

Learning to Fail Rev. Carol Bodeau

Thomas Edison once said that, “Negative results are just what I want. They’re just as valuable to me as positive results. I can never find the thing that does the job best until I find the ones that don’t.” He insisted that “just because something doesn’t do what you planned it to do doesn’t mean it’s useless.” Well, that’s easy to hear in retrospect, right? We can hear him say, ‘oh, it’s okay I failed, because it was just all part of the journey to my ultimate success,’ and we may think, well of course! He was Thomas Edison! But imagine being in his shoes: spending years of his life trying the same task over and over again, without getting it quite right; investing immense resources of money and time, not to mention the emotional and intellectual energy required, before being able to say, “whew! Finally!”

Imagine being known publicly as the guy who failed 1000 times....before he became the guy who actually succeeded. I don’t know about you, but I kind of imagine it being hard to keep plugging away with that kind of a track record. Tony Robbins, a very well-known inspirational speaker and probably about the most highly acclaimed life-coach in the world these days, is often quick to remind people that an essential trait of very successful people is their willingness to treat failures as necessary learning tools.

So, all right, we may be willing to agree that ‘failures’ can sometimes be building blocks to later successes, that mistakes are essential to learning and growing. But what about failures that don’t fit the model of completing a project, or developing a business? What if the failure is more private and personal, more emotional or relational? What do we do then? What if it’s having a long-term partnership end, or developing an illness when we’ve always thought of ourselves as ‘the healthy one’? What if we realize that we will never have biological children, or that our circumstances have changed in ways that prevent us from being financially independent? What if my failure harms another person? Or if it causes consequences that I will live with for the rest of my life?

These may not be quite so easy to reconcile ourselves to.

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One of my favorite resources on the subject of human limitation and struggle is Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron. She was, herself, a supposed ‘failure’ in some ways. Now one of the most famous spiritual teachers in the world, and author of many very successful books, she had a number of challenges and crises that could have caused her to give up.

She was born in the 1930s, (her birth name was Deirdre Blomfield Brown), and she was first married at the age of 21. Though she and her first husband had 3 children, they were divorced within only a few short years. She then remarried fairly quickly, and was devastated when she found out that her second husband was unfaithful to her; they divorced after only 8 years of marriage. She could have easily thought of herself as a failure at marriage.

Think of the kinds of questions we ask ourselves, the things we say to ourselves, when things like this happen in our lives. We might think something like, “When will I ever learn? Why didn’t I see that coming? What was I thinking?” When we have patterns of repeated *non-success*, it’s easy to do all sorts of self-blaming and self-shaming.

Or maybe our pattern isn’t *self*-blaming and shaming. Maybe it’s easier for us to resort to blaming and shaming anyone else, or anything else, around us.

When the dream project fails, maybe it’s because the others on our team were idiots. When the relationship fails, it’s because the other person didn’t do enough, or do it right. When our health fails, it’s because the circumstances were wrong, or the doctors didn’t catch it in time. When our finances fail, it’s because we got bad advice. We can be incredibly creative at finding the *causes* –in ourselves or others—for our supposed failures. But that really isn’t the point, if you ask Thomas Edison or Pema Chodron. They don’t really approach things that way.

When her two marriages failed, Pema Chodron decided she needed to do some exploration. She started seeking spiritual resources, and she found Buddhism. Within a few years, she became a devoted practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, and went on to become the first American fully ordained in that tradition, as well as the founder of the

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first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in North America serving westerners. So what's *her* approach to failure?

The first thing you have to know is how she defines failure. Failure, she believes, is simply what we call it when things don't turn out as we had hoped and planned. That's all. We may think that there is some absolute, real or true, definition of failure, but really there's not. Surely we have societal *norms* that try to tell us what we *should* be, or do, or accomplish. But these aren't really absolutes; they're just subjective expectations which we can choose to adopt, or reject. So, perhaps failure is just one attitude we may adopt when things don't turn out as we had hoped or planned.

And if this is true, then 'failure' doesn't have to be something we defend against, or protect ourselves from. So why do we defend against it, try to prevent it, and protect ourselves from it? The answer is really simple: when things turn out the way we hoped or planned, it feels good. When they turn out otherwise, we often feel pain. And pain is not something we're very good at being friends with. But that's the wisdom, the brilliance really, or Pema Chodron's teachings (and really all of Buddhism, if you get right down to it). We have this assumption that pain is *bad*, and that it's a sign we've done something wrong. But that's not necessarily true, at all.

What if we simply accepted pain as a messenger, giving us information about things? Pema Chodron, and others who teach the value of failure, suggest that the pain or discomfort we feel can be a gateway to something new. She quotes James Joyce describing it as a 'portal' to creativity. Her book on this subject, titled *Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better: Wise Advice for Leaning Into the Unknown* starts with a Samuel Beckett quote: "Ever Tried. Ever Failed." He says. "No Matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better."

Rather than try to divert the pain of things turning out differently than we had planned by blaming or judging ourselves or others, we can instead try to be curious. In the face of that awful feeling that something's wrong, that it isn't how I like it, that I'm scared and

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hurting, we can start asking questions. And I don't think it really matters so much what the questions are. Edison might have asked, "do I need a different sort of filament?" and Henry Ford might have asked, "how should I adjust the fuel?" Pema Chodron might have started by asking, "What needs do I have that I must prioritize this week?" As time passed, she might have wondered, "Is there something I can learn about my patterns or habits here?" or perhaps "What new opportunities can I consider now, that weren't available to me before?"

Too often, our tendency to avoid pain leads to habits or behaviors that are destructive. We may become angry, bitter and closed off from others, as we attempt to push away the pain of connecting. We may begin to think of ourselves as inadequate, or incompetent. Or we may develop addictions, in an attempt to numb our feelings of hurt or fear. Such addictions can take many shapes: addiction to shopping, or to television; addiction to eating, or to dieting; addiction to substances, or to work. Maybe even more insidious, we can become addicted to the story—to our story of being a victim, to our story of being helpless, or righteous, or wronged. We can even become addicted to the drama itself, as a way of protecting ourselves from just feeling that vulnerable feeling.

And that's really the crux of it all, as far as Pema Chodron is concerned: the vulnerability. The benefit of failing, according to a person who went through multiple traumatic divorces while her children were young, and was later diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, failure teaches you "how to get good at holding the rawness of vulnerability in your heart."

The *rawness* of vulnerability. Isn't that an apt description? Doesn't it feel raw and naked and dangerous and painful to be vulnerable? To not know what's going to happen next, to not know how you're going to get through it, or what others might say, or how you'll rebuild. All that uncertainty and vulnerability can be excruciating. But according to a lot of folks who have made it through such times, the best way to "fail" at anything, is to see it as a gift, as an opportunity.

And it's not that you should somehow pretend the pain isn't there, or that what's happening is easy, or effortless. It's just that we can use that pain, that vulnerability, to

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grow. We can use it to connect to other people who may also be suffering or struggling; we can use it to connect to our own hearts, to our dreams and losses; we can use it to see new possibilities, or new alternatives; we can allow it to show us our resilience, or teach us how to generate hope when we thought hope was gone.

All of us experience what the world, and we ourselves might judge as failures, times when things turn out differently than we had hoped or expected. But we have a choice whether or not we label these moments as ‘bad’ and we have a choice about how we approach them. If we can *expect* that the unexpected will occur, if we can imagine that each unplanned step, or each less-than-ideal outcome is just a building block to the next part of the journey, we may have more patience with ourselves and others. We may find that we are more willing to try again, and we may find that the pain of such experiences is significantly lessened, because we choose to see them simply as experiences.

Having an experience that might be called a ‘failure’ has nothing to do with us being ‘failures’ as people. And our choices about how we approach *all* of our experiences matters more than the experiences themselves, in some ways. As Beckett suggests, we can learn to ‘fail better’ and we can copy the big-name failures like Pema Chodron, Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln, and Henry Ford, and so many others, and just assume that there’s something great around the next corner, waiting to be discovered.

I wish for all of us that we can enjoy that journey with more compassion, more patience, and more curiosity.