

EATING GLASS

*THE INNER JOURNEY THROUGH
FAILURE AND RENEWAL*

MARK D. JACOBSEN

“Even as we celebrate what we have achieved, applaud ourselves for daring greatly, and shrug off failure, we are dying inside. Because nobody has really, honestly told us what failure feels like, and the truth is, it is terrifying and it is lonely and it hurts like hell.”

“FAIL FAST, FAIL OFTEN, FAIL FORWARD”... We live in an age that acknowledges the importance of failure and resilience to success. Yet in our rush to bounce back from setbacks, we often miss that the journey through failure and renewal can be a difficult one that plays out over months or years.

In this moving memoir, Air Force officer and entrepreneur Mark D. Jacobsen tells the story of his ambitious moonshot effort to use emerging drone technology to break sieges and deliver humanitarian aid in war-torn Syria. Even as his small volunteer team achieved breakthrough successes, cascading challenges brought down the effort and took Mark past the limits of his strength. In the two years that followed, amidst a grueling PhD program and a difficult faith transition, Mark learned to walk failure's path and find new life on the other side.

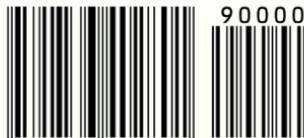
Eating Glass is a compassionate and profound guide that will speak to any dreamer or achiever who is navigating the aftermath of a failure experience. It provides steady assurance that we are never alone in our journeys, and that our seasons of failure are fertile times in which we grow.



MARK D. JACOBSEN is an Air Force officer and professor of strategy and innovation. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Stanford University and has spent his career building and leading teams to tackle wicked problems at the intersection of technology and politics. He also writes fiction and non-fiction about grappling with complex, uncertain futures. He lives in Montgomery, Alabama with his wife and three children.


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EATING GLASS

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*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

MARK D. JACOBSEN



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*For Sam and John,
friends who saw me through*

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Recall the way you are all possibilities
you can see and how you live best
as an appreciator of horizons
whether you reach them or not.

Admit, that once you have got up
from your chair and opened the door,
once you have walked out into the clean air
toward that edge and taken the path up high
beyond the ordinary, you have become

the privileged and the pilgrim,
the one who will tell the story
and the one, coming back

from the mountain
who helped to make it.

David Whyte, "Mameen"

*“Being an entrepreneur is like eating glass
and staring into the abyss of death.”*

Elon Musk

PREFACE

For months, I debated whether to publish this book or bury it forever.

This book is about growing through failure. Specifically, it recounts my own experience of failure while attempting a daring moonshot project and struggling through my PhD. It also explores my inner journey through healing into a richer, wiser, and more centered life.

Publishing a book like this entails several dangers. In our age of personal branding, society expects us to project an image of success. Openly sharing our inner struggles violates a taboo, and a fine line separates authenticity and oversharing. There is also danger in identifying ourselves by our hardest life experiences, even if only for a season.

Time transforms how we understand hardship. In her book *Rise*, Sarah Lewis writes that she deliberately avoids using the word *failure* because “once we begin to transform it, it ceases to be that any longer.” We retroactively describe such an experience as “a learning experience, a trial, a reinvention.”¹

I agree with Lewis. Failure is never the last word, but rather a dynamic process that breaks us open and allows new life to shine forth. However, that retrospective alchemy is precisely why I felt the need to write this book. Failure does not transform overnight; this journey takes time, and honest accounts are rare. All too often

the inner journey is, to borrow a phrase from the poet John Keats, writ in water.

However the world receives it, this book is the most vulnerable, true, and important thing I have ever written. Failure taught me precious lessons about life, and I choose to embrace that story—rather than hide it safely out of view—as I enter a new season of teaching, mentorship, and writing.

I ultimately decided to publish this book in order to help others. We all have experiences that shatter our sense of self and leave us gasping to breathe. The aftermaths of these experiences are rich seasons in which we can experience tremendous personal flourishing, but few of us are prepared for them or have trustworthy guides.

I have done my best to name the thoughts, feelings, and opportunities that accompany the journey through failure, because in naming a thing we gain power over it. What I ultimately hope for are empowered men and women who confidently embrace their stories to live more effectively and wholeheartedly in the world.

I must make two notes up front. First, I am not a mental health professional, and this book is only a tale of my own journey. When mental health struggles become serious, there is no substitute for experienced, professional help.

Second, I am acutely aware of my own privilege and would never dare to compare my experiences to the traumas, injustices, and oppression that so many in our world tragically face.

I will just say this: privilege does not armor us against the experience of personal failure. We are all human, we all struggle, and we all doubt ourselves and our place in this world.

During the years I wrote this book, two of my friends took their own lives. Both were successful, well-educated military officers who inspired and encouraged others. Yet both succumbed to inner battles they fought in secret. That was enough motivation

for me to finish this book and release it into the world.

When I was at my worst, I took comfort in knowing that I was not alone. I treasured the writings of brave souls who told their raw, honest stories. They redeemed their failures by generously sharing their experiences. If this book can help others navigate their own inner journeys, I will be content.

Mark D. Jacobsen
January 13, 2021
Montgomery, AL

INTRODUCTION

We worry about fire every time we fly. Our nonprofit is developing drones for medical deliveries in conflict zones but Stanford's Lake Lagunita is a dry lakebed of crackling yellow grass and tangled, waist-high brush. We fly with a portable fire extinguisher, have discussed fire response procedures, and have rigorous safety processes, but I am always nervous. We have little choice. With the drought, all of northern California looks like this.

Today we are troubleshooting some new gremlin in the autopilot. We can recover by taking manual control, but today something else goes wrong. After a weak takeoff the plane inexplicably rolls to the right. The controls do not respond. Unable to hold altitude, the plane careens toward the ground. We see the impact and then a pillar of flame.

I dial 911 as I run. By the time we reach the crash site, the fire is the size of my house, billowing up in walls of flame when it encounters tangled brush. I run downwind with our portable fire extinguisher, hoping to halt the fire's advance, which is both futile and stupid. I deplete the extinguisher almost immediately, then gag on thick gray smoke and recoil from the searing heat.

We run to the two student dorms lying in the fire's path, yell, and pound on windows. Beyond those dorms are miles and miles of rolling hills, equally dead, equally yellow, equally flammable. If the fire escapes the lakebed, it will devour the open spaces cradling

Silicon Valley.

I have never felt so helpless in my life. All we can do is watch Stanford burn. My heart leaps at the sound of sirens, but it is just a police car. The officer puts his hands on his hips and watches the fire. The flames lap at the perimeter road now. Branches overhanging the lakebed ignite. In minutes, the fire will escape the perimeter.

At last, a fire engine arrives, and then another. Firemen run and lay hoses. I can barely see them through the thick black smoke. I have no idea if they will contain the fire.

After identifying myself to the police, I sit on a log and wait. The firemen battle the blaze for two hours before they finally declare victory. Nobody is hurt. No buildings are destroyed. Three acres burned, but the fire will not devour the homes and open country behind Stanford.

With the immediate crisis over, something new comes: the weary, aching recognition that I have failed yet again.

This time, we will not recover.

It bothers my friends when I use the word *failure*.

You haven't failed, they tell me. You had setbacks. You made an amazing moonshot. So what if you didn't quite make it? You should be proud of what you accomplished. You laid groundwork others can build on.

Those are all true statements.

But I still failed.

For two years, that failure cast a long shadow over my life.

Even after that, the blows kept coming.

Fail fast, fail often, fail forward. That is the mantra in Silicon Valley.

We celebrate failure like Viking raiders toasting comrades fallen in glorious battle. We clank our frothy steins and hail their courage

and honor. We weave epic tales of their battlefield prowess and the journeys of their immortal spirits to Valhalla. We yearn for a death half as good as our fallen heroes.

Any real warrior knows a battlefield death is not glorious. It is stupid mistakes, ill chance, screaming misery, urine and shit, fear and indignity. Dismembered youth strewn along the beach sob for their mothers.

We wrap battlefield death in legend not because it is so glorious, but because it is so terrible. We construct the legends, the myths, and the rituals so we can tame our own terror. Behind each of those gruff, bearded faces, a petrified child peers into the abyss of his own mortality. Will we have the courage to die so well? We clash our mugs, bellow at death, and applaud our own bravery.

Our modern world is not so different. We celebrate failure not because it is glorious, but because it is devastating. The vast majority of startups fail. If you peer behind the slick pitch decks and product prototypes, large numbers of entrepreneurs are tossing and turning in bed, wondering how to pay their employees when the cash runs out next month. They vomit in the toilet before meetings with VCs who might or might not give their dying company another three months of runway. Even as they proclaim world-changing solutions on tech blogs, terror and self-doubt tear their world asunder.

So we beat our chests and make our toasts. To Failure, that slayer of men and women who will rise again in eternity.

I recently listened to a sermon about failure. The pastor was emphatic: “I know you Silicon Valley people celebrate failure, but that’s not what I’m talking about. It’s not failure if you go on later to found a multimillion-dollar company. I’m talking about *failure*.” That drew a hearty laugh, because everyone knew exactly what he meant.

And that's the rub. Our society celebrates failure, so long as it isn't really failure. Thousands of budding entrepreneurs will pay a fortune to hear Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos talk about failure. Our favorite stories are about indefatigable heroes who endured adversity after adversity before succeeding.

But God help you if your adversities seem to add up to nothing but a final, inglorious defeat. The crowds shy away because you are the thing they most fear becoming in their heart of hearts. You shake the foundations of their entire worldview. The story is not supposed to end this way.

If you have grit, you succeed. That is the tale we reassure ourselves with. But when it all comes apart, when it really does fail, when you have endured trial after trial only to end in nervous breakdown or bankruptcy? How could we ever dare greatly, if we live in a universe where such things might happen?

We pull the myth tighter around ourselves like a warm blanket.

And yet we continue to fail. Or to have setbacks, if you prefer. Our companies fold. We go bankrupt. We throw our half-finished novel into a bonfire and watch the pages blacken and curl. Our girlfriend drives away, glaring at us in the rearview mirror, and this time we know she's not coming back. Our career really is over because of a failed deal, bad luck, or that stupid, stupid thing we posted on Twitter. What the hell were we thinking?

Even as we celebrate what we have achieved, applaud ourselves for daring greatly, and shrug off failure, we are dying inside. Because nobody has really, honestly told us what failure *feels* like, and the truth is, it is terrifying and it is lonely and it hurts like hell.

We should start with definitions.

The simplest definition of failure is a lack of success. Our personal struggles often begin that way. Your moonshot misses.

Your startup or small business crashes and burns. Your marriage falls apart. You return from Los Angeles or Nashville empty-handed after failing to make it as an actor or a songwriter.

My own struggle with failure began this way. My bold effort to break sieges in conflict zones and deliver humanitarian aid ultimately failed.

Yet the experience of failure goes so much deeper than a missed success. Failure can also mean a “state of inability to perform a normal function” or “fracturing or giving way under stress.” Failure is a condition in which you pass beyond the limits of your strength into brokenness.

I once took an engineering class that involved stressing materials to failure. We placed solid metal rods in powerful machines that twisted, compressed, and pulled until thundering *cracks* made us jump behind our safety glasses. An entire discipline of failure theory studies “the conditions under which solid materials fail under the action of external loads.”

Now we’re talking.

When you struggle with failure, specific events in your life, job, or relationships usually serve as proximate causes. They stretch and torque and compress you as a human being. All of us learn to tolerate setbacks, challenges, and even failures. But there comes a point when the external stresses overwhelm our capacities. Our souls fracture.

This experience of personal failure appears to be endemic. References to therapists, yogis, and Buddhist mentors pepper interviews with startup founders and corporate executives. Conferences devoted to celebrating failure charge a fortune and quickly sell out. Entrepreneurs share their stories of failure and crisis on anonymous websites. Dr. Michael Freeman found that 49% of entrepreneurs have one or more mental health conditions,

with 30% reporting depression.² Studies have also found a striking mental health crisis in graduate education, with 30-40% of PhD candidates reporting moderate to severe anxiety or depression.³ Teen suicides plague Palo Alto, the heart of Silicon Valley.⁴ These communities include some of the most successful people in the world, and they are barely holding it together.

Yet for all this apparent need, most high achievers still battle their demons in private. References are veiled and clipped. Many high achievers refuse to show any hint of trouble at all.

Stanford students use the metaphor of a duck; they appear to bob placidly along the smooth surface, but underneath they are paddling furiously to survive. In high-success cultures we learn to show no weakness. We become phenomenal actors.

When I initiate conversations about failure with others, their defenses typically come down just enough that I glimpse a secret battle they have never dared to reveal. Then the shields go back up and I'm left wondering if I imagined the whole thing.

Maybe I'm wrong,

Maybe everyone else is fine.

Maybe it's just me.

But I don't think it's just me. It's not just you.

We all have seasons when failure destroys our sense of self and rips our world asunder. We carry our pain like Frodo trudging toward Mordor with his shoulders sagging beneath the insufferable weight of the ring. No one else can carry that burden. No one else can understand. In many cases, no one else can even know.

Too many of us suffer in silence. Our world is finally beginning to have open conversations about failure. Unfortunately, many of these conversations breeze past the pain; we jump right to learning, iterating, and failing our way to success. Missing is an honest exploration of what failure is like *while you are going through it*.

INTRODUCTION

When we fail, we cannot jump immediately to redemption. Failure is a process. Healing takes time, but so does failing. Failure can last months, as relationships unravel, the market changes, cash burns away, setbacks accumulate, or the lawyers hammer out the divorce agreement.

We will get to healing, growth, and new life. We will reflect on how failure forges our souls. We will remind ourselves that any successful human being—whether she is an entrepreneur, president, Olympic athlete, novelist, or devoted mother—will leave a trail of setbacks and failures along the way. We will come to recognize that failure tempers us like steel.

But that is not where we must start.

Right now we are riding out a storm. Waves of seawater crash over the deck, the masts splinter, the sails rip. We careen through the dark and the rain, clutching whatever line or plank we can find, and take our bearings with each white flash of lightning. We cannot even begin to think about swimming ashore. That comes later. For now, we have to survive. And when the waves subside and the roiling black clouds recede on the horizon, it takes time to find our way back to civilization. We cannot rush that process, because that is where the most growth occurs, in all its terrible beauty.

That is what is what many conversations about failure miss. That is what I'm writing about.

PART ONE

MY JOURNEY



WAR ROOMS

Across the street from St. James Park in London, a nondescript staircase descends beneath the streets of Westminster. A passerby might mistake it for a Tube station, were it not for the sign overhead. Its modest appearance belies its significance to the history of Great Britain, and indeed the world.

Descend those stairs and you travel back in time. Crinkled maps of Europe plaster the pale walls, while sheaves of yellowed papers and brightly colored rotary phones cover the tables. The rooms appear exactly as they did when British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill used them to lead the war effort against Nazi Germany.

The War Rooms are a hallowed place. When I visited after graduating from the U.S. Air Force Academy, I passed through each room in reverent silence. I could only imagine what Winston Churchill felt during those long years, carrying the weight of western civilization on his shoulders.

In one of the final rooms, just before returning to a world of busy Londoners and dazzling sunlight, a visitor to the War Rooms comes across this quote:

I felt as if... all my life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.

Emotion overcame me. I was young, fresh out of the Academy,

my life before me a blank canvas. Questions of passion, meaning, and destiny haunted me. As a devout Christian, I believed God had a great purpose in store for me. I dreamed of changing the world but did not know where to begin.

Churchill's words offered hope that someday, maybe decades from now, all the disparate parts of my life might come together. Perhaps someday I too could look back on my life and reverently whisper, "it all prepared me for *this*."

Perhaps I too would have a finest hour.

INSPIRATION

My dream was born in Istanbul.

It was an appropriate place because the city bridges worlds. East and West, Christianity and Islam, ancient and modern, meet in its streets. Civilizations layer the city. Peeling Islamic calligraphy in the Hagia Sophia mosque exposes Byzantine Christian paintings, and the crumbling city walls record history like epic tree rings. Istanbul, like the rest of Turkey, teeters between two visions of political order. Europe and a rich Islamic past both beckon.

The past and future seem equally alive in Istanbul. The weight of history surrounds you, but the city is a place of boundless possibility.

It is a city in which to reflect, sense one's place in the story of human civilization, and imagine entirely new futures.

On March 10, 2014 I was in Istanbul researching the Syrian civil war when the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) released a staggering photograph.⁵ A haggard crowd of thousands vanishes into the glare of white light, surrounded on either side by crumbling buildings, buckled concrete, and exposed rebar. It looks like Stalingrad.

The place is Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp in the suburbs of Damascus, and one of the first cities in Syria to experience the Assad regime's "surrender or starve" tactics. These

Syrians wait in line for a rare food delivery after three months of siege.

Their faces show a mix of despair and iron resolution. Some crane their necks to see above the crowd, wondering if their turn will ever come. A man in a black jacket stares at the ground, shoulders slumped, perhaps too ashamed to look up. Farther back, a slouching man stares into the camera, one hand upturned, lips parted as if he wishes to say something. He might be making a silent plea to the photographer, or an accusation.

The photo went viral. It appeared on the cover of an Amnesty International report about sieges in Syria. Activists displayed it in Times Square in New York.

Skeptics claimed the photo was a forgery. It was not. The world simply could not believe that such atrocities still occurred in the 21st century.

The Syrian civil war began with a peaceful uprising that the world has largely forgotten. Inspired by protests in other Arab countries, Syrians took to the streets to demand dignity, a better life, and freedom from corrupt authoritarian rule. The regime met these protestors with bullets, paramilitary brutality, torture, and permanent “disappearances.”

After months of state violence, defectors from the Syrian army took up arms against their murderous government. The insurgency exploded in February 2012 when the regime began a month-long artillery bombardment of Homs. Every town and village seemed to stand up its own rebel group in the ensuing months. Islamists poured in from abroad.

By the time I visited Turkey a year later, civil war had engulfed Syria. We met with opposition leaders, journalists, rebel commanders, and activists. They were desperate, confused, and badly fragmented. They knew they were losing. Their political

leaders had failed them. Jihadists were outmaneuvering more moderate factions. The West declined to get involved. Every meeting had an air of desperation.

The opposition needed a miracle. Some hoped for a full-scale American intervention. Others called for an ill-defined program of American support for what remained of the Free Syrian Army. Syrians wanted the West to know that they weren't terrorists. They only wanted freedom and dignity, but now warred against a monstrous regime that tortured and raped and starved its people.

The brutality of the Syrian civil war was staggering.

We met a woman who had survived both a chemical attack and a siege. The siege was worse, she said. Watching your children starve, knowing you can do nothing.

One evening we dined with a U.S. diplomat who talked at length about the siege of Yarmouk. His team had explored every option to deliver aid, he said. Ground convoys, airdrops, even catapults. No aid could get in.

After dinner I overheard a Syrian activist named Hind venting to her friends. "The U.S. Air Force can do whatever it wants," she seethed. "America doesn't *want* to help."

I felt compelled to speak up because I happened to be a U.S. Air Force C-17 cargo pilot. I told Hind that even the U.S. Air Force wasn't invincible. Flying cargo aircraft into the middle of heavily defended airspace against the host government's will was impossible. The Syrian regime would shoot down planes unless the U.S. destroyed the entire air defense system first. That would not happen, because the U.S. feared entanglement in the Syrian war.

Hind appreciated my perspective. She could not argue with an Air Force pilot.

We continued on to our hotel, feeling frustrated and helpless.

That night I couldn't sleep.

I felt a deep personal connection to the Middle East. In addition to serving as a cargo pilot, I had spent a year learning Arabic at the Defense Language Institute and two years earning a master's degree in Jordan. My wife Wendy and I were living in Amman when the Arab Spring began, and we felt the pain of our Arab friends when the Syrian crisis escalated into civil war. I now studied at the Air Force's prestigious School of Advanced Air & Space Studies (SAASS), researching complex, multi-sided civil wars. SAASS had generously supported and funded my research trip.

I lay awake contemplating the sieges. I felt the weight of responsibility. As a Major, I had little authority. Nonetheless, finding a way to deliver badly needed cargo in a war zone was part of my job—especially as a cargo pilot and Middle East specialist. Telling Hind “no” seemed inadequate. In the 21st century, feeding a besieged city had to be possible.

I tossed and turned. My mind raced. I tried out alternatives, discarding them as fast as they emerged.

Then lightning struck.

If we couldn't fly one big airplane through Syria's air defenses, maybe we could fly a lot of little planes. I imagined an army of ants stealing a picnic lunch.

The requisite technologies were advancing rapidly. The same technology used in cell phones had ignited a revolution in small drones. Batteries stored more power and lasted longer. Computer chips, GPS receivers, and inertial sensors were smaller and lighter. Powerful, inexpensive drone autopilots had hit the market.

I envisioned several possible ways to build an air bridge into Yarmouk. Quadcopters. Fixed-wing drones. Balloons. Airships. Cheap gliders launched from cargo planes over Jordan or Turkey.

An effort like this would need a team, but I was plugged into all

the right networks: air mobility pilots, logisticians, Middle East specialists, U.S. embassies in the region, the Air Force's professional strategist community, the defense innovation sector, Syrian activists, humanitarian organizations.

We would need to do a ton of research. Flight ranges of drones. Energy density of batteries. Distances to besieged areas from neighboring countries. Besieged population sizes, required calorie counts, and the mass of daily food required. Balloon diameters for various payload sizes, using either helium or hydrogen.

My mind whirled in overdrive.

This would be unbelievably hard but it was *possible*.

Sometime after midnight, I got out a flashlight and a notebook and started working.

I didn't stop for a year and a half.

That morning we flew to Gaziantep, a city in eastern Turkey that served as a hub for aid going into Syria. Later the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) infiltrated the city, making it too dangerous for most Westerners. After two days in Gaziantep we traveled to Reyhanli, a stone's throw from the Syrian border, where I looked out my hotel window at idling lorries waiting to cross through congested checkpoints. Mortar fire periodically rumbled over the hills. Turkish intelligence stopped our bus, suspicious of our identities and intentions.

Our meetings with Syrians became more intense. We met a Syrian doctor named Waliid who had lost most of his family to airstrikes and President Assad's prisons; he still rushed to the sound of explosions to aid the wounded. His story left most of us in tears. We met a young married couple, Sunni and Alawite, who risked their lives to smuggle medical supplies through regime checkpoints. We visited fly-by-night aid organizations where

workers raged at the biggest aid organizations—like the UN and Red Cross—for primarily serving regime-held areas in Syria.

We confronted the war's moral complexity. We visited a hospital where wounded Syrian fighters tried to impress us with cell phone images of heads they had severed. We inadvertently found ourselves in an administrator's office with two low-ranking members of Jebhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qa'eda. A girl told us of watching her best friend paraded naked through her village and raped against a tank. We visited an orphanage filled with glass-eyed children who did not laugh, smile, or play. Later, we learned that regime soldiers had systematically executed the adult men in their village in front of them. We met a revolutionary who used his college tuition money to found a rebel battalion. ISIS annihilated his men and he escaped to Turkey.

We processed our emotions in different ways. Many needed to talk. We met late each night to debrief the day's events. Students shed tears and asked hard questions.

I coped by working.

Between meetings I sketched ideas and researched technical details. I filled my notebook with basic calculations, lists of potential stakeholders, and details of promising companies. I built maps in Google Earth, measured distances, and calculated glide ratios.

I talked late into each night with a colleague who ran an aid organization active in Syria. He and other Syrians I met loved the idea, which seemed to validate my hypothesis that an air bridge would add value. If we could just build the planes, he would coordinate the first airdrops inside Syria.

That was our moonshot: one package onto the roof of a Syrian hospital. That historic milestone would prove an entirely new paradigm for dealing with wartime sieges.

We called our effort the Syria Airlift Project.

My brief exposure to the Syrian war changed me.

On the long flight home to Alabama, I re-watched *Lincoln*. In the final scene, Lincoln delivers his second inaugural address:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

I buried my face in my jacket, pretended to sleep, and silently cried out the emotions of the past eight days.

After my return, I struggled to communicate what I had experienced. During a presentation to my military colleagues at SAASS, I broke down in tears. My peers stared with awe and incomprehension.

My quiet suburban life felt vacuous compared to the life-or-death drama unfolding in Syria.

I have since met many people who brushed with Syria.

It changed all of us.

Unlike most people who watch such horrors from afar, I was in a position to do something that might save lives.

I thought of Churchill's War Rooms.

Every thread of my life seemed to converge in this project. I flew cargo planes in the U.S. Air Force. I spoke fluent Syrian Arabic and held a degree from the University of Jordan. I had helped found an organization called the Defense Entrepreneur's Forum, which promoted disruptive innovation inside the Department of Defense. I had degrees in Astronautical Engineering, International Relations, Conflict Resolution, and Strategy. I had grown up

building robots with my dad and worked throughout high school at his hobby store. I had even learned some Turkish, thinking it might be useful in my Syria research. I was about to begin a PhD at Stanford, where I would have access to some of the best talent in the world. I had dreamed of becoming an entrepreneur, but never knew how, especially while I was still in the military.

My eclectic skill set had never gone anywhere. Demand for Arabic-speaking cargo pilots with astronautical engineering degrees was low.

Suddenly, all that mattered immensely.

PART TWO

FAILING



THE FIRST STEP

And now we return to the beginning.

The wheels are coming off. The critics hate the thing you have poured your heart and soul into for the past two years. You are in a death spiral of complexity. You are hemorrhaging cash and bankruptcy looks imminent. The board has lost confidence in you. Your screenplay is a disaster. It looks like your injury will never fully heal. Awareness dawns that your relationship might really be over.

For me, it was looking out over the blackened ruin of Lake Lagunita, knowing in my gut that we were finished—but also knowing that I was still at the helm, psychologically shattered, with months of excruciating leadership challenges ahead.

Together we stand at the brink, looking out over this vista of failure. It stretches farther than we can see.

The only way across is straight through.

They say the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

So let's close our eyes.

Take a breath.

We will make it through. I promise.

Let's step.

VERTIGO

Failure throws your well-ordered universe into turmoil.

Everything you thought you knew is suddenly proved wrong. You have read all the motivational books, watched all the TED talks, and studied the biographies of renegade entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. You know all about daring greatly, being a disruptive innovator, making moonshots, and possessing grit. Friends come to you for advice. You could make a fortune as a life coach, if you wished. Maybe you already are.

Suddenly none of it works.

Every pilot has experienced a phenomenon called spatial disorientation. You are cruising straight and level through the clouds, unable to see the ground, when all of a sudden, your body is absolutely convinced that you are in a steep turn. Pilots have corkscrewed themselves right into the ground, trying to level out of turns that never existed.

Spatial disorientation terrifies you because your most basic physical instincts betray you. Your universe bends sideways and spins. All you can do is hang on, sweating, clinging to the few reliable indicators on your instrument panel, until your scrambled sensory system reboots and the universe rights itself.

Failure hits the same way. It's pure vertigo. And there are no instruments.

Sustained failure is so disorienting because the mythology of entrepreneurship has no place for it.

We need the mythology because, as we discussed in the Introduction, entrepreneurship is so miserably hard. Nobody would do it otherwise.

Elon Musk famously said, “Being an entrepreneur is like eating glass and staring into the abyss of death.” We chuckle at that. We slap it on motivational posters.

I don’t think Elon was being amusing. I suspect he spoke those words with the thousand-yard stare of a war veteran. This is a man who nearly presided over the bankruptcy of two world-changing companies while undergoing a painful divorce and parenting two children.

Elon said that a failed venture activates the same portions of the brain as physical death. I do not think he researched the neuroscience of failure out of mere curiosity. He sought to understand a personal, intimate, and visceral experience. Such suffering is the price of admission for trying great things.

By one estimate, 75% of venture-backed startups fail to return their investors’ capital. I suspect the success rates of diets, first novels, and marathon training programs is not significantly higher. With these odds, it takes a special kind of insanity to pursue an ambitious dream.

And yet for human progress to occur, we have to try. We need that messy churn of entrepreneurial activity for the winning ideas to emerge. That means we need entrepreneurs, and we must equip them for battles that will test them to the core.

So we create myths. We infuse this perilous journey with glory and hope. The purveyors of our modern myths are not so different from medieval popes calling Europe’s young men to glory and eternal salvation on crusade.

Today our myths take new forms: the self-help and business shelves at Barnes and Noble, TED talks, the Ponzi scheme of entrepreneurial life coaches teaching you how to earn passive income from blogs about entrepreneurial life coaching.

In good American fashion, we have invented and commercialized an entire industry around the mythology that enables and sustains brave new ventures.

It sells. Demand is endless.

When you are making forward progress, entrepreneurial mythology seems to provide sure guidance. You apply lean startup principles and build minimum viable products. You ideate and iterate. You hire slowly and fire quickly. You take audacious risks. You are exhausted and stressed and face continuous setbacks, but you know to expect this. You have *grit*. You won't give up because you are a *badass*.

Then failure pushes you over the edge.

You are in darkness unlike anything you have encountered in podcasts or websites. The blows come faster than you ever imagined possible. You know you should pick yourself up off the mat, raise your gloves, and fight another round, but at some point, you *can't*.

Nothing has prepared you for this. You now face decisions that violate all that sunny wisdom. Instead of being *bold*, you scale back. Instead of being *resilient*, you drink. You cannot *iterate* because you cannot burn scarce cash on another failed prototype. You cannot *fail fast, fail often, and fail forward* because it will take months to clean up the fallout from your latest disaster. You need to explain to your Kickstarter funders why you won't deliver their products, tell your VCs they've lost their money, or tell your partner that you've been fired. The criminal investigation into your company's misconduct will take years, and the press is camped on your lawn. That, and

you are so fucked up that you can barely get out of bed.

When I reached this point, all those bestsellers made me want to vomit. I felt anger towards those authors, podcasters, and mentors who led me to this place. My eyes scanned my bookshelf in despair. *This* was the real deal; *this* was the crucible of leadership. Nothing in my education or experience had prepared me for it.

I felt like Jesus, alone, sweating blood in the garden.

PART FOUR

HEALING



HILL CLIMB

A few weeks after the fire, I hit rock bottom. I couldn't work. Uplift was dead in the water. I agreed to keep the organization alive, abruptly changed my mind, sent the order to dissolve, and then reversed myself again when my teammates protested. I had ceased leading effectively. My self-confidence was shattered.

One Sunday evening, we scheduled a board meeting to sort everything out. Before the meeting, to work off my debilitating stress, I went for a bike ride. I had never been the strongest or fastest cyclist, and a grueling ten-mile-long hill climb near my house had kicked my ass for the past year. I tried repeatedly but never made it all the way to the top.

This time, I decided I was tired of failure.

I would climb that goddamn hill if it killed me.

It took a long time, and I had to stop four times, but I did it. Two days later, I went back and did the entire thing without stopping. That hill never bothered me again.

I still had a long journey through failure ahead, but I'd like to think that was the day I started to get better.

BEGINNING

If recovery cannot be rushed, how do you begin?

That question became increasingly salient after my IT band injury. I could walk for miles but felt debilitating pain the moment I began to run.

My first thought, which seemed sensible, was to give the injury *time*. I stopped exercising for two weeks, then went for a short run. The pain returned immediately. I took a month off, then tried again. Same result.

If a month of rest could not heal me, I had no idea what to do. I feared I would never run again.

I finally visited my physical therapist, who told me I was doing it all wrong. A mile is too far, she said. Run for one minute, then walk and stretch for four minutes. Then do it again. And again. And again.

I obeyed but I felt ridiculous. My shortest “runs” took me over an hour and covered little more than a mile. My heart rate barely elevated. I must have provided great entertainment for the neighbors, running for such brief intervals and then stretching like I had just finished the Boston marathon.

This routine was boring and a little humiliating, but if this would get me better, so be it.

Before long I upped the running intervals to a minute and a half, then two minutes. I gradually shortened the recovery periods.

At one point I ramped up too quickly, felt pain again, and backed off a little. I kept at it.

A month after I first visited my PT, I ran a hard 1.5 miles for my Air Force fitness test with no pain. Then I started piling on the distance: four miles, six miles, eight.

I had never been so happy to run in my life.

This physical recovery process gave me much to think about.

Physicians used to prescribe RICE for injured athletes: rest, ice, compression, and elevation. In recent years professional opinion has turned sharply against passive recovery. Physicians today prescribe *active recovery*.

Gentle movement of injuries promotes blood flow, facilitates the working of the lymphatic system, and helps ligaments and tendons heal. Exercise strengthens muscle tissue. Stretching extends range of motion and prevents further injury. Most sports medicine professionals today encourage athletes to remain as active as possible without aggravating an injury.

I suspect this holds a life lesson.

You have walked through failure. You have spent weeks or months in its gray drizzling aftermath, waiting for the sun to break through. You test yourself, try to run again, and realize you are still injured. It feels like you will never heal.

How do you begin to recover from that kind of weakness?

You cultivate strength over time.

As we have seen, failure can be a lengthy process, and your first responsibility is to walk that path with as much grace, dignity, wisdom, and shrewdness as you can. You can still reach better or worse outcomes. You must continue to fight for every last inch of success, or at least to stave off the very worst consequences of defeat. You will be weak during this season. You may be broken

and bleeding, leaning on friends and family to carry you, barely able to sleep or get out of bed. But you do what you can.

And then, in quiet moments when you can begin to contemplate the future, you make yourself a promise: *no matter how long it takes, I will get strong again.*

As the worst fallout subsides, and you shed responsibilities, spaces open up in which you can begin to heal.

One way to start is by identifying your own equivalents of one-minute runs. You find micro-accomplishments that gently exercise the sore places, promote circulation, and build strength.

One-minute runs can be maddening. Because they are so small, they do not feel like victories. They may have nothing to do with the domains of life causing you pain, and yet they exercise the physical, mental, and emotional muscles necessary for healing.

For some people, that first one-minute run might simply be getting out of bed. Yes, there are days when the best thing you can do for yourself is sleep until afternoon. But unless you have a major illness, you are unlikely to heal by spending two weeks in bed. You must summon the strength to rise and face the day.

For other people, one-minute runs might entail carrying on with simple daily routines. At the end of brutal anxiety-inducing days, I often found solace in simple household chores. I felt satisfaction taking out the garbage, vacuuming the house, or making my bed. These are discrete tasks with beginnings and ends. They defy entropy and bring order to a disordered world. You can check them off a list. When you finish, you know you have accomplished something. Maybe the only thing you have accomplished all day.

“If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed,” says Admiral William McRaven, a decorated SEAL and former commander of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

“If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another.”³⁰

Maybe you failed at writing or academics; the blank page leads you to dark places where demons lurk. Your one-minute run might be writing a paragraph or even a sentence.

Maybe your relationships are in disarray. You are wounded and hiding. When all your doubts and fears steer you towards isolation, your one-minute run might be picking up the phone to call a friend.

It might be accepting an invitation. Praying a few words. Stepping outside into the sunlight. Sending a query letter. Submitting an application.

Whatever it is, your one-minute run advances you a tentative step into an unknown future. You do this one thing and then you stop, rest, stretch, and assess yourself. Then you do it again and again. You learn to be okay with these small steps, and you know when to take your rests.

Before long, you can look back and see the miles accumulating behind you.

Then the realization dawns: you are moving again.

HEALTH

Failure invites us to renewed health.

Many of us view health as the absence of disease or injury, but this is only the beginning. Health entails physical, mental, and social well-being.³¹ Healthy individuals are able to satisfy their needs, identify and realize their aspirations, and cope with change.³² Health entails a dynamic sense of well-being that allows each of us to live at peace with our environment, the people around us, and even ourselves.

Health is, in many ways, the inverse of stress. We experience stress when our lives strain against the world instead of flowing with it. Stress occurs when we overexert our bodies, a marriage demeans our sense of personhood and autonomy, a job sucks away our soul, or our income fails to support our basic needs.

Health entails bringing the flow of our lives and our world into alignment. Sometimes this requires reordering our world, perhaps by seeking a new job or leaving an unhealthy relationship. But health often requires reordering ourselves. Health is partly something found within us, dependent both on how we treat ourselves and how we choose to receive what the world brings.

There is a balance here.

We should never resign ourselves to intolerable conditions. We must not shame the struggling, the depressed, or the broken by blaming them for their struggles or telling them to buck up.

Whenever we can, we should work for justice, fairness, and improvements in external conditions—both for ourselves and others.

At the same time, we cannot always change the world. Victor Frankl, despairing in a Nazi concentration camp, lacked the power to liberate himself. However, he knew he controlled his own attitude towards the events befalling him. That became the basis of his book *Man's Search for Meaning* and all his subsequent work.

Health entails confronting our anxieties, meeting our fears, and learning to hold our situation in our bodies without tension or sickness.

Health is not exclusively a matter of the body, but it must always include the body. Our bodies yearn to move, exert, and run. Healthy physicality energizes our souls and minds. Physical activity is how we move within the world, discover its treasures, and receive its gifts.

The aftermath of failure provides an opportunity to prioritize our health. We likely have unfilled time in our calendars. We are no longer too busy to exercise or too overwhelmed to step outside. We know that we have to treat our bodies with the respect they deserve if we are ever to get better.

Physical endeavors can also be a training ground for other aspects of our lives. My determination to climb Page Mill Road looks trivial in retrospect (any serious Palo Alto cyclist climbs it regularly) but remains a milestone in my life. It gave me a sense of accomplishment at a time I sorely needed it. That achievement also gave me a glimpse of how physical activity could help restore me to health and fortify other parts of my life.

For years my wife had urged me to try a triathlon. I had always pushed back. I didn't have time to train. I was a terrible swimmer.

Racing intimidated me. I was barreling towards a dissertation deadline and felt that every hour of my day needed to contribute to my academic success. After my failure, however, as I roamed Stanford's campus in a kind of daze, searching for ways to renew myself, I took a leap of faith.

I signed up for a swimming class. Three times each week, I stepped away from the hellish grind of academic uncertainty into bright sunlight and cold water. I worked muscles that had been dormant for years. My technique slowly improved. After each swim I felt the afterglow of endorphins and the pleasant ache of revitalized muscles.

I read articles on running faster, used a metronome to improve my cadence, and for the first time in my adult life made a deliberate effort to speed up my usual plodding pace. This was an exercise in taming fear, pushing my boundaries, and embracing pain in the name of self-improvement.

In late April I raced my first triathlon. The night before, as I arranged my gear, I felt like I was preparing for my execution. In the morning I kissed Wendy goodbye and rode the bus to the course start in grave silence. When the whistle blew, and I plunged into the cold lake, I realized almost immediately that two months of pool swimming had not prepared me for open water. I took off too fast. Someone kicked me in the face. Soon I was hyperventilating, unable to get enough breath. My freestyle devolved into a frantic dog paddle. Somehow I survived. The race was a blur after that: wind and sun on the bike, a hard run around the lake, a brief glimpse of Wendy and her triathlete friends cheering me on. I crossed the finish line, and a woman draped a finisher's medal around my neck.

My performance was nothing to write home about, but I had never felt so strong.

My friend John took up walking after Stanford suspended him for the second time due to incomplete work. He walked every day. He walked for miles. He walked in sun and he walked in rain. Each week, the pounds fell away. A kind of serenity dusted his life like snow.

For my friend Sam, it was hiking. Sam is one of the most brilliant people I know. He was so brilliant that he found his brief forays into college intolerable and never graduated, which made it difficult to launch a traditional career. With each passing year his hope of finding professional success grew fainter. He found his meaning and happiness in his lovely wife and beautiful son, along with his many creative talents, but eventually the bill came due; for years he has wrestled with the humbling challenge of providing for his family.

Sam set off into the hills. He had responsibilities, a family, and a time-intensive job. Scheduling every hike was a challenge and a sacrifice. But morning after morning he hit the trails, stretching himself to tackle ever-more difficult peaks in the Cascades. Strength and confidence flowed through him. We hiked together last summer, and I found myself struggling to keep up with his blistering pace through the shattered granite. He carries that strength into every other part of his life.

The power of physicality hit home for me during the Coronavirus lockdown. The strain overwhelmed our national psyche. We collectively realized that this would not end anytime soon. The economy faltered. People ran out of money and businesses closed. The fear and uncertainty were palpable, but throughout each day I saw dozens of people emerging into the sunlight, like survivors of a nuclear apocalypse crawling out of their underground bunkers.

I built a rock climbing wall in my driveway. Down the street, an older neighbor practiced martial arts in his front lawn. Other

neighbors took up Tai Chi and yoga. Even in the midst of this global failure, we reached for health like a million green shoots growing towards sunlight.

Health is always a journey. It is never a destination.

We set noble intentions. Sometimes we fulfill them with discipline and determination. Other times we do not. Our health gets away from us, and we kick ourselves for our inconsistency.

Part of health is learning to be gracious with ourselves. The minute negativity intrudes, we are veering away from health. We are at war with ourselves again.

Life happens. That is part of the challenge.

After my first triathlon I had such wonderful intentions. I did a second, longer triathlon in the fall. I joined the Stanford triathlon team. I got stronger and faster than I ever had in my life. Then my dissertation fell apart, my world unraveled, and I stopped attending practices. I injured both my shoulders due to my lousy swimming form and will probably never swim any meaningful distance again.

John hit new challenges and stopped walking as much, at least for a time.

Sam faced new life pressures. The frequency of his hikes fell off, although he has been making a renewed effort lately, as much as his busy life allows.

They are doing their best. We all are.

We ride a cresting wave of personal growth, discover new kinds of success, and gather renewed strength. And then we zoom downward again with the waves breaking over us. It doesn't always feel like progress, but with each repetition, our internal resources grow stronger.

I tried to prioritize my health when I led Rogue Squadron. My team was strong and motivated, and we repeatedly hit home runs.

However, the stress was extraordinary, and I continually operated at my limits. My experience with Uplift had taught me to be careful and set strong boundaries. I paced myself for the long game. I vowed to never again burn out like I had before.

Even so.

One December afternoon, I felt ill and off-balance at work. When the symptoms abruptly worsened, I asked my friend Ryan to drive me to the Emergency Room. The next twenty minutes were a terrible blur. I lay curled up in the passenger seat of his Mustang, groaning against the worsening pain in my chest, while he muttered “Come on, come on!” and wove through traffic.

Preliminary tests at the ER suggested a pulmonary embolism. The doctors and nurses treated me with reverent concern. There was roughly a fifty-fifty chance that the blood clot would dislodge itself and I would die. I lay motionless in a hospital bed. I wrote a goodbye note to my family. I dearly hoped they would arrive before I died. When they did, I embraced them.

The final test came back: it was not an embolism.

To this day, we have no idea what happened that evening, but I still get sharp pains in that particular place in my chest whenever I am stressed. It feels like a piece of shrapnel, a ticking time bomb. I fear that if my stress ever crosses a certain threshold, I will set it off. I listen to my body whenever that pain flares up.

This abrupt threat to my health came as a shock, but I had been through failure and recovery before. I was getting the hang of this. I knew to take exquisite care of my body, no matter what.

The next week, I started training for my first marathon.

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