



Had it not been for failure, humankind may never have known the magnificent Audubon bird paintings that gave rise to the Audubon Society, the inspiring music of Handel's Messiah or the electric light bulb.

It was only after John James Audubon's business failed in 1819 that he began traveling and painting birds. George Frederick Handel unleashed his creative genius after a night of deep despair over his failure as a musician (he lived in poverty and had suffered a stroke). And Edison is well known for his 1,000-plus failed attempts before creating a workable filament for his electric light bulb.

The world landscape is strewn with such stories of success rising from the ashes of failure. Yet failure tends to strike fear in our hearts like nothing else. There is so little tolerance for it throughout our culture, especially in business and government. The pressure is tremendous to get it right every time, to be in control, to succeed and win—always.

But because we are human, we cannot help but fail. We suffer from failed relationships, failed parenting, failure at work, failure in health. And when we do fail, the wounds may penetrate so deeply that we begin to make safe choices, to settle for less than we really want, less than our best and boldest selves can do, out of fear of failure.

What would it be like to cast failure in a different light, to take it out of the darkness of disgrace and guilt, to remove the feeling of "disaster" associated with failure, to look for what it tells us about our well-being and our conduct in life? What if we could see failure—in our work lives, in our personal lives—as an essential part of the path of creation? What enormous amounts of energy would be freed up? And for what?

"Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat," said Theodore Roosevelt.

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Open Door to a New Success

Like Audubon, a failure can be a lever to open the door to a richer, more authentic life. Many a radical transformation has had failure at its root.

In her book, *How Much Joy Can You Stand?*, author Suzanne Falter-Barns writes, “There really is no such thing as failure. There is only the rearrangement of plans and the surrender of ego. There is only the twist in the road we never expect.”

Spark Creativity

Sometimes we need to be jolted out of our routine and back into the essential work of creating ourselves. Failure can open up neglected parts of our lives, encouraging us to explore avenues that previously were off-limits or submerged. Failure doesn’t just clear its throat, it blows a trumpet in our ears and stirs up all the creative juices. We can’t help but respond with passion and drive, as Handel did while composing the Messiah.

Promote Risk-Taking and Change

Failure is a natural offshoot of adventure and risk-taking, and growth is a natural offshoot of failure. Great courage is needed to face real change. A great failure can be the influence that enables us to risk and change. As the saying goes, “If you aren’t making mistakes, you aren’t making decisions.”

Getting Through It

In his book *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, Thomas Moore writes: “If we could understand the feelings of inferiority and humbling occasioned by failure as meaningful in their own right, then we might incorporate failure into our work so that it doesn’t literally devastate us.”

Here are a few suggestions for working constructively (succeeding!) with failure.

Acknowledge your feelings of pain, humiliation and/or inadequacy. Otherwise, you end up spending all your energy avoiding, rather than working through, these emotions.

Laugh, if you can. A little bit of humor goes a long, long way in soothing the sting of failure.

Acknowledge your responsibility. Don’t deny the importance of the failure, but neither let it overwhelm you with guilt. Guilt isn’t helpful; taking responsibility is.

Talk about it. Failure is a lot less punishing with regular, frank, honest communication. Companies

and relationships that embrace failure as necessary steps to growth and innovation don’t want to bury the bad news.

Forgive yourself. Forgiveness doesn’t take away the consequences or the memory of the failure, but it does soften the fall and clear a path for the next step.

“You may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing that we call ‘failure’ is not the falling down, but the staying down,” said silent-film actress Mary Pickford.

Build a base of supportive people. Share the reality of your life. When you stop hiding shame and denying negative feelings, issues are quickly surfaced and resolved.

No self-recrimination. Replace “If only...” with “Next time...” to keep focused on the future.

Expect to make mistakes again. Some organizations are now building in this expectation and experiencing the enormous potential for innovation, teamwork and achievement that is unleashed when the fear of failure is removed. Individuals can experience the same potential.

Ultimately, failure is not about loss, deficiency and flaws. It’s about learning lessons and courageously moving on. It’s about retaining hope and the instinct for joy. The lessons of failure make us wiser, stronger and more prepared for the rest of our journey, if we take them with us.

Reflecting on Failure

The gifts of failure—for an individual or for an organization—are numerous, but not without reflection. We receive the gifts when we seek not to blame but to search for the wisdom beneath the failure. With real curiosity, ask yourself these questions:

- How can this failure serve me?
- What does this setback mean?
- What have I learned and gained?
- What patterns do I recognize? What do they mean?
- How can I use this failure?
- How can I see it in a different way?
- What is positive here?
- What am I really trying to accomplish?