

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*.

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

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

MARK D. JACOBSEN



CONTINUAL ASCENT

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