

COURAGE

Failure has a curious side effect.

Even though it devastates your self-confidence in the short term, it imprints much deeper confidence in the long term.

Before, failure was something abstract and terrible. It circled ominously in the sky above you, felt but not seen. You tossed and turned at night, terrified of all the ways it might strike.

And then your worst fears were realized. Failure sank its talons in you. Its putrid smell filled your nostrils. Flesh tore, bones broke, your spirit groaned. And then the evil thing passed, one final shadow blotting out the sun before it vanished towards the horizon, leaving you alone in the harsh desert light.

Failure did its worst, and you are still here.

Uncertainty is the heart of fear. We live in terror of what we do not know or understand. When we survive failure's attack, we gain knowledge. We emerge wiser, shrewder, battle-hardened.

No two episodes of failure will ever be quite the same, but at least we know the shape of the thing, the feel of the attack, and each intimate stage of its assault. If we handled it this time, we can handle it next time.

Failure gives us courage.

We are no longer afraid of failure.

At least, not like before.

Leading Rogue Squadron was the most stressful job I have ever had. I never knew when or where failure might strike. I felt like those doomed space marines in *Aliens*, creeping through corridors and sweeping their rifle-mounted flashlights over wet, glistening things in the dark. They hear scuttling in the vents, glimpse faint shapes through the steam, see horrific traces that their adversary has been there ahead of them. An ambush could lie around any corner.

New threats assaulted Rogue Squadron every day. Entrenched incumbents shut us out of meetings and outmaneuvered us in conference rooms across Washington D.C. Rival organizations stole code. Millions of dollars of expected funding disappeared without a trace in the swamp of Congressional gridlock, continuing resolutions, and broken government processes. IT constantly tried to shut down needed software development tools. Government abused our people—tampering with salaries, imposing undue restrictions, failing to follow through on promises, dragging its feet on contract negotiations to keep my team employed. We always risked losing our best talent.

I agonized over all the ways failure could strike. A security breach. A disgruntled employee sabotaging our network. A spiral of technical debt that ground our software development cadence to a halt. DoD passing some new regulation that instantly made our software off-limits to troops. My journals are a shrine to my anxiety and paranoia. But as the old saying goes, it isn't paranoia if they really are out to get you.

Facing constant threats, amidst so much uncertainty, is a ruthless mind game. Unfortunately, this is a common state of affairs for anybody who dares to lead people, build something, commit to a relationship, have children, or drive social change. The

practical challenges you will face are nothing compared to the challenge of managing your own mental health.

Ben Horowitz, author and cofounder of the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, writes:

By far the most difficult skill for me to learn as CEO was the ability to manage my own psychology. Organizational design, process design, metrics, hiring and firing were all relatively straightforward skills to master compared to keeping my mind in check. Over the years, I've spoken to hundreds of CEOs all with the same experience. Nonetheless, very few people talk about it and I have never read anything on the topic. It's like the fight club of management: The first rule of the CEO psychological meltdown is don't talk about the psychological meltdown.⁴⁸

It takes courage to show up every day, knowing this is what you will face.

You will have good days when the team is on fire, the product delivering, the customers delighted. Many evenings you will sit hand-in-hand with your spouse, glowing with affection, overwhelmed with gratitude. On hot summer days you will feel transcendent joy as you watch your children leap through the sprinkler.

However, you will also feel the existential dread of knowing that this moment cannot last. You will sense some faceless threat lurking on the horizon, ready to swoop in and ruin everything. Even when all seems well, you will find it hard to trust goodness.

So you must manage yourself.

There is only one way to learn how to survive in the arena: fight in the arena.

You can read books and listen to podcasts. You can speak with

hardened warriors who went before you. You can walk the battlefield some quiet evening, familiarize yourself with the terrain, and imagine what this place will look like when transformed by daylight and crowds roaring for blood. But in the end, nothing can fully prepare you to watch that iron gate rising, to see the bright sunlight spilling into your pen, to know that nothing now separates you from an enemy whose sole thought is eviscerating you.

Modern military forces understand this. We have a principle: *train like you fight*. Fighter pilots in Vietnam had much longer life expectancies if they survived their first five combat missions; that trial by fire gave them the experience, steeled nerves, and quiet confidence to prevail in combat. That led the Air Force to develop realistic, scenario-based training.

As an Air Force pilot, I experienced this principle firsthand. Every graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy remembers the silent terror of riding the blue bus towards the first moments of basic training. I felt echoes of that experience years later, when a similar bus swept me off to a three-day confinement in a simulated Prisoner of War camp. There I spent a long night crammed in a pitch-black cell the size of a closet. In the morning, a menacing guard interrogated me in a dingy room lit by a single bulb. On another occasion, guards slapped and punched a female colleague in front of me while they demanded I give up information.

The Air Force does everything in its power to let Airmen experience the sights, sounds, and emotions of standing in the arena. It wants them to taste fear, push through, and realize that their inner strength can take them far beyond what they once thought possible. If an Air Force pilot is shot down and captured today, she will feel tremendous fear, but she will also feel recognition.

A Spartan King once said, “Man differs little from man by nature, but he is best who trains in the hardest school.”⁴⁹

Failure is the hardest school of all.
It is no simulation.

Hitting the limits of your personal strength—and coming out the other side—replaces your dread of the unknown with tangible experience. Failure is no longer an ethereal demon prowling your imagination; it is a being you have wrestled with. You know the texture of its leathery skin and the sharpness of its claws.

That familiarity becomes the basis of courage.

You launch your next startup knowing what it will feel like to someday close the doors. You commit to a new relationship despite knowing the pain of a broken heart. You begin your next book knowing it may only ever reach a few dozen readers.

The world has hurt you once.

You survived.

What more can they do?

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

MARK D. JACOBSEN



CONTINUAL ASCENT

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