

SCARS

Even as you heal, you discover that you will always carry scars.

You cannot endure something like this without changing forever. You learned what it is to feel helpless, overpowered by forces larger than yourself, unable to rise again for a time. Few people can walk away from that kind of experience unscathed.

I am mostly better now. The trauma from my season of failure largely passed. The aftershocks subsided to the occasional, faint rumble. I mostly feel strong again, and I meet the demands of each day with cool resolve.

At least, most days.

Some areas of my life remain tender to the touch.

I sometimes find myself in leadership situations that echo my worst experiences with Uplift. I experience these events like someone jamming a thumb into an open wound.

At one point, when Rogue Squadron was succeeding wildly, we were in a position to ask for nearly anything we wanted. Our team consisted of just three people, but my excited boss wanted me to ask for double-digit millions. I pushed back. Uplift taught me that growing too fast can be fatal. At this stage, that kind of money would have been like winning the lottery: it probably would have ruined our lives.

Our discussions became contentious. My baffled leadership

could not comprehend why I was so opposed to shooting for the stars. I felt like a trapped animal, just as I had when Uplift was becoming overextended.

Angry, frustrated, and terrified of being trapped in a debacle, I sent a heated multi-paragraph email that damaged several key relationships. It also hurt my reputation in the organization, making me look volatile and unstable. The fallout threw me into an emotional tailspin, shattered my self-confidence, and left me questioning my ability to work in an entrepreneurial organization.

I learned that one of my scars is an abiding terror of overcommitment.

My problem is that I am too excitable, too passionate, too quick to find faults in the status quo and suggest improvements. If someone brings me a problem, I spin up like a warp core. I talk animatedly. I gesticulate with my hands. I scribble diagrams on whiteboards. I write white papers in single, manic afternoons. I suggest idea after idea to do things better.

Days or weeks later, I discover that colleagues expect me to take ownership of executing all these grand ideas, which was never my intent.

At this point, I panic.

I don't have time, I tell them. I'm overextended.

Then everything unravels. My colleagues get angry because I gave so many signals that I was committed to this. They are trying to help me, they say. And I get guilty and awkward because I know they are partly right, that I probably had implied a personal commitment, even though I thought I had been clear about my limits. Now the whole thing is a muddled mess, and everyone is angry with each other.

I am especially terrified of owning responsibility for efforts I believe will fail. Unfortunately, this happens to me somewhat

regularly because I am most likely to speak up when I believe something is about to go off the rails. Somehow, that approach often ends with me being placed in charge.

I never learn.

When I feel overcommitted, I get mean and nasty. I fight like a caged animal. My emotions go off the charts. I vacillate between soaring optimism about new possibilities and stalking, raging, mumbling fits. In these moments, my coworkers probably think I am a mental case and an ass.

Later, alone with my thoughts, I wonder why I am such a mess.

The answer is clear: I have been trapped in failure before. I know what it's like to feel that crushing weight on my back for month after endless month, unable to breathe, and unable to escape. I never want to be in that place again.

So when danger appears, my amygdala floods my brain with fight-or-flight chemicals, jolts with me with adrenaline, spikes my heart rate, and tenses every muscle. The same instincts that evolved to protect me from ravenous lions in the African savannah urge me to escape with my life.

My poor, faithful body. It is doing everything in its power to protect me.

After you fail, you will carry your own scars. Every person's will look different. You might never want to talk about some topics again, just as you might have a lifelong aversion after a bad case of food poisoning. You might carry lifelong fears of particular people, places, or types of situations. Your inventory of inner strengths and weaknesses may forever look different. For the rest of your life, you will view the world through the lens of your failure, guided by powerful intuitions that can serve and protect you.

Your intuition in these cases will often be right.

Behavioral scientists tell us that expertise is largely a matter of pattern recognition. We hear stories of firefighters who are overcome by a sudden sense of calamity. They can't explain it, but they escape the burning house moments before a fireball erupts. A good pilot is attuned to every hum and vibration in the cockpit; his body registers the slightest deviation, and he knows immediately that something is wrong. Decades of experience are etched into the brains and bodies of these experts, allowing them to make accurate judgments without conscious thought.

The trauma of failure is not so different.

Every scar inscribes knowledge in your body. You know what it is to be hurt, trapped, broken, or humiliated. You have a sixth sense for danger. You are a bit like Frodo now; every time the Ring-Wraiths drew near, he felt searing pain in his chest where the Witch-King of Angmar had once stabbed him with a cursed blade.

When you carry wounds like this, you might not always be the life of the party. But as you stand in the shadows with your drink in hand, and look out over this sea of young people with their bright eyes and endless optimism about how everything is going so swimmingly, you feel set apart.

They have so much to learn.

You have the benefit of hard-won wisdom.

On the other hand, your intuition can sometimes be wrong. Our worst failures scorch traumatic experiences into our nervous systems. We might be hypersensitive for the rest of our lives. We might jump at shadows. Our nervous systems might desperately fight to protect us from threats that no longer exist.

My intuition generally serves me well these days, helping me to identify threats and find my way through complex and dangerous situations. On the other hand, it can also make me overly cautious.

I owe most of my achievements to partners who pushed me to

take big leaps into the unknown. In each case they pushed for decisions that I thought were too ambitious, fast, or reckless. I freaked out. I got mean. I lost my cool with friends and colleagues who were trying to help me, who owed me nothing, who had every right to walk away. Instead, they put up with me. We launched new efforts, and we saw results I never could have achieved alone.

The truth is, I am wrong nearly as often as I am right.

This has given me a healthy fear of myself. Despite my best efforts to remain open to the world and supple in my perspectives, I am calcifying into a fossil of my lived experience. It happens to all of us. I respect my intuitions but also fret over them. I am never sure if they are working for me or against me.

Time heals, but it rarely heals everything, so you learn to manage your wounds. You learn to show your face again, even with all that scar tissue.

You develop a realistic understanding of your limits and boundaries. You know how hard you can work before flaming out. You know what triggers you. You become acquainted with your personal version of Mr. Hyde, the brutish thing you become when you are cornered and the flashbacks come.

You realize the importance of working with others. Your friends and colleagues have scars of their own, but they are different from yours. There is goodness in that, because you can carry each other when old injuries get the better of you. Your fellow travelers can tell you when you are being prudent and when you are being unreasonable. The answer may not always be clear, but you will at least have additional perspective. Somehow, you will push through.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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