

The Missing Ingredient to Greatness



Send him mail.



"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

The common person alive today will live his whole life believing his fate is enacted by forces entirely beyond his control. This is, perhaps, the biggest reason why most people are so sickeningly contented with mediocrity. They are convinced the lot they are currently given is the lot they will always receive, until chance or the fates feel kind enough to shower them with a one-shot blessing grand enough to alter their present lives' courses. They willfully cement their identities around it. Anyone who lives and acts not by his own choice, but by the circumstances bombarding him from all directions at any given moment, is not really living at all.

For years I've struggled to understand this disgusting human tendency to neuter one's own power and ability. I know that the reasons for this behavior are probably multitude... frighteningly inadequate parenting, lifelong physical and emotional malnourishment, the zoo-like conditions of modern city life, the constant threat of punishment and oppression from the armed madmen running society... but, perhaps, the crux of the matter lies entirely on a more internal level. Maybe the reason most people never believe that it is in their power to succeed is because they have also never really experienced the opposite either.

Maybe most people have never ever truly failed in life. I don't mean to say most people have never experienced hardship. No, even in America we all have times when the stuff really hits the fan, if not in a financial sense, or in a "getting hit by a bus on the way to the grocery store" bad luck sense, then certainly at the very least through emotional turmoil at some point or another. But hardship does not mean failure. Failure means being forced to realize, accept, and have your life permanently altered by the inescapable knowledge that you gave something everything you had and were ultimately still useless and unable to do what you know needed to be done.

The reason most people never fail is the same reason most people never succeed: they

have become accustomed to never trying. Even when it happens, it becomes all too easy and convenient to pass our failures off as, once again, situations of circumstance and chance, or even worse, blinding ourselves to our own failures by casting them off as someone else's fault. For everyone, failure is a destructive experience. It tears us apart internally. That's why we so fervently struggle to avoid experiencing it. The pain grows so intense and awful that we believe, perhaps rightfully so, that the only way to escape the overwhelming torture of facing the consequences of our shortcomings is to lobotomize the portion of our minds which allow such pain to exist in our windows of subjective experience. The death of human ambition begins with life's first real failure and its unbearable anguish. Suicide is the exit strategy of the man who believes his failure is permanent and recovery impossible. The admission of failure is a dangerous thing indeed.

Understanding, on every conceivable level, that something terrible was your fault entirely, that it was your weakness, your inability to act, and your poor judgment which has allowed some terrible event to pass may be the worst thing you ever have to experience. But if it doesn't completely destroy your will to live, what's left of your spirit just might be strengthened and forged enough by the fires of torment to turn you into someone far more righteous and stronger than before. Think of the most cherished stories of heroism our cultures continue to pass down and recycle. The hero's quest could never rightfully be called a quest if failure was never an option and not faced regularly on the way to higher greatness and eventual emergence as the true hero. The hero never starts that way. It's not his greatness alone that we admire; it's everything he had to do along the way to becoming great.

Without an origin story, we don't care what happens next. Luke had to confront his own inner darkness, embodied as Vader, to become a Jedi Knight. Tony Stark had to make up for a lifetime of shallow pleasures and corrupt business dealings, and in doing so underwent the necessary character transformation to become the superhero Iron Man. Link must continually be reincarnated through countless iterations of the same basic fable, each time working his way up from mild-mannered forest child to eventually conquering all-powerful enemies and earning the title Hero of Time. The survivors of Oceanic 815 each had to come to terms with their respective sinful pasts through all that eerie island drama to become balanced people and earn a final moment of reward with the friends who helped them complete the journey. Jesus grew up a humble carpenter, confronted the devil for 40 days alone in the desert, willingly sacrificed himself to end all the evil in the world, and had his glorious reemergence as the champion of men. We like stories like these, and countless more, because they touch something deeply embedded in the human psyche: that undeniable desire to do what seems impossible... and succeed against all odds.

I can't be sure why this ambition for greatness rests so heavily in our hearts, even if we never act upon it in our own lives. In many ways, it seems counter to the natural laws of

promoting survival. Great risk-takers face great prospects of dying young and never reproducing. Under normal circumstances this is generally true in any group population. But if you remember that it was only the most adventurous, only the biggest risk-takers, and only those most willing to attempt the impossible among our species who survived the rapidly changing climate and ecosystems of the prehistoric past, and that consequently every single person on the planet is directly descended from the most heroic and ambitious primates who ever lived, it is suddenly not so hard to understand why human beings have such a high appreciation for greatness. Perhaps we are bred through natural selection to seek heroism.

So what happened? Where have all the heroes gone? How did we ever come to live in this vanilla world without that excitement and lust for exceptionalism that our ancestors once cultivated but now exists only as a passing glow in emotional spikes when we see an exciting movie and get lost in a video game or book? I don't know, but somehow we got scared. We are so, so goddamn scared to live and explore and achieve anything outlying and unusual because we don't know what will happen. We don't know what will happen because we are still infants who were never pushed out of the cradle and forced to experience real uncontrollable falling. We never got to struggle, helplessly, with every particle of effort we contained to fix our lives or the world at large, and as such we never got to feel that soul-crushing dismay of learning how almost absolutely powerless we were against it all.

Almost absolutely powerless. But that "almost", that tiny sliver of real power that every living person has is amazing when finally fully appreciated. Maybe this is why people change so dramatically after near-death experiences or other situations of complete and instant change of circumstance. For a moment they did lose everything, or at least believed they did, and yet here they are still alive and able to talk about it, still able to tell the story and continue acting in the world. There's nothing like the perspective of having even a single moment of true powerlessness to make you appreciate how the simple act of conscious choice is all the power you will ever need (or have).

Even the smallest real power when leveraged can continue to grow, so long as the constraints of time and space will allow for it, through that most wonderful of human components called *the mind*. We are not, like so many of the other life forms on this planet, limited to our starting conditions in life because we can conceive of infinite possible futures and work to change the flow of entropy. We can build up structures of complexity and organization which never could have come to exist through natural forces simply because we can *conceive* of them and act upon that conception. That second half of the formula, the acting is the truly courageous part because only acting is where the possibility of failure exists.

The hippies, new-agers, and eternal optimists are only half right. Thinking, dreaming,

wishing, intending, praying, believing, and meditating upon anything will never be enough. Ideas are the start, but action is the end. It is so tempting to stay in the security of philosophy and ideology, because in there can be no failure and no real consequence from ideas alone. In imagination, right and wrong cease to be relevant concepts. Contradictions, refutations, and most importantly, failures cannot reach you there. Ideology is the refuge of the perpetual child still unwilling to flee the nest and break his legs on the hard ground so far below... so afraid to fight for his own life and truly act upon what he believes because he knows that if he fails, and he probably will, that it will destroy his spirit completely. So religion, politics, and hordes of other well-intentioned “movements” are born out of that initial faulty premise: that by wishing something to be true, by talking about it and living as though it were true, agreeing that it is true, it becomes true.

If you want to fix the world, it requires a new breed of men capable of doing the most terrifying and difficult things without reservation; men who can achieve the seemingly impossible. It's the only way to replace the short-sighted, short-term “solutions” dominating the playing field today and for all of history. And unfortunately, the mantle falls upon every individual, however few, who understands this to step up and become the new leaders, actors, and champions. No one else is going to do it, and you're not helping anything by expecting them to. But to succeed at this, or anything else worthwhile, you must first experience true failure.

Just once, really test yourself. Try, try again until you see where your limits lie, and you come to realize that no matter how strong you are there is always something so much bigger, darker, and more insurmountable than you could have previously believed. Hit the ground and, for but a passing time, let yourself crash and burn. Hard. Learn the depths of your own ability to experience psychological shame and terror at your own hand. I say this because I know that if you walk away from the experience you will do so with the knowledge that you have seen into the furthest depths and blackest darkness of your capacity to feel... and you will know you can take it. You will know that every demon hiding within you was not enough to kill you. And when you know what you can take, what you can survive and still maintain the will to try, you will not fear ambition any longer. You won't fear the unknown because you will know that whatever it is could not be worse than the suffering you inflicted on yourself through acknowledgment of your own weaknesses. And you will be motivated every single day of your life to further remove those weaknesses so that no one will ever have to be hurt again because of them. Not you. Not anyone else. Ever.