

HAS-BEEN

Success assures you that your life matters for something. Most of us go through life terrified that it doesn't. We wake up one day in our thirties or forties, look back over the past few decades, and wonder what the hell we are doing with our lives. We ask what we have accomplished, what great loves we have known. We fear mediocrity. We suspect that our closest loved ones shake their heads behind our backs at the disappointments we have brought.

When you are succeeding in a new venture, you briefly transcend that chronic, nagging sense of irrelevance.

At a superficial level, success strokes your ego, but validation goes much deeper than ego satisfaction. You know the pride of accomplishment, for one thing. You engaged in the sacred act of creating something that never previously existed. You invested so much, and did it in a community of belonging.

Every type of effort has its success metrics. Businesses want positive cash flow. Nonprofits want impact. Artists want sales, readers, or glowing reviews. We do not chase these metrics merely for riches or glory; we see them as measures of value.

They feel like measures of *our* value.

You exist.

And then it's over.

One of the most chilling aspects of life after failure is the

silence.

After the Stanford fire, I braced for negative news coverage and phone calls inviting me to appear before angry Stanford administrators. Neither ever came. When we sent a grim donor update offering to refund donations, we heard none of the frustration, anger, and disappointment I anticipated. When we announced the dissolution of Uplift Aeronautics five months later, we heard crickets.

I felt relieved that my worst fears were not realized, but it was disconcerting how fast the world moved on.

This is life as a has-been.

You are she who must not be named.

It's like being invisible, or a ghost. You run frantically around work or school and wave your arms in people's faces and say "Here I am! I exist!" but nobody can see you or hear you. Your earlier sense of validation feels like a ruse. All your worst fears about your value as a human being come roaring back.

You are a disappointment, a mediocre human being who is padding slowly towards the grave. You have wrought real damage. You have wasted people's money. You have disrupted the lives of your employees, your volunteers, and your family. You nearly burned down Stanford.

Nobody remembers the things you accomplished, the good that was taking form, the universe of potential you worked so hard to unleash.

"People treat it as if it never happened, as if it never had value," Avni Patel Thompson says, referencing the shutdown of a company she gave four years to. "It's like it never existed." That erasure from existence, she says, is the most painful part of a shutdown.¹⁷

When we dissolved Uplift, our closest supporters immediately stopped referencing our story. A partner organization published a book-length report on the state of humanitarian drones. We did not merit a footnote. Another supporter published a newspaper op-ed calling for humanitarian drone airdrops in Syria. He listed numerous initiatives that showed the promise of drone technology but did not mention the Syria Airlift Project. Given his level of involvement before, it was not a moment of forgetfulness. Stanford Magazine ran a glowing 3000-word article on all the amazing drone research on campus. Other than a sentence about the fire, we did not receive a single mention.

We were an embarrassment now. We were being excised from history.

“What do you expect?” one former volunteer said. “We didn’t achieve what we tried to do.”

She wasn’t being cruel or calloused. She was giving me the truth, like a bucket of cold water in my face.

This silence plays out in any domain.

Maybe you get fired from the company where you have worked for the past three years. Other than two friends who take you out for beers, you don’t hear another word from the dozens of colleagues you worked with.

Your debilitating sports injury invites a short-lived wave of sympathy from friends and then everybody moves on.

Nobody is being cruel. This is just the way of the world. Everyone is swamped, and beholding failure is awkward and energy-draining. The world snaps back from it like a hand from a hot stove.

One of my favorite places to work is the courtyard outside Stanford’s Graduate School of Business (GSB). You can sit in

warm sunlight. A parade of fascinating people stroll through. You can eavesdrop on cutting-edge scientific research and hear ten different languages spoken. At any given moment, numerous businesses take shape around you.

As the Executive Director of Uplift Aeronautics, I had countless coffees at GSB with supporters, journalists, engineers, business leaders, and students. Aspiring entrepreneurs hung on my every word.

After the fire, I continued to work out of GSB, mostly on my dissertation, usually alone. Nobody sought meetings anymore.

I still eavesdropped on those conversations in which Stanford students birthed companies on the backs of napkins. Many involved drones. These students had big ideas, big promises, and in some cases big egos. I knew now what was entailed in building a viable business, and I knew most of them did not have a chance. Yet they kept plugging away, and investors kept giving them millions, and they kept imploding.

I sat back with folded arms, watching from a distance. Nobody asked my opinion. I was just another washed-up grad student in the coffee shop, plugging away on his MacBook. I couldn't possibly have anything to say.

When you are a has-been, you have to confront an ugly reality: you *do* have an ego. Maybe you don't crave the limelight, but you do want to be validated. Maybe you don't seek fame, but you do want respect and love. Maybe you don't want to be a celebrity, but you do want acknowledgement for those years of work.

It doesn't matter how saintly and selfless you are: we all have the snarling demon of ego inside. When you become a has-been, that demon will not be fed. It will be ravenous, starving, clawing its way out of you. You have two options: you can let it eat you alive, or you can fight to transcend it.

We have all met has-beens who never tamed their egos. At cocktail parties they regale you with tale after tale of faded accomplishments. They name-drop celebrities they brushed with, books they read, investors they courted, professors they studied with. They are like fishermen casting different kinds of bait, desperately hoping for a catch.

Ravenous ego can also express itself through bitterness, which is equally unattractive. These people rage against those who let them down. They fantasize about how things might have turned out differently. They refuse to take responsibility for their mistakes. They vent their anger to every captive audience life hands them.

You want to be better than that.

So you sit there at your own equivalent of GSB, latte in hand, watching the busy world spin, contemplating these aspiring and successful individuals who are too busy with their own ambitions to care about your dream or its failure. You flip through the latest trade magazine and muse about your own absence from its pages. One way or another, you learn to be okay with that.

It isn't easy.

But if you can find your way through this, you will be better for it. Failure teaches you to do battle with your own ego. It is an unlikely gift but perhaps the most important that failure offers.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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