

“Fail again. Fail better.” Failure in the Creative Process

*By Sarah Cole**

I spent my sabbatical writing. I was writing a full length play and I was in what theorist Csikszentmihalyi had termed 'flow.' Suddenly, I found myself fumbling. First, there was writer's block. It grew worse in direct proportion to my fear. Then, when I had pushed the block aside enough to resume, I began to get rejections from play writing competitions. Again, I stopped writing. I began to examine these instances within the framework of the creative process. I studied my writing before and after my block, and found that I was much happier with the 'after' material, when I had put aside the fear of failure. I saw that writing fueled by fear of rejection is inauthentic and anemic. My writing fed on instances of failure, though, was richer than ever. Failure is vital to the creative process. This paper explores the definitions of failure within the creative process and the importance of failure within the creative process. Failure should be reframed as a positive signpost within creative processes; as a call to examine the foundations of one's truthful approach to a creative project. Creativity is essential to human nature, and failure is vital to creativity. Traditional models of the creative process, however, do not tend to address the component of failure as a large part of this process. In these models, failure is, at most, an interruption in the process, a thing to fear. Failure is nothing to fear. One of our greatest teachers is failure. Samuel Beckett wrote, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better." Failure should be embraced as an opportunity to reevaluate one's creative truths.

Introduction

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.” Samuel Beckett wrote this in his 1983 novella “Worstward Ho”¹. This idea of failure is intriguing, especially given the American ideal of success and achievement at all costs. Failure has been cast as the enemy of progress; however, failure can be vital to a creative project.

We have become so terrified of failure that creativity languishes. Our fear of failure stunts creativity in our numerous roles, from professional to student. This fear of failure can also be seen in scholarly research into creativity, where

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¹Beckett, Samuel. *Worstward Ho*. http://www.samuel-beckett.net/w_ho.html: 2014

failure is left unmentioned. It is only the artists—who live the creative process on a daily basis—that embrace failing and see it for what it is. Failure is a vital driving mechanism to the creative process, and indeed the creative person must make a lifelong commitment to failing.

My research on failure is of personal importance to me, both as creative artist and as educator. I spent my recent sabbatical writing. Things were going well. I was happy and in 'flow,' as creative theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms it. Then suddenly, it seemed, I felt blocked. This was exacerbated by the feeling that I must produce something of import during my sabbatical. I had been given the gift of time to focus on my creative works, and I did not want to squander the opportunity. I began to experience raging self-doubt as to whether my idea was good enough, whether I was a talented writer, and whether it had all been said better by someone else. Plays submitted to competitions were rejected. Critiques were harsh. I was failing, and it seemed to snowball. I made the mistake of equating momentary failures of a creative journey with being a failure as a person. My self-esteem took a blow. I did not want to write. Yet I could not squander this opportunity.

I made the decision to back away for a short time, and do what I have been trained to do as an academic specializing in creative work: I looked at failure within the framework of the creative process model. If I could understand it, I reasoned, I could overcome it. I would not fail because I defeated it by logic. Of course, this set up an even higher expectation from me—that I could intellectualize my failures and overcome them rationally. This is untrue, but the confidence generated by my ability to look at something critically has helped conquer the fear of failure.

I have started writing plays again—although the full-length play I began my sabbatical with still languishes—and my creative life is back on track. This is not because I found the answer to failure, but rather I am coming to understand the important role of failure in a creative process. Failure propels the creative process. The 'flash of insight' we often say we feel when an idea springs forth is actually a culminating moment, born of failure. We learn from our past failures to articulate our creative truths. I am learning to accept failure as a long-term commitment in the creative process. Failure must have a larger accounting in our understanding of the creative process, and be appreciated for what it can teach us about our work and ourselves.

There should be a paradigm shift around our notion of failure, as evidenced here by examples gleaned from different professional spheres as well as my own experiences as case study. The real danger to our creativity is not failure itself; it is atychiphobia: the fear of failure. Failure is not the antithesis of perfection, and needs to be reframed as vital to the progress of creative process.

Traditional Models of the Creative Process

Perhaps the best known model of the creative process is Graham Wallas' 1926 model, from his missive *The Art of Thought*. He details the four stages in the creative process to be:

1. Preparation: We have consciously chosen a particular problem to explore and are gathering information.
2. Incubation: Here, unconscious processing is at work. One thinks about the issue without directly thinking about it. Einstein called this stage “combinatory play.” We are not consciously aware of our mulling over the problem, but it is playing in the background as we go about our daily lives. Wallas proposed that by building obstacles into our thought processes—i.e. about the issue—we gain more productivity than focusing on the singular problem.
3. Illumination: This is the 'my best ideas come in the shower' phase. It's the subconscious 'aha' moment—that flash of insight we have as to how we will approach the issue. This is when things consciously click into place from our previous attention and non-attention to the problem.
4. Verification: This is that time when, like the first stage, we are consciously attentive to our idea. We are focused on the production of our creativity¹.

Other models seem largely based off of this model. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi delineates five stages:

1. Preparation.
2. Incubation.
3. Insight.
4. Evaluation.
5. Elaboration.

This model expands Wallas' original model while retaining crucial steps of it.²

Also retaining the Wallas model is Koberg and Bagnall's 1971 version, as examined in their book, *The Universal Traveler*. They, too, outline seven steps that bear striking similarities to Wallas'. The steps are:

1. Accept Situation (or understand the problem).
2. Analyze (the problem/situation).
3. Define (restate the problem clearly by defining the goal).

¹Rothenberg, Albert, and Carl Hausman. "Chapter 2: Descriptive Accounts." *The Creativity Question*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1976.) 69-73.

²Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. (NYC, NY: Harper Perennial, 1996) 79-80.

4. Ideate (to think of the possibilities, come up with option).
5. Select (to decide upon the best option by comparing the options on important parameters such as feasibility, risks etc.).
6. Implement (by taking the plunge).
7. Evaluate (to assess whether or not the solution works and how it could be improved)¹.

A more recent one is Geoff Petty's 1996 model, in which he details six phases, which can be remembered via the mnemonic "ICEDIP:"

1. Inspiration
2. Clarification
3. Evaluation
4. Distillation
5. Incubation
6. Perspiration

He also states that the order is not important, and one may move back and forth among these phases².

These four examples are but a smattering of the creative process models out there. One thing all seem to have in common, though, is the fear of mentioning failure as a driving force within a creative process.

Failure in the Creative Process

There is an old saw that states that the best teacher is failure. We reach and fall short in our efforts. We become stuck—the old bugaboo of 'writer's block' or 'creative block' rears its head and roars at us. Our fear of failure has so cowed us that we even avoid naming it. This is true for creativity scholars, too. Apart from Wallas' model, all of the models given here include an 'evaluation' step. It is in this phase that our fear of failure may become apparent. Csikszentmihalyi notes that evaluation "... is often the most emotionally trying part of the process, when one feels most uncertain and insecure. This is also when the internalized criteria of the domain, and the internalized opinion of the field, usually become prominent."³ Revision is a part of this phase. Yet what drives the need for revision? Our sense of failure. Failure makes us better if handled correctly, worse if we do not.

Failure, while it should not be seen as a separate phase of the creative process, is indispensable as a driving mechanism; it spurs on continued innovation, revision, and critical evaluation. It can become a self-propagating

¹Koberg, Don, and Jim Bagnall. *The Universal Traveller*. (Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Learning, 1991) 26, 41.

²Petty, Geoff. "How to Be Better at Creativity." <http://www.greenfields.u-net.com/docs/home.html> (accessed 2014).

³Csikszentmihalyi, 80.

phase, and we become stuck. This is when the fear of failure—a fairly obscure term called atychiphobia—overtakes us. We fear failure in ourselves for what it may expose of us and our perceived shortcomings. In the United States, our desire to become perfect academics, parents, community members, and people have exacerbated our fear of failure, and made it into a deadly word. However, the journey of failure as important within a creative process is one that should be embraced and examined for clues of how to proceed in our creative endeavors. If we look at the creative process as a steam engine, then failure is the coal which drives the engine, but not a car of the train.

The Definition of Failure in the Creative Process

The creative process is a journey, and not a single event. There are many ways to experience the feeling of failure, but only one way to really fail. If we give up—or worse, never try—then we have failed in a very real sense. If we tie our creative processes to external outcomes (such as grades or promotions, for example), then we have done ourselves a great disservice. We run the risk of not being authentic to our creative endeavors, or worse, not attempting them in the first place. One will surely fail if one does not try.

Reframing Failure

There are several approaches to our fear of failure. We overanalyze. We become fixated. We engage in negative self-talk. We pander. We avoid. We give up. We wallow. We are ashamed. We become so overwhelmed with how to approach failure that we start writing papers on failure.

Some of these approaches, in moderation, are useful to the creative process. We need to kick-start ourselves into getting going again, but too much attention to our failure and the reasons why will not help.

Taken as it should be, failure can be seen as a rerouting opportunity. Failure is a test to see whether we are following our creative urges in the way we wish to follow them. Failure is a measure of how truthful we are being in the aim of our creative work. In his book, *The Triggering Town*, poet and creative writing teacher Richard Hugo states:

When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it. One is that all music must conform to the truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music.”¹

In other words, what you write (or sing, design, draw, or play) must either follow the truth as dictated by others (or as you perceive it to be), or the truth of your work is informed by your own creative process and adds to your own

¹Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*. (W.W. Norton & Company, NY, 1979) 3.

understanding and interpretation of a given thing. To be happily, authentically creative, the second condition must be the one we strive for—all truth must conform to music.

By seeing failure for what it is—a resilient growth process instead of a single final event—creative people are able to find the authenticity they seek from the creative process they engage in. When we experience internal failure of our creative process, we must learn to assess the journey and not the temporary result. Our aversion to the word 'failure' creates a stress in us that negates our ability to see this journey. We too often equate our creative failures with being failures personally. Sarah Lewis notes in her 2014 book, *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery* that failure is an imperfect word. "Once we begin to transform it, it ceases to be that any longer... once we are ready to talk about it, we often call the event something else—a learning experience, a trial, a reinvention..."¹ What we see as failure is really just learning to find your own truth, and your own way of expressing it. Failure is a gift, and not simply for artists. It is a gift for all fields of inquiry. The sciences, business ventures, and the arts all have anecdotal evidence which supports the importance of failure. Failure is the mechanism for the alchemical 'flash of insight' that we often point to as the magical part of the creative process. It is the lifeblood of the Ouroboros of the creative process. There are a myriad of examples to support this.

Practical Failure

So, given that failure is a driving mechanism in the creative process, how can we use it to our advantage? The easy answer is to borrow the words of Winston Churchill, who said, "If you're going through hell, keep going." Keep on creating. Keep on producing.

However, it can be hard to do this effectively – so looking at what is causing the failure may be helpful. Failure within the creative process does not have much scientific research, so we must look to less academic sources for the virtues of failure. We must look to the individual creators.

If the failure is because of influences external to the creator, then the creator must decide how much weight these criticisms and rejections might have. One cannot control how others react to the creative product. I keep on submitting plays to conferences and contests, because of three things: it inures me to this type of rejection. It makes me see that their rejection and my sense of failure need not be interconnected. Such rejections mean that you're on your way. Perhaps your product did not meet their requirements. Perhaps what they say is true. Then it is up to you, the creator, to be objective about your work and see if you agree with them, or if they are simply not the right fit for you. You're in it for the long haul. These minor rejections are road signs. Writer Lisa Alther is an example of one that was in it for the long haul. "It had been

¹Lewis, Sarah. *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*. (Simon & Schuster, NY, 2014). 11-12.

fourteen years and I hadn't had anything published. I had 250 rejection slips. I got my first novel published and it was called *Kinflicks*. It turned out to be a best seller.”¹

External influences can be teachers. Yet if your goal is to be accepted by others, you're creating for the wrong reasons. We should teach our students this; perhaps it would reduce plagiarism and rekindle a love of learning. Rejection and criticism internalized become the fear of failure. It is feeding your fear. Create for yourself. Pay heed to the words and critiques of others that you trust, but do not collapse into their critiques of you, either good or bad. Selling out is as big of a problem as never starting is. Potential is still wasted.

If you have based your creative ability on the evaluations of others, you have thrown up a huge road block in your creative process. This road block is what writer Steven Pressfield calls 'Resistance.' In his book, *The War of Art*, Pressfield writes that “Resistance seems to come from outside ourselves... [but] Resistance is not a peripheral opponent... it is self-generated and self-perpetuated”². It comes out in the negative self-talk we engage in.

And of this negative self-talk? We say, 'It's all been said before.' Yes, it probably has. Even the Bible notes in Ecclesiastes that “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.” It hasn't, however, been said or done by you. This makes it new. The failure here is a false one, and points not to your own creative power, but rather to the self-doubt that is interfering with your power to create. Lose it.

'Someone else said it better.' How do you know unless you try? No one else has the perspective that you have on a particular problem. Not trying is the real failure. If you approach something with your own unique perspective, then it is beneficial to you, which is what being creative is all about. In his recent book *Steal Like an Artist*, Austin Kleon notes that there are ten guidelines for being creative. The first is 'steal like an artist'. “All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is original”³. Shakespeare even built upon the previously mentioned Ecclesiastes quote in his sonnet 59. To say that someone else said it better is to give yourself an excuse not to explore a concept. It's not a valid concern.

Procrastination can be a sign of the fear of failure. By procrastinating, we are protecting ourselves from external rejection. Pressfield writes, “Procrastination is the most common manifestation of Resistance because it's the easiest to rationalize” (21)⁴. Dr. Timothy Psychyl echoes this statement in an October 2013 article for *Psychology Today* when he writes, “procrastination involves a great deal of self-deception as we try to reduce the cognitive dissonance between not acting on an intention when we know we ought to”⁵.

¹Alther, Lisa. *YouTube interview*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Vf3G2wyqQE>

²Pressfield, Steven. *The War of Art*. (Black Irish Entertainment LLC, NY, 2002) 8.

³Kleon, Austin. *Steal Like an Artist*. (Workman Publishing Company, NY, 2012) 7.

⁴Pressfield, 21.

⁵Psychyl, Timothy. “Procrastination Helps Creative Thinking.” *Psychology Today*. *Don't Delay*, October 12, 2013. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-delay/201310/procrastination-helps-creative-thinking>: 2014

Don't confuse procrastination with the important incubation phase of a creative process, though. Sometimes we need to delay because we haven't successfully worked something out in our mind to the extent that we can act upon it. In this case, the delay is sagacious. There's a fine line between a delay and procrastination, so we must be able to discern the difference by understanding why we are putting something off. This takes careful consideration.

Conversely, taking the easy way out—perhaps also called 'selling out,' is a sign of our fear of failure. We finish as quickly as we can. We pander. We don't play with the problem enough. We find a solution and go with it, instead of mulling over other possible solutions. In his talk for 'Video Arts,' John Cleese—perhaps the best known member of the Monty Python comedy troupe—ruminates on why it was that a more talented member of the troupe produced fewer original scripts than did Cleese. The answer, he determined, was the time they each took to sort out a problem.

If he was faced with a problem, and fairly soon saw a solution, he was inclined to take it. Even though (I think) he knew the solution was not very original... My work was more creative than his simply because I was prepared to stick with the problem longer. So imagine my excitement when I found that this was exactly what MacKinnon¹ found in his research. He discovered that the most creative professionals always played with a problem for much longer before they tried to resolve it, because they were prepared to tolerate that slight discomfort and anxiety that we all experience when we haven't solved a problem.²

It's the fear of failure that stops us, because we wrap it too preciously in our psyche. Our creative failures need to be reframed from negative instances of finite defeat to a more positive journey to resilience. Resilience and the ability to start again lead to progress. Failure is not a character flaw; however, never having failed is – for that means you've never started.

Conclusions

Stories abound on the failures in science that have brought about wonderful revelations. The discovery of penicillin happened only when Sir Alexander Fleming was washing up some petri dishes from failed experiments to find a 'wonder drug.' The creation of the pacemaker resulted from electrical engineer John Hopps failing to make a machine that would reverse hypothermia. Scientists at Pfizer failed to develop a drug that would help with angina, instead developing Viagra.

¹For more information on creative theorist Donald MacKinnon's research, please see: <http://cpsb.com/research/articles/creativity-research/Issues-Further-Research-MacKinnon.pdf>

²Popova, Maria. "John Cleese on the 5 Factors to Make Your Life More Creative ..." Brain Pickings. <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/04/12/john-cleese-on-creativity-1991/> (accessed April 28, 2014).

Likewise, other inventions were created by failure to create something else. Post-it notes are the result of inventor Spencer Silver trying to create a strong adhesive. The microwave oven was the result of a failure of a radar project involving a vacuum tube. Silly Putty is the failed result of an attempt to make a rubber substitute out of silicon. WD-40 is the abbreviation for 'water displacement, 40th attempt.'

For artists, failure is the constant process of creating art. Stephen King's first novel, *Carrie*, was rejected 30 times before finally getting published. Oprah Winfrey was molested and gave birth to a child at age 14 and is worth millions today. Fred Astaire, when screen tested for MGM, was given this summation of his talent: "Can't act. Can't sing. Slightly bald. Can dance a little"¹.

The stories are numerous, but one thing remains clear: failure was reframed by these creators to forge a new path for themselves – one fueled by their failures. 'Eureka' moments are not metaphysical gifts handed down from the gods, but rather the processing of previous failures until a breakthrough is reached. They are resilient, which is failure's gift. Dr. Agustín Fuentes writes, "Achieving resilience in the face of failure, perseverance in the face of adversity is a central part of any ultimate success, and part of our own evolution"². We learn limitations and seek alternate ways of doing things. These are things success cannot teach us. We should heed this, not just as creative beings, but also as educators and help our students fail in order to succeed.

For my own part, my failure as playwright has been a trying time for me. I began to research failure in earnest while retreating from the failures I felt. As the rejections trickled in, my self-doubt grew. I think this reaction is normal. My resilience wavered, because of my orientation to failure. I was experiencing the real demon of the creative process, atychiphobia: fear of failure. I knew I needed to see failure as a journey, and not an end result. I switched focus to researching failure, since I felt that this part of the creative process was lacking in many formal discourses. It is such an important part, and the creator should welcome it as a driving force in the creative process. Beckett stated that failure is the artist's world. Richard Hugo echoes this in his assertion that writing—and this applies to other forms of art as well—"is a way of saying you and the world have a chance. All art is failure"³. Successful artists embrace failure; indeed, success is failure's progeny. It's a recursive thing: the only way to ultimately succeed is to fail. Fail again. Fail better.

¹Carinci, John Paul. *An All-Consuming Desire To Succeed*. (Morgan James Publishing, NY, 2011) 166.

²Fuentes, Augustin. "Failure is Good." *Psychology Today*. *Busting Myths About Human Nature*. October 10, 2013. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/busting-myths-about-human-nature/201310/failure-is-good>: 2014

³Hugo, 72.

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