



CONFRONTING FAILURE



Setting the Stage

Harry Potter Author Addresses Harvard Class of 2008

I have wracked my mind and heart for what I ought to say to you today. I have asked myself what I wish I had known at my own graduation, and what important lessons I have learned in the 21 years that have expired between that day and this.

...On this wonderful day when we are gathered together to celebrate your academic success, I have decided to talk to you about the benefits of failure.

...I am not dull enough to suppose that because you are young, gifted and well-educated, you have never known hardship or heartbreak. Talent and intelligence never yet inoculated anyone against the caprice of the Fates, and I do not for a moment suppose that everyone here has enjoyed an existence of unruffled privilege and contentment.

However, the fact that you are graduating from Harvard suggests that you are not very well-acquainted with failure. You might be driven by a fear of failure quite as much as a desire for success. Indeed, your conception of failure might not be too far from the average person's idea of success, so high have you already flown.

Ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure, but the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it. So I think it fair to say that by any conventional measure, a

mere seven years after my graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless. The fears that my parents had had for me, and that I had had for myself, had both come to pass, and by every usual standard, I was the biggest failure I knew.

Now, I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun. That period of my life was a dark one, and I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution. I had no idea then how far

the tunnel extended, and for a long time, any light at the end of it was a hope rather than a reality.

So why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped

pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.



You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default.

Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above the price of rubies.

The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will

never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more than any qualification I ever earned.

So given a Time Turner, I would tell my 21-year-old self that personal happiness lies in knowing that life is not a check-list of acquisition or achievement. Your

qualifications, your CV, are not your life, though you will meet many people of my age and older who confuse the two. Life is difficult, and complicated, and beyond anyone's total control, and the humility to know that will enable you to survive its vicissitudes.

“*It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default.*”

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What do you think JK Rowling meant when she said, “failure meant a stripping away of the inessential”?
- ▶ Do you agree or disagree with JK Rowling’s reasons why failure can be beneficial?
- ▶ What other ways can failure be beneficial?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

Talmudic Failure

תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין דף מג עמוד א
 (ישעיהו ג') "והמכשלה הזאת תחת ידיך" -
 אין אדם עומד על דברי תורה אלא אם כן נכשל בהן

Talmud Gitten 43a

The verse states: "and this stumbling block (i.e. the Torah) is under your hand." Why is the Torah referred to as a stumbling block? Because man does not arrive at a full understanding of the words of Torah unless he first stumbled in interpreting them.

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה כג
 בן הא הא אומר לפום צערא אגרא:

Mishnah Avos 5:23

Ben Hei Hei says: the reward is in proportion to the exertion.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Why would understanding Torah require stumbling first? Is this true of other disciplines?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced in your life the principle that commensurate with the pain is the reward?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

Struggles: What's the Point?

רמב"ן בראשית פרק כב פסוק א

והאלהים נסה את אברהם - ענין הנסיון הוא לדעת, בעבור היות מעשה האדם רשות מוחלטת בידו, אם ירצה יעשה ואם לא ירצה לא יעשה, יקרא "נסיון" מצד המנוסה, אבל המנסה יתברך יצוה בו להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל הפועל, להיות לו שכר מעשה טוב לא שכר לב טוב בלבד. ודע כי "השם צדיק יבחן" (תהלים יא ה), כשהוא יודע בצדיק שיעשה רצונו וחפץ להצדיקו יצוה אותו בנסיון, ולא יבחן את הרשעים אשר לא ישמעו. והנה כל הנסיונות שבתורה לטובת המנוסה:

Ramban: Beraishis 22:1

The matter of "trial," in my opinion, is as follows: since a man's deeds are at his absolute free command, to perform them or not to perform them at his will, on the part of the one who is tried it is called a "trial." But on the part of G-d, who tries the person, it is a command that the one being tested should bring forth the matter from potential into actuality so that he may be rewarded for a good deed, not for a good thought alone.

Furthermore, G-d only tests the righteous. He does so knowing that the righteous will do His will and therefore tests him in order to make him more upright. G-d does not test the wicked because he knows they will not obey. Thus all trials in the Torah are for the good of the one who is being tried.



Questions to Consider

- ▶ According the Ramban, what is the purpose of divine tests?
- ▶ How do tests help us reach our potential?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

Words of Consolation to a Struggling Student

משלי פרק כד פסוק טז

כי שבע יפול צדיק וקם ורשעים יכשלו ברעה:

Mishlei 24:16

For a righteous man can fall seven times and rise, but the wicked shall stumble upon evil.

פחד יצחק אגרות וכתובים ס' קכח

רעה חולה היא אצלנו שכאשר מתעסקים אנו בצדדי השלימות של גדולינו, הננו מטפלים בסיכום האחרון של מעלתם. מספרים אנו על דרכי השלימות שלהם, בשעה שאנחנו מדלגים על המאבק הפנימי שהתחולל בנפשם... אבל דע לך חביבי ששורש נשמתך הוא לא השלוח של היצר טוב אלא דוקא מלחמתו של היצר טוב.

ומכתבך היקר הנלבב מעיד כמאה עדים כי אכן לוחם נאמן... באנגלית אומרים "Lose a battle and win the war" ... החכם מכל אדם אמר "שבע יפול צדיק וקם." והטפשים חושבים כי כונתו בדרך רבותא. אע"פ ששבע יפול צדיק מ"מ הוא קם. אבל החכמים יודעים היטב שהכונה היא

שמהות הקימה של הצדיק היא דרך ה"שבע נפילות" שלו.

Pachad Yitzchak - Collected Letters #128

There is a common misconception in our midst regarding our attitude to the appreciation of our great individuals. We tend to focus on their current elevated status, neglecting to recall the many mistakes and hardships they encountered on their path to greatness. ...But know this, my beloved, the root of your soul is not found within the serenity of your desire to be good, rather it is specifically in the struggle to become good. And your precious letter, testifies like a thousand witnesses that you are, indeed, struggling faithfully...In English there is a saying, "Lose a battle and win the war." King Solomon wrote, "A righteous person falls seven times, yet rises again" (Mishlei/Proverbs 24:16). The uninformed assume the meaning to be that greatness can be achieved despite experiencing an occasional stumble; however, the wise know well that the verse's intention is to instruct us that the very path to greatness is solely attained by encountering obstacles and then overcoming them.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Rav Hutner mentions a common misconception we have about great individuals. Have you ever held similar misconceptions?
- ▶ "Lose a battle and win the war": What's the meaning of this phrase and how can it apply to our confrontation with failure?
- ▶ How does Rav Hutner reinterpret the verse "A righteous person falls seven times, yet rises again"? Have you ever experienced this in your own life?