

Message: Does Success Start with Failure?

Gathering Words

One: Fear of failure is disabling because it keeps us from doing what we love.

All: Fear of failure keeps us from being adventurous.

One: There are lessons to be learned from our mistakes and failures.

All: When we avoid the discomforts and uncertainties of failure, we lose opportunities for growth.

One: Let go of your failures, mistakes, and disappointments.

All: The possibilities far outweighs the disappointments.

One: Keep experimenting, exploring, and evolving.

All: May we find renewed spiritual strength and healing in the courage to come to know who we are and what we are made of, and act accordingly.

Readings

Faced with a mistake or loss, the right response is to acknowledge the setback and change direction. Yet our instinctive reaction is denial. This is why “learn from your mistakes” is wise advice that is painfully hard to take. Tim Harford *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*

“My father used to encourage me and my brother to fail,” she continued. She said he would ask every day what she failed at and was actually disappointed if she didn’t have any failure stories to relay. She recalled being very excited after auditioning for a play and telling her father how wonderfully horrible she was! “It changed my mindset at an early age that failure is not the outcome, failure is not trying. Don’t be afraid to fail,” she said. Sara Blakely (youngest woman billionaire and founder of undergarment company Spanx)

Luke 15:11-32

¹¹⁻¹² Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’”

¹²⁻¹⁶ “So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

¹⁷⁻²⁰ “That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say

to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father.

²⁰⁻²¹ "When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

²²⁻²⁴ "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

²⁵⁻²⁷ "All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.'

²⁸⁻³⁰ "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

³¹⁻³² "His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"

By Susan Deininger

Message : Does Success Start with Failure?

For many years when I heard the story of the prodigal or lost son in church, I identified with the self-righteous jerk of the older brother. Of course I didn't see him as a self-righteous jerk then. I happened to agree with him. I thought it was "unfair" that the father threw a party for the younger son. I thought the younger son should have been punished for what he did. You see, I identified with the cultural belief that sins or mistakes should be punished. And that one earned God's or parental love by being good and taking your punishment when you deserved it. I know I worked very hard at being good to earn that love because I didn't feel loved the way I was. Those were the cultural beliefs that I had learned from my family, my church, and the people around me.

I learned this in part by getting big red X's on all of the wrong answers on my school papers. I learned it from the media and tabloids that still love outing and shaming celebrities for their failures. I find it in our US justice system that is built on the cultural belief system that we must punish those who commit any kind of crime. We see punishment as a powerful deterrent and a way to control people's behavior. And most Christian doctrine is built on the notion dreamt up by Augustine that sin separates us from God and we were born sinful. All of these beliefs are based on a culture and fixed mindset that says mistakes and failures are bad and to be avoided at all cost.

I grew up being mocked at home, by my mother and brothers, and at school, by the teachers and other students when I made a mistake. The worst part of this cultural belief system was this voice I developed in my own head that would use cruel insults against me when I made an error even when no one else saw it. That inner voice would then tell me that I was stupid or not good. As a result, I learned to fear failure, big time. I came to believe that failing at some task made me a failure and that hurt. So, I learned to avoid taking risks because that could lead to failure and humiliation. I see this fear of failure and silent verbal self abuse all around me causing drug and alcohol abuse, suicides, and mental illness.

There is a different way to look at our mistakes and failures and that is as an opportunity to learn and grow. It is sometimes referred to as an open or growth mindset. Young children can be our best teachers when it comes to handling failures. All you have to do is watch a baby learning to walk. They're not afraid that they'll never learn to walk. They're not afraid to try and will keep trying as many times as it takes to master walking. They're not afraid of falling down or looking stupid when they take their first steps. They don't care that they will fail a number of

times when they are first attempting to walk. They can't wait to learn to walk and then run. They only learn to fear failure later on, as they get older and someone teaches them to fear failure.

There are a lucky few who manage to grow up under a different belief system or culture, thanks to their parents instilling in them a growth mindset with a different perspective of failure. Sara Blakely was one of these lucky people. Her father used to actually encourage both her and her brother to fail. At the dinner table every night, he would ask them what they had failed at doing that day. It wasn't to ridicule them. It was a way to encourage them to try new things. They were taught that failure is not the final outcome but a learning step along the way. I'll repeat that, they were taught that failure is a learning step along the way. Sara learned that real failure is not trying. She learned to see failure as life's way to let you know you're off course. She learned that failure was not to be feared.

Sara grew up wanting to be a lawyer like her father. But she failed her exams. She worked at Disney World for a few months and then sales at an office supply chain store. She turned entrepreneurial after being frustrated by what to wear under a pair of white pants. She just wanted an undergarment that didn't exist. While working full-time, she put her \$5000 savings into launching her new idea for the undergarment she wanted. She ran into and overcame challenge after challenge after challenge along the way, but could handle it because she didn't fear failure. She does say she didn't know how hard it would actually be to launch a new product or she might not have attempted it.

She couldn't convince any of the manufacturers she approached to make her undergarment because they were all men and couldn't believe there would be any demand for this kind of clothing. She finally convinced one of them to ask his wife and daughters if they would want to buy this undergarment. When the women in his life resoundingly replied yes, they would gladly purchase such an undergarment; he agreed to be the manufacturer of Spanx. Sara is now the youngest woman billionaire in the world and the company Spanx sells 200 products in over 11,000 stores and online shops in 40 countries. Her story is just one example of what is possible if you don't fear failure but manage to see it as a challenge to be overcome.

So how does this have anything to do with Jesus' parable of the lost or prodigal son? We know that most of the current editions of the Bible attach the labels of either Lost Son or Prodigal Son to the story. With a title like Lost Son or Prodigal Son, I tend to think of the son as a loser who will remain lost before I even have a chance to read the story. The father in the story does say that the son *had* been lost or dead but *was now* found or alive. Think about it for a minute, how would we hear this story differently if it were titled The Found Son, The Alive Son, The Son Who Came to His Senses, or The Son Who Learned from His Failures. For an emphasis

on a different character it could also be called the story of The Loving Father or The Story of the Self-Righteous, “Holier than Thou” Son. Titles and labels do matter in the way we hear these things. For this morning, let’s call it The Story of the Son Who Learned from His Failures and Is Progressing Towards Success.

What else do we know about the younger son? He went to a foreign country where he wasted his money until he was flat broke. Then he had the bad luck of being there during a famine and could only find a job feeding pigs, which would have been totally distasteful for a Jewish boy. He was hungry and homeless. We would probably call this “hitting bottom”. When you hit bottom you basically have three options. You can wallow in the pit and stay there, you can dig yourself a deeper hole, or you can decide to figure out how to crawl out of your hole.

The younger son spent time thinking realistically about the situation he had gotten himself into and how to get himself out of it. By analyzing the situation carefully he learned some great lessons in life. He made a choice to survive or continue to live rather than to die where he was at. He also decided to swallow his pride and cut his losses. He decided to go home to his father, confess the errors of what he had done, earnestly ask for forgiveness, release his father from any obligations of kinship, and ask for employment. He made a solid plan on how to move forward.

As the son is approaching his home the father reacts in an unexpected way. Dad doesn’t even listen to his son’s confessions but is overjoyed that his son has come to his senses, is no longer living in denial, has survived his failure, and is coming home. The father is able to separate his son’s actions or missteps from his son’s identity. He doesn’t identify his son as a loser like the older brother does. The older brother found it extremely difficult to recognize and believe that his baby brother had come to his senses and had truly changed. The father, however, is able to see that his son has been changed by this experience and he celebrates it.

We know the son is no longer in denial when he is able to ask for forgiveness. To me this is the real power behind asking for forgiveness. I believe that this is the meaning in the parable when the son starts to confess his sins to his father and his father doesn’t even listen to him. It’s not the act of asking for forgiveness that’s important, it is the process before hand of coming out of denial before we ask for forgiveness that is important. We are no longer in denial when we are ready to ask for forgiveness and are then ready to take responsibility and move ahead.

If you are like me, you have learned far more from the things you’ve had to struggle with than those that come easily. And I find it *is* a struggle to work through my failures. Even though I have hated struggling with my failures, I have found overcoming them is deeply satisfying and

I love the wisdom I have gained from these struggles. In this way, I have turned those failures into successes. Adapting an open mindset that sees failure as just a mistake or an experiment and an opportunity to learn and grow, rather than viewing a failure as a threat to our lovability and self-worth, allows us to learn from our mistakes.

Don't be afraid to risk failure. Do make sure your failures are survivable. Don't beat yourself up for failing. Don't deny your failures. This is the hard part. Do own and acknowledge your failures. Take the time to examine what you can learn from your failures. Then use what you've learned to gain courage and self-confidence that you can bear the cost of failure. Keep experimenting, exploring, evolving, and really living!