

VERTIGO

Failure throws your well-ordered universe into turmoil.

Everything you thought you knew is suddenly proved wrong. You have read all the motivational books, watched all the TED talks, and studied the biographies of renegade entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. You know all about daring greatly, being a disruptive innovator, making moonshots, and possessing grit. Friends come to you for advice. You could make a fortune as a life coach, if you wished. Maybe you already are.

Suddenly none of it works.

Every pilot has experienced a phenomenon called spatial disorientation. You are cruising straight and level through the clouds, unable to see the ground, when all of a sudden, your body is absolutely convinced that you are in a steep turn. Pilots have corkscrewed themselves right into the ground, trying to level out of turns that never existed.

Spatial disorientation terrifies you because your most basic physical instincts betray you. Your universe bends sideways and spins. All you can do is hang on, sweating, clinging to the few reliable indicators on your instrument panel, until your scrambled sensory system reboots and the universe rights itself.

Failure hits the same way. It's pure vertigo. And there are no instruments.

Sustained failure is so disorienting because the mythology of entrepreneurship has no place for it.

We need the mythology because, as we discussed in the Introduction, entrepreneurship is so miserably hard. Nobody would do it otherwise.

Elon Musk famously said, “Being an entrepreneur is like eating glass and staring into the abyss of death.” We chuckle at that. We slap it on motivational posters.

I don’t think Elon was being amusing. I suspect he spoke those words with the thousand-yard stare of a war veteran. This is a man who nearly presided over the bankruptcy of two world-changing companies while undergoing a painful divorce and parenting two children.

Elon said that a failed venture activates the same portions of the brain as physical death. I do not think he researched the neuroscience of failure out of mere curiosity. He sought to understand a personal, intimate, and visceral experience. Such suffering is the price of admission for trying great things.

By one estimate, 75% of venture-backed startups fail to return their investors’ capital. I suspect the success rates of diets, first novels, and marathon training programs is not significantly higher. With these odds, it takes a special kind of insanity to pursue an ambitious dream.

And yet for human progress to occur, we have to try. We need that messy churn of entrepreneurial activity for the winning ideas to emerge. That means we need entrepreneurs, and we must equip them for battles that will test them to the core.

So we create myths. We infuse this perilous journey with glory and hope. The purveyors of our modern myths are not so different from medieval popes calling Europe’s young men to glory and eternal salvation on crusade.

Today our myths take new forms: the self-help and business shelves at Barnes and Noble, TED talks, the Ponzi scheme of entrepreneurial life coaches teaching you how to earn passive income from blogs about entrepreneurial life coaching.

In good American fashion, we have invented and commercialized an entire industry around the mythology that enables and sustains brave new ventures.

It sells. Demand is endless.

When you are making forward progress, entrepreneurial mythology seems to provide sure guidance. You apply lean startup principles and build minimum viable products. You ideate and iterate. You hire slowly and fire quickly. You take audacious risks. You are exhausted and stressed and face continuous setbacks, but you know to expect this. You have *grit*. You won't give up because you are a *badass*.

Then failure pushes you over the edge.

You are in darkness unlike anything you have encountered in podcasts or websites. The blows come faster than you ever imagined possible. You know you should pick yourself up off the mat, raise your gloves, and fight another round, but at some point, you *can't*.

Nothing has prepared you for this. You now face decisions that violate all that sunny wisdom. Instead of being *bold*, you scale back. Instead of being *resilient*, you drink. You cannot *iterate* because you cannot burn scarce cash on another failed prototype. You cannot *fail fast, fail often, and fail forward* because it will take months to clean up the fallout from your latest disaster. You need to explain to your Kickstarter funders why you won't deliver their products, tell your VCs they've lost their money, or tell your partner that you've been fired. The criminal investigation into your company's misconduct will take years, and the press is camped on your lawn. That, and

you are so fucked up that you can barely get out of bed.

When I reached this point, all those bestsellers made me want to vomit. I felt anger towards those authors, podcasters, and mentors who led me to this place. My eyes scanned my bookshelf in despair. *This* was the real deal; *this* was the crucible of leadership. Nothing in my education or experience had prepared me for it.

I felt like Jesus, alone, sweating blood in the garden.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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CONTINUAL ASCENT

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