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Failure

It is not your first failures or your latest success that define you but it is the accumulation of experiences that become the gems from which you weave the necklace of your life. Sometimes the failures shine and sparkle more brightly than the successes because from them you learn lessons of incalculable value. Sometimes our successes come so easily because they are built on our God-given talents that we have little perspective on their magnitude. People watching you operate in your gifts – whatever they are, singing, dancing, writing, business, speaking, teaching ... – are awed by the performance because it may be at a level beyond their abilities or dreams. And yet you take this gift for granted, not in a negative sense but in the same sense that the fish looks at water, or the eagle the sky. It is a given of your existence.

The challenge for talented people (and each of us have absolutely different talents) is to use the gift to build beyond the easy, to push, to learn, to change, to transform, to create the work of art that is “our” life. We can treat our ocean-going vessels as rowboats keeping near the shore or we can unfurl the sails and let the winds of our talent take us to far-a-way places and amazing adventures. Every journey into the unknown has its own dangers whether it’s storms or rocks (or in the days of sailing no winds where you just sit and wait – I think that would be called patience!)

There is something worse than failure – it is knowing that you haven’t pushed the boundaries of your talents. It is that you took this amazing gift and buried it. We have made failure the boogey man of life without explain to our children that failure is often the foundation and stepping stones to success.

History is full of stories of success built upon failure – Edison and the light bulb, the life of Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill. Failure does not define you but what you do after failure frames the definition of your success. Ironically, it is failure (or the possibility) that gives zest to life. When my children were young and were learning to play board games

losing would bring them to tears and frustration. (They are like their parents who like to win.) So, we would start over. I would let them go first. They would roll the dice and I would announce that they were the winner. They looked at me strange. “Let’s play again.” And we would repeat the same scenario. After doing that several times I would ask “Is this fun?” Of course they said “No.” (I also could read their minds –“You’re crazy Dad.”) “So, is it just winning or playing that’s fun?”

That is the question each of us must ask ourselves – is it just winning or playing that’s fun? Don’t get me wrong winning is wonderful and losing sucks but you can’t win meaningfully unless you are in the arena. Great artists (and you are the great artist of your life because no one can paint it like you or compose your songs) use their talents as a base from which to build being personally driven to greater heights and depths.

The world makes fame and beauty and money the determination of success but when you are sick or lonely or hurting isn’t it the nurse, the pastor or the teacher who embodies what real success is? Being there, using their gifts to comfort and bless others. As a Christian Montessori teacher our success is rarely measured in time but will only be revealed in eternity. God asks if you are willing to let Him determine the definition of your life’s success.

If—

BY RUDYARD KIPLING
(‘Brother Square-Toes’—Rewards and Fairies)
If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt
you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your
master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your
aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to,
broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out
tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and
sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your
virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common
touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!