

Failure Is Not a Four-Letter Word

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Present Connotations for the word “failure” generate numerous problems. Actually, the problems that the *word* generates are frequently far more serious than any problems prompted by the act of failing *per se*. It is for this reason that we see a need to examine failure in order to establish a healthier understanding of it.

Failures occur every moment of every day. This is not a shocking statement. It is merely a straightforward observation of events. As long as human beings strive to achieve, they will frequently, *not* reach their goals. They will experience failure. Such failures are natural occurrences, resulting from normal activities. Specifically, then, failure is always a possible consequence of human effort. We watch the Academy Awards knowing that of all the film nominated for best picture, one is going to win and others are not, even though the group from which the winner is chosen is a select group. In a graduating class one student will be first, and no matter how hard the others have tried, they will not be first. Such examples of failure quite literally permeate all aspects of life.

At this point one might be inclined to argue that our examples involve inherently competitive situations. In many endeavors, it might be argued, competition is unnecessary; and, it is best to seek our noncompetitive situations in which the indignity of failure can be avoided. It might be best to talk about other than who’s first, second, third, etc. But even then, unless we eliminate the concepts of achievement and accomplishment, we are forced to conclude that there is some chance for failure. For when a person decides internally what it is that he or she wants to achieve, what she or he wants to do, what he or she wants to accomplish in her or his daily activities, she or he may not always reach the desired goals. The person may fail. Thus, in noncompetitive pursuits the fact remains that failure is a natural consequence of human activity, and the only way to avoid it is to do absolutely nothing.

A brief examination of the early career of Abraham Lincoln demonstrates that he was not a financial success as a young lawyer in Illinois. At one point, in 1837, he was sufficiently in debt to have his surveying instruments attached and to depend on friends for transportation, room, and board. Hardly what we would consider successful. He continued to experience failure as a Congressman from 1847-1849. In Washington he was virtually lost. At best, his actions can be judged as only mediocre. He was definitely disappointed with his inability to accomplish anything. The people in his district were even more disappointed, especially with his stand against the Mexican War. They subsequently voted against Lincoln’s Wig Party as a

means of demonstrating their displeasure with their representative. At the end of his term Lincoln sadly renounced politics and returned to Springfield to practice law.

When he returned to politics in 1858, he again met with failure, losing to Douglas in the Senate race. As unfair as it was, Lincoln lost that election, not because he was less popular than his opponent, but because the apportionment of Illinois was inequitable. That failure, however, gave Lincoln increased national recognition and marks the beginning of his eventual rise to the Presidency.¹

Indeed, circumstances that yield failure can be extraordinarily cruel and unjust. We recall a black student who was an extremely talented college debater. He was a hard-working student who cared about the quality of his work and spent long hours overcoming numerous obstacles. When his debate team went to an important national tournament, he was well prepared and willing to exert every possible effort to succeed. In a crucial round, however, the judge was from a southern state, and while this student had consistently received high speaker points, this judge ranked him as low as it was possible to rank a speaker. As a result, his team was eliminated. Unfair? Of course! But he had to endure the disappointment of failing to reach a goal nevertheless.

It may be due to their own mistakes; it may be due to lack of motivation, and it may be due to circumstances entirely beyond their control, but failure does result whenever people attempt to accomplish goal. And that is our fundamental thesis.

It is not enough, however, to understand that failure results naturally from all activity. Nor is it sufficient to realize that, under various circumstances, failure is going to be the *unavoidable* outcome of human effort. We would stress that the act of labeling individuals *failure* merely because they fail is both illogical and potentially destructive. Perhaps nothing is of greater importance to educators than the need to help student deal effectively with failure when it occurs.

We must teach young people that viewing ourselves or others as failures because we fall short of desired goals is illogical. It is illogical, not only because it unjustly transforms an external, and completely normal occurrence into a personality trait, but because it incorrectly turns the goal sought into an absolute standard out of proportion to its importance.

Clearly, our society places great importance on success. Typically, it is valued, not for itself, but because its status can be attained by a small portion of those attempting it. In our society anything that anyone can achieve is common and of limited value. So it is with accomplishment in general. The value of achievement is exclusivity. Unfortunately, we emphasize and praise the achiever, the winner. We love success stories, but who cares to hear about failures? They're so common. Thus success stories are told and retold while failure is down-graded. It is hardly any wonder, then, that people begin to view instances of failure as negative statements about the person who failed. Yet we must stress that most people are average and below. The

overwhelming results of quantitative tabulations demonstrate the recurring bell shaped curve. Given a specific standard, *the majority will not excel!*

But because it is unpleasant to experience failure we frequently strive to minimize its occurrence. In order to do so we may be forced to rationalize and distort failure. And this avoidance of reality can lead to inappropriate mental development. Reality cannot be avoided by pretending that it isn't there. Such rationalization does not help us to cope effectively with failure when it occurs – as it will: as it must for everyone.

By its very nature, failure is omnipresent. It happens concurrently with success, because goals are relative and behaviors often fulfill some goals while failing to fulfill others. One cannot live without failure. It makes no sense to label a person a failure with labeling everyone failure. If we live, we fail. It is not a personality trait. It is an inherent aspect of life, and is far more neutral than negative. Thus, we solidly agree with the 18th century rhetorician, Richard Whately, when he stated, “he only is exempt from failure who makes no effort.”

Let failure is becoming a taboo in our society – even though it is essential to our way of life. Whenever a society is unable to accept failure as a component of growth, its individuals become incapable of dealing with their individual problems. The results of research in problem solving, as well as common sense, tell us that the defining of a problem is a major step in its solution. Yet, where there is a taboo against failure, it is indeed difficult for anyone to define a problem, for such is an admission of failure.

Many examples of this principle come from marriage. Numerous marriages are functionally nonexistent simply because neither person is able to say, “I have failed,” or “The marriage has failed.” Norman M. Lobsenz made this very point in an address to the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors: “To *not* have problems is an unrealistic goal.”² Nevertheless, such is the only goal possible in an anti-failure world. The norm is opposed to facing mistakes. As one lady wrote to Ann Landers, “I was ashamed to admit I couldn't handle any problems that came my way.”³ Failure is normal in marriages. Failure is also normal on the job. People fail in selecting the appropriate job. Employers err in choosing the correct employee. Unfortunately, the situation is often not corrected because it becomes easier to view the “*relative success*” in such decision than to the “*relative failure.*” Both employer and employee suffer as a result.

Perhaps the greatness of a man like Harry Truman can be observed, not in his deeds, but in that he accepted the responsibility for his deeds. John Kennedy's strength may have been his ability to admit that he blundered. Without such an attitude it is difficult to envision an alternative to repeated error, foolish adherence to mistaken notions, and unpardonable arrogance of power. This arrogance of power is illustrated in a study by Raymond Duff and August Hollingshead⁴ of a large New York City hospital. In repeated cases, when the discovery of terminal illness followed an earlier incorrect diagnosis, the doctors did not admit their mistakes, but, as a rule, adhered to the earlier diagnosis, even if it had been another doctor's mistake.

Innocent people were forced to endure prolonged and unnecessary pain and suffering as a result. The most disturbing aspect of these findings is that the physicians acted more from a desire to avoid admitting failure than to helping the unfortunate victims of their errors. We believe that the shocking finding underscores the degree to which failure distortion can have undesirable effects in our society. While on the surface it might appear that it is best to protect the individual and his self concept by creating a world where failure does not openly exist, such an action is detrimental to the individual, and worse, it prompts the suffering of innocent people because the individual does not act responsibly in accepting the consequences of his or her failures.

On a broader scale, we must deal with failure honestly if we are to progress as a society. The quality of our existence depends upon the strength of our decision processes. We must abate the growing trend to avoid the recognition of failure if we are to improve our decisions.

Clifton Fadiman is quoted as saying, "We are enshrining mediocrity in people, in artistic styles, in life styles, even in the air we breathe and in our physical surroundings." He believes that the "21st century may be an ugly, gray, muggy place and time in which to live." Fadiman also claims that "We will accept as cultural currency all that is counterfeit, cheap, and worthless."⁵ The picture he paints is bleak. Yet such mediocrity is imminent if the civilization is forced to view any and all behavior as "success." As failure becomes intolerable, we can develop any necessary technology to regulate life in such a way that no one need experience failure or any other sense of discomfort. Huxley's *Brave New World* describes how the world could be under those conditions.

Certainly we cannot be ready to create this utopia! Although the facing of failure as an integral facet of life does necessitate periods of disappointment, depression, and anger, these are human emotions, and the world in which they exist is one that provides the essence of life as we have known it.

There are definite advantages to accepting failure as a reality. Among them is the ability to conquer dread. Dread itself is simply a fear of failing. By realizing that living necessitates failing, we understand that failure should not be dreaded by accepted as life itself is accepted. Another advantage is that tolerance is increased. We accept that everyone fails, we are more understanding when others let us down. We can respond to them simply as fellow humans. We understand that others are only human and that as they live, they, as we, must fail.

But the most important consequence of dealing honestly with failure is that one is better able to enjoy life. The person is able to savor the activity of living even when the outcomes are not as favorable as he or she would have liked them to be. As children, we would often attempt feats that spelled almost certain disaster simply for the experience. So, it is clear that it is not always best to be positive. Certainly we

can look upon the “half full cup: as half full. Still we must, in attempting to be positive, not to deny that the cup is partially empty by omitting the word “half.”

In the words of the ancient philosopher, Rodan of Alexander: “It sounds well always to claim success, but the end results are appalling. Such a technique leads directly to the creation of a world of unreality and to the inevitable crash of ultimate disillusionment.”

This address was presented at the Phi Kappa Phi initiation banquet at the U. of Central Missouri, May 21, 1977. It was base on a book-length manuscript entitled. “*R*” is for Failure. Ironically, the manuscript was never published.

Notes:

¹ *Dictionary of American Biography*, volume VI, ed. Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933), pp. 244-246; 248.

² Norman M. Lobsenz, “The Ten Questions most often asked of Marrieage Counselors,” printed in *Readers Digest*, (June 1976), p. 74.

³Ann Landers’ syndicated column of August 7, 1975.

⁴Raymond Duff and August Hollingshead, *Sickness and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp 310-311.

⁵Maurice V. Mitchell, “The Report of the Chancellor on Academia, Year-End Report,” *University News of Denver – Alumni News* (December, 1975), p 4.