There are times in life when we find ourselves seemingly tapped out, and digging into our deepest inner resource to find some hidden potential with which we can face our opportunities for growth.

There are times that perhaps the only thing we have left is the will which tells us to hang on.

It is of these times that I wish to speak this month...and I want to do it from the perspective that 'F' words have in our lives: Fear (Fight, Fly, Freeze), Fatigue, Failure, and last but not least, Faith.

An oft-quoted euphemism suggests to us that there is no such thing as failure, merely an opportunity to learn. Perhaps there is some truth to the statement, but it is not quite as simple as it might seem. Learning isn’t about success or failure. It is about discovery, about finding out who you truly are. True, deep, learning is as much an inner journey as it is the navigation of an outer landscape. It has little to do with knowledge per se, and has much to do with experience and ultimately, the acquisition of wisdom.

So let’s take a look at this thing that we have collectively labelled as failure.

Unless we are arrogant enough to think that we have never ‘failed’ in life, it doesn't matter how, or even what we define failure to be, we each have our own perspectives and experiences to bring to the discussion. Perhaps it doesn’t even matter where we experience failure...be it in our academics, our relationships, our careers, our health, our families, our finances...I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest to you that deep failure in any of these areas teaches the same lesson.

For sure, I have known my own failures in life. If you push me in my moments of self-doubt, I will tell you that my entire life is a colossal series of failures, but I know that to be a lie. In my more enlightened moments, I will be able to tell you that I have never failed because, ultimately, there is no such thing. Most of the time I live somewhere in the middle...I am not enlightened, I am merely on my own personal journey...full of lessons and opportunity.

So what is failure? From my current perspective on the road of life, the potential for a perception of failure occurs when some expected outcome does not materialize in the physical, psycho-social, emotional, financial, and/or spiritual domains of our lives in the way in which we had imagined it would (or should).

And there’s the first lie: Outcomes and events are what happen. There is no such thing as what ought to be, or what should be...only what is. It is the mis-match between what we think ‘should’ be and what exist that causes us so much distress.

But to return to the subject matter, times of perceived failure can devastate us. If the lesson is sufficiently intense, such times can leave us broken, traumatized and unable to see a way back to our former selves.

And there’s the second lie. There is no
A Multiplicity of F’s contd.

formr self to which to return, there is only the new self, defined by the lesson that we choose to learn from our experiences. So in the face of failure we are confronted by a two more F’s: Fear and Faith. Fear, in turn confronts us with three more F’s: Freeze, Fight, Flee. I’m going to save the Faith bit till the end. I’m going to tackle fear-based outcomes first.

Fear in the face of opposition and obstacles is a natural and survival-based trait. Fear therefore hits us in our deepest self...our survival and security selves...after all we all cling to life and it is fear of death that looms large in the face of seemingly insurmountable opposition and unconquerable obstacles. It is only when we overcome our own fear of death (the unknown), that we understand fear for what it truly is...an absence of Faith.

Fear saps our energies physically, emotionally, spiritually and leads us to fatigue. And, as a dear friend used to tell me: Fear and fatigue make cowards of us all.

Given that most of us are not enlightened enough to have overcome fear...what do we do in the face of fear? When we face an opponent or obstacle on the road of life, in any domain of our being we face three choices. First option: We can fight. That is to throw everything we have at the event regardless of the eventual outcome (remember I said I’d leave faith till the end). Second option: We can quit and do something else. Third option: We can be frozen into inaction. At any given moment any one of those might be the right choice. I’m not here to judge the choices we make, I am merely here to explore the possibilities of seeing something other than failure in the road ahead. There are times when choosing to fight is undoubtedly the correct path and others when all that fighting will achieve is escalated conflict, where another choice could lead to acceptable resolution. And, no I’m not talking about surrender, I’m talking about a change of tactics to achieve the desired strategic goal. There are times when choosing a different path is a wise choice. Some may see choosing a new path as quitting an old path. At times, for sure, maybe it is. Like I said, I’m not here to judge, merely explore choices. Unfortunately though, all too often we change paths when things get seemingly too difficult, rather than give a truly committed push to reach our desired goal. In moments when we choose to walk away we have demonstrated our lack of resolve. In coaching, I ask two questions of my clients: How important is xyz to you? How committed are you to xyz? We can all be in relationships that we see as important but to which we are not truly committed. Under such circumstances, we are in fact truly committed to something else, and when obstacles emerge, we change paths in accordance with the things to which we are truly committed.

Lastly, in the face of perceived potential failure, we can freeze. Sometimes pausing can be a time to regroup, re-evaluate and replenish our resources, prepare and repair. Sometimes freezing is a function of our inability to see the path ahead and our inability to see the ‘right’ choice. Maybe there isn’t a ‘right’ choice in the moment. Maybe there isn’t an ideal choice, or even an acceptable choice, so we are left with a manageable choice...and we go from there. Again, the choice presented is a test of resolve, commitment.

If I have learned anything in the last four years, it is what I do when I am confronted by the perception of potential failure. For sure, I have been pushed to the limits of my abilities in a number of life domains during the last few years, but then again, when I retired and put myself back into Oriental Medical school in 2012, I had a good sense of what I was giving up to do it, and (only) some (small) sense of what it might take to chart a successful path through the program. In the last four years I have been confronted by perceptions of potential failure in a number of areas: emotional, spiritual, academic and financial. Often, I have been given opportunities to face myself on multiple fronts at the same time. I have

“It’s O.K. to have the thought, just don’t let the thought have you”

Anonymous
known deep struggles, opposition, obstacles and moments when there seemed no viable path forward. I have known moments of despair, extreme self-doubt and a total sense of inability. And yet, for some reason I have kept going.

It is possible that I could do better to write this article once I have graduated from school, passed my national boards and become licensed in oriental medicine...but you know what? it wouldn’t make any difference. The simple truth is that as intense as this part of the journey has been, the end of this particular phase will not mark the end of learning opportunities in my life.

For four years I have placed myself in an incredibly intense crucible of learning and I chose to do it willingly, knowing that it would require that I dig into the deepest untapped parts of my being to find the resources necessary to chart a path to the end of the program. In part I had a sense that I was taking my entire life to date, and putting it to a test of potential...to prepare a vessel if you will, a vessel in which I could undertake the next portion of my life, as a practitioner of Oriental Medicine. Not wishing to diminish anything else I have done in my life, but this is the most important thing I have ever done and is the culmination of everything I have learned to this point.

In the last few months, when things have been so intense as to leave me with what I thought was nothing left with which to get through the program, I have discovered just how committed I am to getting through this program and becoming the practitioner that I see in my heart. During the summer and the early part of the fall, I thought I was tapped out mentally, physically, emotionally and at the end of my resources on a number of fronts. All I had was the will to go on. (Shades of “If” by Rudyard Kipling). Part of the will to go on, however, stems from an unassailable sense of our major, definite purpose (Napoleon Hill).

Again, I am brought back to questions I ask my coaching clients: What do you want? What are you willing to do to get there?

Again, it doesn’t matter whether the proximal event is finding a path through academic, relationship, business, health or career challenges or any other area of our lives where we court potential disaster and failure. How do we fuel the will to persevere in the face of fear and in the face of our perceptions of potential failure? Simply, there are times that all you have left is Faith. So where does that come from? Inner faith? Outer faith? Both? Doesn’t really matter. Faith is an intangible quality and we give it all manner of labels. When we lose faith, we lose our focus, we lose our way...we quit, we fail....any and all of that becomes possible in the absence of faith. When my own candle of faith seemed to grow dim, it was those who believed in me who held my candle for me, reminded me of what I could not see in the moment and helped me to sustain my belief in this path.

So I suppose it all really does come back to faith, hope and love doesn’t it?

Faith in the inevitable outcome and faith that the inner and outer resources will manifest in the right ways at the right moment. Hope in the value of the mission and the purpose that underscores the journey. Love of the goal, of self, of others, of those for whom we serve and are willing to commit our lives. How committed are you?

Ultimately then, there is no failure...there are our perceptions of what we interpret as potential failure. So in his answer to Hamlet, Nietzsche was probably right: Those who withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, emerge having discovered deeper personal resources. I know I have, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to do so. Perhaps, too, I am even more grateful to those amazing people who have stood by my side during the darkest of my moments. ☺

“You have been disappointed, you have undergone defeat [...], you have felt the great heart within you crushed until it bled. Take courage, for these experiences have tempered the spiritual metal of which you are made— They are assets of incomparable value”

Napoleon Hill
In Transition?

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