *not* your friend.

Sometimes, your mother is right.

**You don't have to do this alone.**

PERFECTION IS PROBLEMATIC.

*Take baby steps - take one right now.*

**You can't fix it if you keep pretending it ain't broke.**

**(5) Fail again.** If you are a human being, this will not be your last or only failure. But here's the good news: You will get better at it! The best way to do justice to the pain of failing is by learning from it, growing from it, and mining it as a rich source of new wisdom and confidence. The poet John Keats said, "Failure is, in a sense, the highway to success, inasmuch as every discovery of what is false leads us to seek earnestly after what is true, and every fresh experience points out some form of error which we shall afterwards carefully avoid." Our failures help us to become smarter in our risk-taking and truer to our aims. Experience teaches us how to avoid failure when we can, how

to greet unavoidable failure with some degree of equanimity; and how sometimes to seek out failure willingly, even eagerly, because we trust in the rewards that the risk of failure can bring but the safety of success can not.

Everyone fails. My hope for you is that you will make *this* failure a really *successful* failure.

## Quotation Sources

Unless noted below, all epigrams and brief quotations can be found at <http://www.brainyquote.com> and <http://www.quotationspage.com> (accessed January 14, 2009).

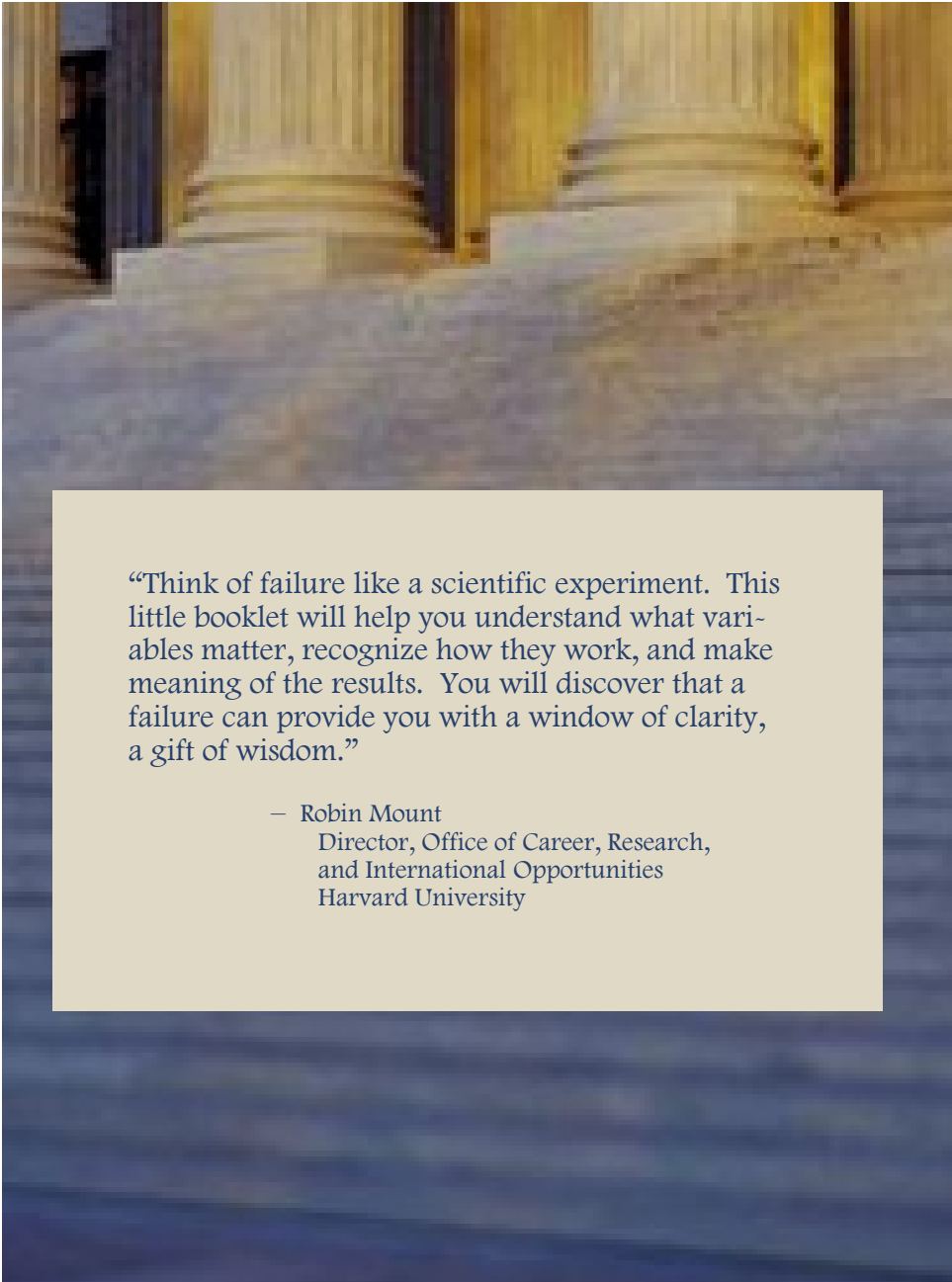
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“Think of failure like a scientific experiment. This little booklet will help you understand what variables matter, recognize how they work, and make meaning of the results. You will discover that a failure can provide you with a window of clarity, a gift of wisdom.”

— Robin Mount  
Director, Office of Career, Research,  
and International Opportunities  
Harvard University