

Failing to Win— Embracing the Fear of Losing

by Marta Wilson, PhD

Two men looked out from prison bars, One saw the mud, the other saw the stars.

Failing my preliminary exam in graduate school and the fear I faced in deciding whether or not to sit through it again is one of my most vivid memories. Bringing myself to talk about this experience has taken a long time. If you've ever failed at anything, I think you'll relate to my story, which begins many years ago in the hills of Tennessee.

Growing up, every weekend and during the summers, my dad, mom, brothers, and I drove thirty minutes to my mother's family farm to work. We were tobacco farmers. I recall getting up early, no sleeping in on Saturdays or during summer breaks, and being dirty, tired, and sticky from toiling in the hot sun. As a child, I continuously said that I was going to be something different when I grew up. Tobacco farming wasn't my cup of tea.

Even though I loathed working in tobacco, I will admit the beauty of the farm always overwhelmed me with its two hundred sixty acres of dense woods, rolling green pastures, plowed fields, and crisp clean air. When I was allowed to play, I often explored the farm for quiet places to rest, stare at cotton ball clouds, feel the gentle country breeze on my face, and daydream about my future. As picturesque as all that might sound—and it was lovely in those brief moments—I still wondered if I'd ever escape the imprisonment of that tobacco farm. An ever-present question in my childhood was: "How can I make my way out into a world where I can do the things I like to do and can sleep late if I want?" I had clear intention to create an answer to that question.

With my family's blessing, when I turned sixteen, I found my first job in a restaurant as the salad bar attendant. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven! Those leaves of lettuce were a lot prettier to me than any leaves of tobacco I'd come across. On top of that, the place was air conditioned, and I never had to pick up a hoe or a tobacco stick to perform my duties. Life was good. At this point in my development, I also became conscious that I did not know much about the ways of the world and could benefit from more education.

When the time came, I started college and was exposed to a variety of subjects. The area to which I was most drawn was psychology. I felt this discipline was going to allow me to make a difference in the world. After completing my bachelor's degree in psychology, I went on to attend an industrial-organizational psychology graduate program. At that point, I had never failed anything in school. My intention had always been clear: 1) Pass your classes; 2) Get your degree; 3) Find your job; and 4) Be successful.

In my graduate program, when one completed the master's degree, the next step was to pass a preliminary exam. Passing "prelims" was the final step before being accepted into the doctoral program. So, after receiving my master's, I studied for several months and went through the grueling experience of prelims, which included two days of written testing followed two weeks later by a lengthy oral exam.

The oral exam was administered by a committee of my professors whose job was to judge my knowledge of industrial and organizational psychology. As I responded to the committee's questions, I remember feeling confident. However, it seemed to take forever for them to reach a decision once I had left the room. I don't recall being worried as I waited. In fact, I had no idea what was taking place behind those doors. The first clue I had that something was terribly wrong was the look of mixed gloom and dread on my advisor's face when she emerged from the meeting room. I remember being immediately confused by her expression. Then, she delivered one of the most stinging blows of reality I've ever faced. She informed me that I had failed. What had she said? I had never heard of anyone failing prelims! I had never failed anything! This made no sense!

I'm not the smartest person in the world, but I had always worked hard enough and long enough in school to demonstrate competence of any material I wanted to master. Failed? Me? I was in shock. As part of their feedback, the committee said my written and verbal answers were at

a “30,000-foot” level, and they just couldn’t be sure if I had the “5,000-foot” picture of things in my head. Honestly, I thought I was going to die. I was mad, hurt, and scared. I didn’t show it though. Instead, I put on a brave front as I usually did when I really wanted to fight or flee.

To make matters worse, my friends had planned a celebration that night. The hosts decided they should go on with the show because a crowd of students and faculty planned to attend. That evening, I felt like a total loser. When I arrived at the party, I was nervous. What would my friends, fellow students, and esteemed professors think of me? But, there I was, and the thing to do was to walk in and keep a stiff upper lip.

The evening passed so slowly. I endured eternity waiting for each guest to approach me. Some already knew I had failed the exam. Even worse was interacting with the people who hadn’t heard the verdict and who showed up ready to make merry. They would rush over to congratulate me. I had to tell them there was nothing to celebrate. It’s funny, instead of crying, I actually ended up comforting folks who broke down when they found out about my situation. I guess my failure was pretty scary for some of my peers.

Suddenly, the next day, I found myself coming to the stark realization that I HAD FAILED. This meant I would have to wait another year to take that big, hairy test again then spend months studying all the material again with the possibility of failing the darned thing again. I had no attraction to any of that. My life had been put on hold. I couldn’t start my dissertation. I might never receive a doctorate. The fact that I had a master’s degree already under my belt was no consolation to me because it was an academic degree (primarily preparing me to go on for my Ph.D.) Basically, I didn’t believe I had the applied skills to compete for a job in my field, and I didn’t think I could land a decent faculty position without a Ph.D. I felt like a lost and extremely depressed victim of circumstance.

From my biased viewpoint, I had little to show for having been in school most of my life except some student loan debt. I spent several days in a daze with no clear thoughts and afraid to tell my family how I had let them all down. I was derailed and struggling to come to terms with the one thing that had been part of my self image: Complete what you set out to do. Now, I was faced with the fact that completion might not be possible. I suddenly felt like I didn’t even know who I was or what was important anymore. I wanted to hide in a shell and never come out again!

Ben Stein says, “The indispensable first step to getting what you want out of life is this: Decide what you want.” This requires getting focused on what we desire with such unbending purpose that we refuse to quit, even after multiple failures, no matter what obstacles we face. My failure (and the potential of failing twice) caused me to question my life goals and my mission on the planet. My advisor also helped

me see there was a lot I could learn from this catastrophe. I finally realized the only way to become a psychologist (which was what I really wanted to be) was to take that test again and pass it. I knew what I wanted and decided to go for it.

To put myself back in the game, I made a plan to first go on an internship program and come back to school afterwards to tackle the prelim process again. I moved to Atlanta and worked with a team of interns (all who had passed their prelims). Being with them was a constant reminder of my pitiful performance. During that time, I often cried myself to sleep and constantly dreaded going back to school to once again begin the months of studying that would lead up to my potential failure.

About a year later, I returned to school. Deep down, I knew if I tried again and failed, I would only have myself to blame. This was hard to accept. I was afraid of the truth. If I failed again, what would become of me? If I stopped now, what would become of me? I finally came to the conclusion that the truth (no matter how unsettling) would set me free. I was scared, yet determined, to test my limits and face the results.

I began to study and was surprised to realize my professors and classmates were 100% supportive of me. When I would get discouraged and say things like, “I think I’m going to drop out. This is too hard. What if I fail again?” they offered encouragement. They also gave me helpful hints on how I needed to correct my study habits.

After a few weeks of studying and incorporating my committee’s feedback, I began realizing there was a lot I didn’t know. I constantly fought panic. How would I learn all of this material? Could I do it? Throughout the months, I gained more insight. By the end of six months, I had actually become pretty self-assured. Finally, I took prelims again and passed. It was a victory that I would have never experienced if I had let fear get the best of me.

Fear can hold us back mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. It can limit our growth and development. Giving up due to fear of failing keeps thousands of people stuck in a rut every day, too afraid of their negative fantasies to take a leap of faith. A secret of winners is they’re not afraid of losing. Winners make choices about what they want and summon courage to take the risks to go for it, even in the face of fear and uncertainty. They are willing to fail in order to win.

I’ll assert the results in my life are related to the intention that preceded them. I’ll even go as far as to say that my intention was to fail prelims the first time. The second time I took the test, I found the help I needed to change my study habits and accepted that my mind was able to process and retain the required details. Getting clear on what I wanted helped me remove self doubt, overcome disappointment, find the courage to take risks, and ultimately be victorious in my pursuits. Once I visualized that I could succeed, the means became obvious.

Most barriers to my goals lie within me. A very real human tendency is to blame external factors as the cause of inadequate outcomes. When I find myself blaming outside forces for my inferior performance, it is a signal to examine my stated intention versus my demonstrated intention. I blamed a lot of people and things for failing prelims including my committee, my family, my background, and my responsibilities. I never once blamed my intention. The point is, once I became clear on taking and passing prelims a second time, I found a way to do it. Sufficient will to achieve a particular outcome can unlock the way to make that outcome a reality, regardless of the barriers.

I can see the glass as half empty and choose a victim outlook, which means living at the mercy of life's daily events, hoping that health, wealth, and happiness will be delivered to my doorstep. If I choose to be a victim, I see myself as either a lucky winner or an injured party, depending on the situation. When things go wrong, I blame other people, other things, or the gods of fate believing life happens to me, occurring outside my control. I prefer to float from one incident to another, without a sense of direction or purpose, like being on a drifting lifeboat - sometimes feeling persecuted, sometimes feeling lucky. If I adopt this mindset, life becomes a series of reactions. I admit to having had my share of experiences enticing me to feel like a victim. Failing prelims is one example where I was tempted to feel powerless. I finally realized the "glass" was more than half full of opportunity.

Today, I choose to see the glass as half full and create the results I desire in my life. I see myself as accountable for making things happen around me and for seizing opportunities. As an example, I've chosen to redefine how I think and feel about my tobacco farming years. I no longer look at it as imprisonment. I've rewritten that script. Farming was a chance to learn how to be patient, grow things, organize work and people, implement a plan to create desired results, and more. In fact, what I know about growing tobacco makes me a much more effective consultant and professional. The same is true for having failed prelims.

We're often taught that mistakes are bad and are even punished for making them. It's hard to unlearn that way of thinking. Yet, if we look at the way humans are designed, we learn by making mistakes. Ironically, we learn to walk by falling down. If we never fell down, we would never walk. It's a simple truth that I sometimes forget along my journey. If I know what I want and have pure intention about getting or creating it, I can move mountains. That doesn't make it easy. It often requires facing my fears and experimenting with new attitudes and behaviors, at the risk of embarrassment or worse.

What's the moral of this story? Sometimes I win, and sometimes I learn. My fear of failure is real, but it isn't the problem. It's how I handle fear and failure that makes the difference in my life. My failures have made me stronger and smarter, especially when I've taken my losses and

turned them into victories. The key to leveraging my fears is having reached the realization that I cannot walk down the road of life holding hands with comfort and growth simultaneously. I choose to face my fears because I can't hide in my shell and at the same time shine my light.

THE END

RESOURCES

Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within by Robert Quinn

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

How to Stop Worrying and Start Living by Dale Carnegie

Live a Difference: An Interactive Book by Marta Wilson and Cindy Schilling

Rich Dad, Poor Dad by Robert Kiyosaki with Sharon Lechter

The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By by Carol Pearson

The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life by Robert Fritz

The Survivor Personality: Why Some People Are Stronger, Smarter, and More Skillful at Handling Life's Difficulties...and How You Can Be Too by Al Siebert

Work Miracles: Transform Yourself and Your Organization by Stephen Hacker, Marta Wilson, and Cindy Schilling

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