

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.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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CONTINUAL ASCENT

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