

# Whitney

an idea for which he was mercilessly criticized in the media. In 1969, the New York Times printed an apology for its 1920 editorial against Goddard. Today, he is considered the father of modern rocketry.

Albert Einstein did not speak until the age of 4, while he did not read until age 7. His teacher said he was “mentally slow, unsociable, and adrift forever in his foolish dreams.” Einstein would later say: “It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s that I stay with problems longer.”

Winston Churchill failed the sixth grade, was defeated in every election for public office until he became prime minister at age 62. Churchill said: “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

Abraham Lincoln lost two elections before he was elected to Congress, then failed to get re-elected. He failed in his bid for the Senate and lost again when he ran for vice president. Four years later, he was elected 16th president of the United States.

Failure is a cousin of fear. Our fears tell us where we need to go, what we need to work on, and can even point us in a direction we would never have considered without facing failure. My son-in-law, when asked about a momentous moment of failure in his life, recalled going to college to play soccer. When he failed to get off the bench, he gave up soccer, changed colleges and pursued a career in advertising, where he met my daughter. Without that decisive moment of failure, we would not be enjoying our new granddaughter.

The celebrated playwright August Wilson began as a poet. When he discovered his poems did not present the form he needed to express his ideas, he turned to playwriting. As Ezra Pound tossed failed novels into the fire, he realized he was trying to “get the novel cut down to the size of verse” and so turned to poetry.

What do you do with failure? I try to treat fail-

ure like doubt. If you shut doubt away in a closet, behind closed doors, doubt, standing in all that darkness and anonymity, gets louder and more powerful. But, if you take doubt out from behind the closed door, pull up a chair, and allow doubt to sit right next to you, as you stare down doubt – maybe even converse with doubt – then suddenly, all the power you have given doubt comes back to you.

Miles Davis saw failure in a different light, saying: “Do not fear mistakes, there are none.”

What is the timing of failure? Is it a nod from the universe that you should try a different tact, or go a different direction? Could failure be a turning point? Perhaps failure moves you closer to pursuing a passion in lieu of playing it safe.

Allow yourself the luxury of making mistakes. August Wilson habitually spent time in local cafes and always wrote on napkins. A waitress asked: “Do you write on napkins because it doesn’t count?” Wilson said: “It had never occurred to me that writing on a napkin frees me up.”

What is the shape of failure? Does it actually give you extra wiggle room – space to improvise? Creativity needs nurturing – it needs “private spaces” as Sarah Lewis points out in her book, *The Rise: Creativity, The Gift of Failure and the Search for Mastery*. Jazz musicians can give us a clue in this respect.

At the Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Charles, a neck surgeon/saxophonist, has a recording booth in his medical office. He and colleagues studied the minds of jazz musicians, scanning the brain as the musician moves from a set chord to improvisation. During improvisation, the musician’s brain involved in self-expression lit up, while the areas that control self-judgment were suppressed.

What the rest of us may see as supreme confidence in a jazz musician is actually a state of suspended judgment. Wynton Marsalis said playing jazz is like a “conversation. You can’t evaluate yourself while you’re having it. ...Jazz leads you to the core of yourself and says, ‘Express That.’”

Weakness in something – something Lewis calls the amateur’s “useless wonder” – can prove to be a strength. Lewis: “An amateur is unlike the novice bound by lack of experience and the expert trapped by having too much....the amateur stays in the place of a ‘constant now,’ seeing possibilities to which the expert is blind and which the apprentice may not yet discern.”

Actively incorporating failure into the creative process is actually coming into vogue. Entrepreneur Sara Blakely, founder of the girdle-redefining line Spanx, valued at \$1 billion in 2011, founded her company before the age of 29 and still owns it outright. Blakely recalls growing up with daily dinner table conversations when her father would ask her: “What did you fail at today?” Cutting her creative teeth on that question spurred Blakely to look at failure in a holistic way, a way to see the next step rather than be stymied by the idea of failure, viewing failure as a crucially important step in the creative process.

In 2009, in San Francisco, in response to events that seemed to speak only of success, FailCon was born – an annual one-day conference that has taken place since throughout the world – an entire day in which the only topic is failure. The only rule is that no one can speak about their successes – only their failures. The FailCon website states: “Failure is still a taboo topic all over the world, but we’re working to change that one city at a time.” In fact, if you’re interested in hosting a FailCon event in your city, simply consult the website: [www.thefailcon.com](http://www.thefailcon.com).

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Always do what you are afraid to do.”

Fred Astaire observed: “The higher you go up, the more mistakes you are allowed. Right at the top, if you make enough of them, it’s considered to be your style.”

Remember – if not for the pressure, there would be no diamonds.

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