

FAIL BETTER

Some people allow failure – or the fear of it – to define their lives. But the wise, argues Allegra HUSTON, embrace it as a friend

Imagine a painter. Well, he calls himself a painter, but most who see his work think he's not very good. Unfortunately, he doesn't draw well. He's committed, at least; the poor sod refuses to consider doing anything else with his life. Fortunately, his father is prepared to support him with a minimal allowance. He hangs out with other, much more successful painters, which must be galling. Decades pass, during which he trades the odd painting for the odd dinner, but that's about it. You'd probably call this man a failure. In fact, his name was Paul Cézanne.

It's nice to think that we might have been sentient enough to recognize Vincent van Gogh's prodigious talent, even though the world was so unaccountably blind to it. Likewise, Beethoven and Hendrix were simply ahead of their time. But what of someone like Cézanne, whose failure wasn't an accident of cultural misjudgment, but seemingly a condition of his being? You'd probably have pitied him and advised him to get a real job, in accounting or the law. Or bartending.

Would you have guessed that the hippie dropout would turn into Steve Jobs, or the Yale flunk-out into Vice President Dick Cheney? That Joanne R, the single mother on welfare, would become JK Rowling? Charles Darwin recalled that as a boy, his father and teachers thought him "rather below the common standard of intellect." Einstein famously didn't speak until he was four, and was expelled from school repeatedly; everyone assumed he was mentally disabled. The young Thomas Edison was told by his teachers that he was too stupid to learn anything, and by his employers that he was not productive enough. Walt Disney was fired as a journalist for lacking imagination.

These are comforting stories. It seems to follow that, if JK Rowling can fail like me, then I can succeed like JK Rowling. In her 2008 Harvard commencement address, Rowling describes how the failure of her marriage and job stripped away the inessential and focused her on what really mattered. It showed her who her true friends were, and gave her permission to follow the idea that consumed her imagination: a boarding school for wizards. She was set free by the sense that she had no further to fall. The pill – the truism that everybody fails sometimes – is easier to swallow when we can see, in retrospect, the fulfillable promise of success. But once the adrenalin rush of encouragement has gone, we're left with the same existential ache. Thousands of impoverished single mothers don't have a brilliant idea and a storyteller's talent. Thousands of college dropouts

aren't technological geniuses. Thousands of painters who plod on year after year, decade after decade, don't turn out to be Cézanne. The chances are that we're in that crowd.

Yet still, the Mephistophelian internet promises success to the masses. *Googlo, ergo sum*; or rather, *Googlor*, the passive: "I am Googled." When the bounds of renown are infinitely expanding, we're deluded into thinking there is room for us all. When, in the dark night, we step off our furious wheel of striving, we suffer the 21st century's existential torment: I think I am somebody, but what if I am not? Do I really make a sound if no stranger has heard of me?

I've stood in bleeding silence while work that I've given my heart to is excoriated by someone I'd hoped would champion it. I've felt the baffled frustration of not being able to create in the physical world that thing that's so clear in my head. I know the grinding panic of cowering under a looming pile of bills, my borrowing capacity close to maxed out and no hope of more; the phone calls at ominous hours; the daily terror that this time they'll say, "We're taking your house." I know the nausea of learning that the one you love loves someone else, and the tearing loss of the future when love is gone. For some reason, I am mulishly convinced that there are people in the world who have never known these feelings. How could the human race have survived for so long if failure rains down like this, like fire bombs, engulfing us all? If, instead, it targets individuals with sharp, clinical sniper rounds, there must be some who escape unscathed.

Still, there's no road sign saying "Welcome to Failure: Over 7 billion served." You'll never know you're there unless you tell yourself you've arrived. There is no concept of failure without a concept of success, ambitions, goals; and no crucifying emotional devastation of failure without the certain knowledge that this relationship, and this relationship alone, means my lifetime's happiness; that this job, and this job alone, means solvency, my child's education, my standing in the world; that this achievement, this creative expression, constitutes the meaning of my life. Failure is not the thing itself; it's what you make it mean. The enterprise, the relationship, has not turned out as hoped for. One person will move on, and another will conclude, "I am a failure."

Theoretically, it is possible to live your life so guardedly that failure is impossible – and that, as Rowling remarked to the Harvard graduates, is the greatest failure of all. But is it possible in reality? Is it possible to have no goals, no ambitions, no idea of how you would like to live or who you would like to be? I don't think so. A Buddhist strives for total detachment from the world, both its pleasure and its suffering, but even a Zen master must have failed in those terms many times.

Saint Augustine wrote, *Si fallor, sum*. If I be fallen – if I be mistaken, if I be in error – I am. Fallenness, error, is something that happens to us by virtue of being alive. The truly modern translation would be, "Shit happens."

Science and invention don't actually allow for failure. They expect it. They are predicated on it. If failure is allowed to mean anything beyond the specific information it imparts, it means progress. You try all kinds of things, without preconceptions about whether they'll be right or wrong. This is the definition of the scientific method. An idea doesn't work in its first ten thousand iterations, until one day, along comes the long-sought epiphany in which thought and physics chime. Edison took over 1,000 stabs at the light bulb before he made it work; James Dyson built 5,127 prototypes of his game-changing vacuum cleaner. I wonder if, somewhere in the 2,000s, Dyson had any more or less faith that he could realize his vision than Cézanne had.

In search-and-rescue circles, the rule is that when you can't find a lost person or body, you look where you don't think it is. Similarly, the most valuable lesson I ever learned was that the words "I don't know" are more powerful than "I know." I was a good academic girl at the time, with high SAT scores and a first-class Oxford degree. The proposition shocked me. I thought knowledge was what we aimed for: the more

knowledge I had, the better equipped I would be to succeed in the world. Now I was presented with the possibility that I was wrong – and that I should not only continue to be wrong, but even revel in being wrong, or at least not right. Each "I know" closes a door to the surprises of the unknown. As your mother might have told you, know means no. She just didn't spell it that way.

Knowledge fosters certainty; certainty births judgement. Once you are certain of what you want, of how things should be – in other words, once you have a definition of success, and therefore of failure – you reduce the wealth of possibilities to a yes-or-no condition. And there are so many more ways for a certain thing to not happen, than to happen. That prickle you feel on the back of your neck, as the consummation you had envisioned disintegrates before your eyes? It's the hot breath of entropy, riding you.

The principle of entropy teaches that, as a random arrangement of atoms that are constantly rearranging themselves, anything we perceive as order is vastly less likely to exist in a given moment than the myriad arrangements we perceive as disorder. Doors, which we build to fit just so, warp and sag and stick. Engines will seize up, slip out of alignment, crack. I won't even start on the subject of weeds. Every successful object is, really, a fleeting miracle of physics meeting desire.

Of course, you might succeed in ways you hadn't imagined. While trying to discover a cure for malaria, you may accidentally give the world the color mauve. (True story: it was the first artificial dye.) In failing to end your days as the dictator of Egypt, you may become the unwitting godfather of people power in the Arab world. If you change society with your philosophy, perhaps you should expect a cup of hemlock to be forced on you. Failure and success whirl together in a kaleidoscope of perspectives. It's possible that Gaddafi is, in his own eyes, a raging success, with his phalanx of gun-toting babes, his juicy Swiss bank accounts, and – who says you can't turn events to serve your own myth? – instead of a dull and feeble death, the promise of a blaze-of-glory shootout like something out of *The Wild Bunch* or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

To fetishize failure is to defend against it. The delicious schadenfreude provided by the Darwin Awards, with their stories of people attaching rockets to their Chevy Impalas or balloons to their lawn chairs, makes spectacular failure safe. It's unusual, not universal; it's something that happens to stupid people; therefore, on both counts, it won't happen to me. On the other hand, if ordinary, common-or-garden failure is an ingredient in all the best success stories, that takes away its sting. A dash of failure leavens the hubris and keeps the hero human, someone we can identify with, or provides *chiaroscuro* to brighten the blaze. Rubbery adventurers like Donald Trump and the pseudo-cowboy George W. Bush bounce up from failure so smoothly, they make it seem like a springboard. What's pitiful is the unimaginative failure of the powerful: Kenneth Lay and his dodgy accounting, Mel Gibson and his drunken rants, Robert McNamara and his grinding, unwinnable wars. Americans have no myth for them: they should have got it right, but they got it wrong. They are dead ends, the dream-light in their eyes extinguished. They are the ones who make us want to turn our faces away.

The British, on the other hand, distrust the dreamers. It is bad taste to want anything too much. It is very bad taste to long to be exceptional. The repetitive drone of Richard Branson's success stories make most Brits want to stop up their ears. It's also bad taste to purport to be good at something: you are getting too big for your boots, and are therefore ripe to be taken down a peg or two. The British delight in stories of ineptitude by those who should know better, and prefer to mitigate their successes with failure's throwaway elegance. The archetypal British hero was, until the last few decades, Robert Falcon Scott: arrogant,

careless, and ill prepared, his greatest legacy is the perfection of the stiff upper lip. Even the man who dethroned him in the canon of British Antarctic explorers, the impossibly indomitable Ernest Shackleton, with his dead-reckoning voyage of nearly 1,000 miles in an open boat, capped by a trek over icy, trackless peaks, was created by failure: when his ship, the *Endurance*, stuck in the ice, his dream of a trans-Antarctic crossing was abandoned. If he had been American, his story would thunder to an inspirational conclusion with a bestselling book, lionization, and probably a move into politics. Instead, his return to England in 1917 was virtually ignored because World War I had stolen his thunder. He died, over \$2 million in debt in today's terms, on his way south to another Antarctic expedition which, before it had begun, already had the stench of failure – ill-defined aims, inadequate ship – hanging over it.

Recently, my friend Chipper Thompson told me that he'd come to the conclusion that he is a hobbyist. I think he saw the shock on my face. "A really good hobbyist!" he added; it was a judgment of category, not quality. "But I've realized I'm never going to be Mick Jagger. And if someone came to me right now with a proposal for a tour, I don't know that I'd say yes."

For those of you who have never heard of Chipper, which is probably nearly all of you, I will give some background. Chipper is a virtuoso musician on stringed instruments and hand percussion, and, to my mind, is among the greatest undiscovered songwriters in the US. He has recorded five albums, all self-financed. He looks like Ewan McGregor, if Ewan McGregor was an Allman brother, and when he dresses up, in high boots, a Civil War re-enactor shirt, and big silver hoop earrings (or barefoot, in a finely cut suit), you can't take your eyes off him. He's from Athens, Alabama, and he never did move to Austin, or Nashville, or New York, or LA.

"What would I be doing now if I'd gotten that Virgin Records deal?" he mused, then answered himself. "I'd be living in Taos, New Mexico, with a big room full of really cool instruments, playing music. Oh, wait – that's exactly what I am doing." Now in his 40s, he has no desire to go on the road with a bunch of twenty-somethings in a sweaty, broken-down van. The road to that kind of success isn't worth the price. Describing himself, he described many of our friends: artists and businesspeople who choose not to swim in the main current, who scratch together barely enough money to keep doing what they do. My painter friend Erin Eagleton told me he'd decided to stop selling his work because he found himself creating new pieces that were similar to the ones that had sold best in the past. The nectar of the flower of success was poison. He didn't stop making art, but now he has only one question to answer about his work: do I like that line, or not?

In places unlike Taos, people ask, "What do you do?" A one-category answer is expected. "I'm a banker," or "I'm a rocket scientist." What if, in the spirit of experimentation, you answered, "I do what fills my heart with love and my spirit with joy?" They would stare aghast for a moment, and take refuge in guffaws of uncomfortable laughter, shading into comfortable contempt. It's like describing last night's sex: it's not polite, it might incite envy (who doesn't really want to do that?), and you don't know other people's standards, so you risk looking ridiculous. We all know that the world is not pure love and joy. To announce this as your identity is to announce that, daily, you are failing.

Now shift the scene from a cocktail party, with its glints of expensively whitened teeth, clinks of crystal, and calculated laughter, to a deathbed. I know what I would like to have done. Now shift again, to a christening. What do you really want for your child?

Churchill once said that success is the ability to go from one failure to another without losing your enthusiasm. In other words, the successful life is one lived according to the scientific method. In the present moment, there is no failure. There is only doing: the lifelong inventing of the self.