

In praise of

FAILURE

Failing is among
life's least pleasant
experiences, but nothing
else is as essential to success.

By Marisa Taylor

COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES are meant to be inspiring, uplifting affairs that impart a few words of wisdom to graduates about to set out to make their way in the world. So among the many topics British author J.K. Rowling might have broached in her June 5th address to Harvard's 2008 graduating class, failure was certainly an offbeat choice. After all, what did she, the author of the wildly successful Harry Potter series, know about failure? Moreover, how could it be relevant to this particular audience of young adults, among the best and brightest of their generation?

But in her speech, titled "The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination," she told the crowd, "What I

feared most for myself at your age was not poverty, but failure ... And by every standard, I was the biggest failure I knew."

For all of Rowling's success—nearly 400 million copies of her books have been sold worldwide, and her fortune is estimated at \$1.1 billion—her early life and forays into fiction were far more modest. Her childhood dream was to write novels, but her parents, who came from underprivileged backgrounds, worried she would never survive and encouraged her to do something technical or otherwise financially practical. She compromised by studying classics in college and afterward worked as a researcher for Amnesty International. But it wasn't until she found herself as a young divorcee living on state benefits that she hit, as she said, "rock bottom."

"I was jobless, a lone parent and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless," Rowling told the crowd of soon-to-be Harvard alumni. But it was during this dark time that she was able to reach for her goal of writing fiction

because, in her mind, she had nothing left to lose. "Failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged."

Her failure, in fact, ended up as the catalyst for her tremendous success. "The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive," she said in her speech. "You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity."

SOUNDS A BIT DEPRESSING AND, TO BE honest, not much fun. After all, failure isn't one of the things most college graduates look forward to putting on their CVs. In fact, failing is an experience most people go out of their way to avoid, rather than embrace. Attitudes toward failure differ around the world: In Asia, it's something to be ashamed of, to be hidden from family and friends; many European countries have tried to legislate against it by creating social-welfare systems that protect citizens from the most dramatic economic

J.K. ROWLING DELIVERS A COMMENCEMENT SPEECH AT HARVARD ABOUT FAILURE.



Only after being
an unemployed,
poor single parent
did J.K. Rowling
have what it took
to become a
bestselling author

+ WATCH WRITER J.K. ROWLING TALK ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF FAILURE: ODEMAGAZINE.COM/FAILURE

catastrophes; in the U.S., it can sometimes be a badge of honour, but only if the failure has an immediate popularity benefit, like losing the *American Idol* competition but getting your 15 minutes of fame.

Of course, failure isn't an experience to be deliberately sought, and cushioning ourselves against its harshest blows makes perfect sense. But failure isn't something to be despised or ashamed of, either. As J.K. Rowling went on to say in her speech, "Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way." Failure may feel horrible, but it can actually be good for you.

That's not a message we hear a lot about these days. Saunter into the self-help aisle of the average bookstore and it's clear just how success-obsessed we are. The shelves are crammed with books purporting to reveal, in flowery language and pastel colours, how we can lose weight, make money, go green and have better relationships with more sex—all after minimum effort and without setbacks.

Yet some of history's most impressive successes started out as big, fat failures. Ludwig van Beethoven's teacher told the young musician he was hopeless as a composer; then Beethoven went deaf, yet he still managed to compose some of the most ravishing music ever written. Abraham

Lincoln suffered a nervous breakdown and lost several Congressional bids before becoming a U.S. president and abolishing slavery. Business woman Carly Fiorina disappointed her parents by dropping out of law school after one semester, but went on to be vice-president of AT&T and CEO of Hewlett-Packard. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who flunked sixth grade, suffered a string of catastrophic defeats against the Nazis and was booted out of office after the war, yet is still considered his country's greatest wartime leader. He summed up his philosophy like this: "Success is the ability to go from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm."

The stories of the world's most successful failures suggest that what matters most is not whether you win or lose, but how you fail.

THAT'S A LESSON BASKETBALL STAR

Michael Jordan took to heart. Jordan, often described as the greatest basketball player of all time, was cut from his high school team the first time he tried out. He went on to lead the Chicago Bulls to six National Basketball Association championships. In a commercial for Nike—famous for its failure-defying tagline "Just do it"—Jordan says, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot, and missed. I've

failed over and over and over again in my life—and that is why I succeed."

Sports is an arena in which failure would seem to have no place, but the experience of Billy Beane suggests otherwise. As a teenager, Beane had it all. He was good-looking and athletic, the star of his high school football, basketball and baseball teams. But once his professional career with the New York Mets started in 1980, things took a turn for the worse. He averaged a measly .219 batting average with only three home runs. It went on like that for 10 years.

But in 1990, when Beane finally quit as a player and became a scout, he became a great one. In 1997, he signed on as general manager of the Oakland Athletics, and the team promptly embarked on an amazing winning streak, despite having one of the smallest player budgets in the major leagues. How did Beane manage to mess up a playing career that seemingly couldn't go wrong and then mastermind a magnificent managerial record?

"Experiencing the first had led Beane to the solutions he used to achieve the second," former cricket star Ed Smith writes in his book *What Sport Tells Us About Life*. "Beane's reflections on his own career had taught him to respect performance—largely because it was never demanded of him as an emerging player ... Talent only matures when harnessed

within a personality that is capable of self-improvement. And talent, ironically, has a nasty knack of protecting the talented from the urge to self-improve."

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS LESSON HAS been borne out by the research of Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck. Her studies show that failure, viewed as a learning experience—in other words, as an opportunity for self-improvement—can build and strengthen new neural pathways in the brain.

Dweck has spent her career studying intelligence, and finds that the way people view their own intelligence has a profound effect on how they react to setbacks. She was interested in how people coped with failure, and through her research noticed that some people, given a problem or task they couldn't solve, tended to blame themselves, or become discouraged or extremely defensive. Others became invigorated by the same failure, reporting they enjoyed the challenge. "Instead of thinking that their lives had come to a screeching halt, they believed that this was a signal to try harder, to try something new, that it was an opportunity to learn," Dweck explains. "I was determined to figure out what beliefs were at the heart of these two different reactions to failure."

Dweck thinks people in the first category have what she calls a "fixed" theory of intelligence—they believe they're born with a finite talent for learning. They tend to focus more on tasks they can already do well, and have a fear of trying things that might involve making a mistake or appearing stupid. Those in the latter group, who become more motivated by failures, have an "expandable" theory of intelligence—they believe they can increase their ability by putting in more effort, and tend to welcome a challenge, even if they fail the first time around.

Whether a person has a fixed or an expandable mindset can have significant effects on performance, even over a short period of time. For example, in Dweck's most recent study, published in her 2007 book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, she followed nearly 400 middle school students in New York City over a period of two years and examined how

their attitudes about their intelligence affected their math grades. Those students who had fixed mindsets saw their math grades slip. In reaction to failure, they said they planned to study less for math class, or would even consider cheating. Those with expandable mindsets saw their math skills improve. In reaction to failure, they said they'd study harder and spend more time on math.

In the second part of the study, Dweck conducted an eight-week workshop designed to teach the students with fixed mindsets that they could expand their thinking, describing the brain as a muscle that grows stronger the more it's used. After the workshop, Dweck says, the group showed a marked improvement in their math grades and study habits. "It changed their fear of failure," she says. "It allowed them to work wholeheartedly and not protect themselves against the possibility of a meaningful failure."

After the workshop, the students were asked if they'd changed their minds about anything. Says Dweck, "Many of the students said that when something is hard for them, instead of giving up, they keep going, because they know that by doing that, they are making their neurons grow." In fact, that's exactly what happens in the brain when learning occurs. Connections

among synapses, which link nerve cells in the brain, become stronger the more often learning is repeated. And new synaptic connections are formed every time the brain learns something new. So failure isn't only a great teacher, it's a great brain-expander.

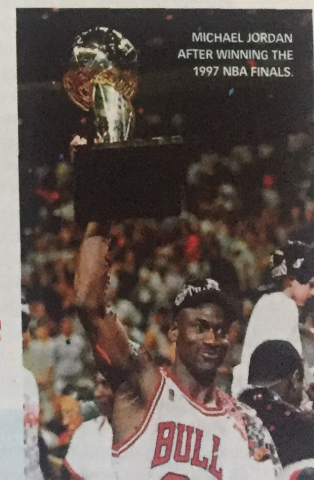
How do fixed mindsets become set, even at young ages? Dweck recalls a time when, as a student at a public school in Brooklyn, New York, her teacher seated the class according to IQ, with those students on the lower end of the scale overlooked when it came to certain privileges like clapping erasers or carrying the flag to school assemblies. While Dweck was seated in the No. 1 spot, she found that "it took the joy out of learning, because you felt that you were being evaluated all the time."

Her research has shown that when you praise a child for intelligence or talent, he or she sees failure as something undermining it and becomes so afraid of making mistakes that motivation is stunted. But if you put the emphasis on the process or the effort the child is putting in, the child learns to be resilient in the face of setbacks and is more open to seeking challenges.

REGARDING FAILURES AS LEARNING

opportunities is crucial outside the classroom, too. In business, willingness to

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MICHAEL JORDAN AFTER WINNING THE 1997 NBA FINALS.



Henry Ford went bankrupt multiple times before he got Ford Motor Company off the ground

take risks—and possibly, to fail—is essential for success. Dweck cites the examples of companies like Apple and Xerox, which have been led by executives who encouraged effort and innovation and, when setbacks did occur, regarded them as stepping stones to something better.

That philosophy was put into practice a quarter-century ago at the educational-software firm Davidson & Associates, where founder Jan Davidson, a Los Angeles-based teacher, came up with the idea to use computers to teach math to children. She invented the highly successful computer game Math Blaster in the 1980s, which she spun off into a number of other educational computer games, making millions in the process. Still, she ran her company much the way she did her former classroom, saying to her employees, “This is a place where you should make lots of mistakes. We don’t want you to be afraid to take a risk.” I used to have a sign in my schoolroom that said, “If you don’t make 10 mistakes a day, you aren’t trying hard enough.” She and her husband Bob have since sold their software company and gone on to found the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, which offers scholarships and educational programs for highly gifted students.

Failure in business is, in fact, more common than success. More than half of all dot-coms that received venture-capital

financing in 1999 didn’t make it past the first five years, according to a study by the University of Virginia’s business school and the University of Maryland. Capitalism, like evolution, is all about survival of the fittest. What’s different about the survivors is how they apply the knowledge gained from failure. To take a lesson from automaker Henry Ford, who went bankrupt multiple times before getting Ford Motor Company off the ground: “Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.”

Failed companies tend to be ignored completely in business case studies. Instead, really successful companies are compared with mediocre ones. Michael Raynor, a professor at the Richard Ivey School of Business in London, Canada, and a distinguished fellow with Deloitte Research in Boston, Massachusetts, wondered why. “I don’t have any psychological data to back this up, but failure is depressing,” Raynor says. “We’re not interested in failure; we’re interested in success. I think it’s kind of telling when we use the word ‘dinosaur,’ that’s a metaphor for failure when, in fact, dinosaurs are one of the most successful life forms that ever evolved.” Raynor’s research shows businesses that succeed the most and businesses that fail the most tend to have identical strategies: They take big risks.

British satirist Max Beerbohm once

quipped, “Only mediocrity can be trusted to be always at its best.” Raynor’s examination of business case studies confirms that observation. Companies that pursue modest, low-risk strategies typically achieve only modest levels of success. Companies that hit it big or go bust, on the other hand, both commit themselves to high-risk ventures that other companies can’t imitate. “What we’ve missed is that companies that have failed and those that have succeeded tend to have strategies that actually look more or less the same,” Raynor explains.

In his book *The Strategy Paradox*, Raynor looks at the example of Japanese electronics company Sony and the spectacular flop of its Betamax video-cassette recorder (VCR). In the early 1970s, Sony developed the technology of the VHS machine, but co-operated with Matsushita—a much bigger company that had been developing its own technology—to avoid having to compete. Eventually, Sony went it alone with its Betamax system, focusing on making its machine high-quality rather than low-cost, and maintaining an iron grip on technology licensing. Matsushita developed its VHS using the opposite strategies and ended up dominating the video-rental market, eventually driving the Betamax into oblivion. Both companies pursued strategies that involved big commitments and big risks. Sony failed.

Fast-forward to the early 1990s, when

Sony was rolling out its MiniDisc player. After its Betamax failure, the company stole a page from the Matsushita playbook: It made the machine affordable and took a looser approach to licensing. But because the MiniDisc launched just as the Internet was making the download market possible, the need for such a player ceased to exist. Sony failed again, even though it adopted the strategy of the company that had beaten it previously.

Few people would regard Sony as a failed business. For Raynor, the lesson is: The opposite of success is not failure, but mediocrity. To achieve big successes, you need to take big risks; if you take little or no risks, mediocrity is guaranteed. Raynor says the key is to have a number of higher-risk strategies up your sleeve in case one or more of them doesn’t pan out. “It’s an indictment of what we’ve come to think of as the prerequisites of success,” he says. “Failure can be beneficial, but you have to learn the right lessons from it.” In other words, you can’t be a game-changer in the business world unless you try something risky, which might well result in failure.

THE SAME “SUCCESS BIAS” IS PRESENT in science. With scientific research often backed by big corporations or large university budgets, the pressure to produce findings that are positive or dramatic can be overwhelming. Scientific journals can therefore be reluctant to publish studies that don’t show a positive correlation or result—such as, say, the idea that eating carrots isn’t correlated with enhanced eyesight. *The Journal of Negative Results in Biomedicine* was founded as a way to promote the open discussion of negative or unexpected results, and, according to its website, “is ready to receive papers on all aspects of unexpected, controversial, provocative and/or negative results/conclusions ... providing scientists and physicians with responsible and balanced information to support informed experimental and clinical decisions.”

Unreported scientific findings, whether positive or negative, can skew further research and hamper funding for important studies that may be prompted by negative results. “Publishing well-documented failures may reveal fundamental flaws and

obstacles in commonly used methods ... ultimately leading to improvements in experimental designs and clinical decisions,” the *Journal’s* editors write.

A number of significant scientific failures have, in fact, produced positive developments. In the 1830s, scientist Charles Goodyear had a vision of making rubber the material of the future. He spent more than a decade working on the vulcanization process, enlisting the help of family, friends and anyone else who would listen to him and contribute funds. Goodyear was laughed at by potential investors and even thrown into jail several times by creditors (he did some of his first experiments from his jail cell). It wasn’t until he accidentally spilled a concoction of rubber and other materials on a hot stove that he came up with a mixture that could stand up to extreme temperatures, which eventually became the basis for the tires sold by Goodyear, a company named in his honor even though Goodyear had no affiliation with it.

Even Viagra, surely one of the most successful drugs of all time, started out as a mistake. In 1992, pharmaceutical company Pfizer was testing the drug sildenafil for the alleviation of angina, chest pains caused by heart disease. The men involved in the clinical trials for the medication found that, while it didn’t affect their chest pain very much, it did have a marked effect on their libidos. Pfizer’s blunder launched a multibillion-dollar industry.

“Discoveries we claim come from research are themselves highly accidental,” writes Nassim Nicholas Taleb in *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. “They are the result of undirected tinkering narrated after the fact, when it is dressed up as controlled research. The high rate of failure in scientific research should be sufficient to convince us of the lack of effectiveness in its design ... Random tinkering is the path to success.”

JASON ZASKY LEARNED FIRSTHAND the potential of tinkering with an offbeat idea. As a writer for the now-defunct *Musician Magazine*, he and the staff were laid off in 1999 when the magazine folded. He found himself walking the streets of New York City with his cousin, who suggested he start a magazine about failure. Now co-founder and editor of the online *Failure Magazine* (failurmag.com), which just celebrated its eighth anniversary, Zasky jokes, “As soon as I heard those two words together, I like to tell people now, I saw failure as my future.”

The publication features a daily column about historical failures called “This Day in Failure,” and even markets a line of Failure Wear, a collection of mugs, T-shirts, courier bags and baseball caps featuring the magazine’s logo. Zasky now makes a pretty decent living from failure.

And naturally he has a lot of perspective on the topic after eight years writing about

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it. Mainly, he feels, failure is in the eye of the beholder. "Success is kind of boring," Zasky says. "Failure is much more interesting to read about, and to study, and certainly to work on. It's a universal experience we can all relate to." Often, he says, success is completely accidental, and is built on something that is viewed initially as failure. Take the Canadian cough syrup company, Buckley's, which has capitalized on failure—in this case, its failure to make a cough syrup that's palatable.

For the past two decades, Canada's No. 1 cough syrup company has been running the slogan, "It tastes awful. And it works." Citing the unique herbal ingredients that make the product so effective—and so awful to ingest—Buckley's even launched

a Bad Taste Tour in which company execs travelled around the country videotaping consumers' reactions to the product. The winner, wearing a suitably disgusted expression, was featured in a Buckley's television commercial, with more photos of grossed-out customers appearing on the company's website (buckleys.com). Other slogans the company has run include owner Frank Buckley quipping, "I wake up with nightmares that someone gives me a taste of my own medicine" and "I came by my bad taste honestly—I inherited it from my father." The campaign seems to have worked, because the company's market share increased by 10 percent afterward.

Zasky says his most memorable failure is Moe Norman, who was, he says, "the

greatest golfer the world has never known." Norman, a native of Canada, joined the Professional Golfers' Association tour in 1959 and quit after fewer than two seasons. His golf swing was impeccable, but his personality was unsuited to the golf world. "If you've ever seen the movie *Rainman* with Dustin Hoffman, he was like the Rainman of golf," explains Zasky.

If Norman grew bored during a hushed, slow-paced tournament, he might simply lie down on the green while other golfers were playing. His appearance was usually unkempt, and people who knew him speculated that he might be a high-functioning autistic. Even though he didn't achieve the fame and recognition he might have if he'd had a more conventional personality, he was inducted into the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame. His unique swing—now known as "the Norman Swing," consisting of a short backswing and a short follow-through—was unorthodox, extremely accurate and utterly unique. Tiger Woods once said only two golfers in history "owned their swing": Ben Hogan and Moe Norman.

"Formative defeats are usually a central strand in any successful sportsman's story—because failure, for almost every athlete, is written into the script," writes Ed Smith in *What*

Sport Tells Us About Life. "The important question is not whether you will fail, but when, and above all, what happens next."

Sooner or later, failure is pretty much inevitable. In fact, a life devoid of failure is in many ways not a full life. As J.K. Rowling told this year's Harvard graduating class, "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." So if at first you don't succeed, try, try again—but try to fail better.

MARISA TAYLOR wrote about the silence of an anechoic chamber in the July/August 2008 issue.

Great moments in failure

Sometimes the greatest success stories stem from the most dismal failures.

NAME: Louis L'Amour
OCCUPATION: Writer

FAILURE: L'Amour couldn't seem to catch a break in the publishing world; a couple hundred of his stories were rejected before his first one was published in 1935. Today, more than 300 million copies of his 123 Western- and frontier-themed books are in print, and almost two decades after his death, he's still one of the most popular novelists in the U.S.

NAME: Joshua Davis
OCCUPATION: Professional underdog

FAILURE: Davis, a 129-pound data-entry clerk, was stuck in a dead-end job, but after entering the U.S. National Arm Wrestling Championship (and losing), he made a career of entering such obscure competitions as bull-fighting, sumo wrestling and backward running, which he chronicled in a book *The Underdog: How I Survived the World's Most Outlandish Competitions*.

NAME: Bonanno Pisano ▶
OCCUPATION: Alleged architect of the Tower of Pisa (the architect's identity is still in dispute)

FAILURE: The architect of "the world's most famous construction mistake" failed to account for the unstable, bog-like terrain the Tower was built on. The Tower attracts hordes of visitors because of its odd architecture.

NAME: Ren and Deanna Thompson
OCCUPATION: Founders of breakupservice.com

FAILURE: The married couple, who met through an Internet dating site, had encountered so many losers via online dating that they decided to profit from their misfortune. They founded a Web-based "breakup service" that delivers the bad news to the rejected party by phone call or letter.

Source: failurmag.com

