

Pathways

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“All genuine progress results from finding new facts.”

—John Gardner

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Failure

We could begin this month's newsletter lead article by looking at the fact that I have failed to get this month's newsletter out.....on time. Instead let's look at what is perhaps, the true meaning of failure.

Among motivational speakers, there is a mantra that the only difference between successful people and everyone else is that successful people have had more failures. So what is it they are attempting to tell us? I get the impression that failure is merely an inevitable step on the journey to success, and that eventual success is itself an inevitability. From that perspective then, I believe that failure isn't the issue...the real values are hope, courage, tenacity and willingness to undertake risk.

What is it that causes a bankrupt business person to launch a multi-million dollar company, or a failed politician to become the President of the United States, or an addict to build a new life, or a divorced person to re-marry? What common thread runs through all these examples, and countless others that I could list.

When hope fails, dreams fade.

Everyone who fails and quits is bereft of hope. They may have the courage to *try* again, but if they don't believe in the possibility of ultimate success, then there will be no irresistible drive to strike out one more time in the face of apparent failure.

I have said many times that Judo is all about falling over and getting back up again...indeed, this may be its deepest, greatest lesson. The lesson of getting up one more time than you are thrown is perhaps the most pervasive, most

useful lesson you can ever learn in life. For in that lesson are all the ingredients of success: Hope for the future, trust in the process, courage to do it again, willingness to risk another failure and the tenacity to go on regardless of the possible risk.

We could even argue that there is no such thing as failure, there are merely stepping stones to our future. I could look at all the mistakes and failures I have made (and continue to make) in my life and see my life as a pathway of error, but that would be a poor shadow of reality. In reality, my life is a series of lessons, some of which were quite hard, but all of which, have brought me to today, sitting here, writing newsletters....every month.

I like the analogy of a plane flying from LAX to Honolulu....most of the time the on-board navigation computer is making minor adjustments to keep the plane on course. Hawaii is a tiny dot of land in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and even a minor course error of a degree would put the plane hundred of miles off target and in the ocean. Failure is a lot like the analogy; each failure we make in life is a signal from the on-board navigation computer that we need a course correction to land on that plot of land called success.

So, how's your on-board navigational computer system doing? How many course adjustments have you made? Do you believe in the ultimate destination? After all, you can't see Honolulu from LAX....nor could Columbus see the New World when he set out on his voyage of discovery.

Success

I like to think that success in an inevitability.

Sooner or later, if you learn the right lessons from your experiences, have the courage to risk failure time and time again and the tenacity to hang on long after everyone else has called it quits (and quite often when others are calling you a fool for doing so), success is assured.

The fundamental point here is that nothing will be achieved without faith in the inevitability of a successful outcome or the hope of success. All of which neatly brings me to my main point.

It seems to me that there are two types of people in the world: There are those who believe that the world is a dangerous place full of snares and pitfalls and that success is as much a matter of being in the right place at the right time as it is a function of careful planning and execution. There are also those who believe that living in the world is designed to be a journey of success. They have faith that "all things will work together for good", and they have hope in an outcome that they cannot see from their current vantage point. So it comes back to this: There are those who live in fear and those who live in faith. These, it seems, are mutually exclusive positions.

Suppose for a minute that that the talents and abilities that are unique to each of us, are merely personal tools that as a society are to be used for the improvement of the whole. There is something synergetic about this: I have skills that you do not have and you have skills that I do not

have. We need each other to truly succeed as both individuals and as a society at large.

There are three things that I can look at in my own life in which it never entered my mind that failure was an option, until I was well into the process. Firstly there was my education. I had several hiccups along the way, but from the age of twelve onward, I *knew* that I was going to get a Ph.D. and become a university professor. My whole being was set upon this course and I would pay any price to get there. Something I did not figure into the bargain, was the price that others would pay along the way. (But that's a wholly different article.) The second thing I did in which I never saw the possibility of failure was my journey in the martial arts. I never doubted that I would get to black belt and beyond. In fact my goals in this regard have been extended as the years have gone by and I have exceeded my wildest dreams as a child. The journey has taken a lot of unexpected turns along the way, but at this point in my life I would consider my martial journey to have been an unqualified success. The third thing would have to be the business venture itself. I have said before that the thought of failure never entered my mind when I got started. True, we have had some exceedingly close calls and I have spent more than a few sleepless nights thanks to the business, but the business is in its tenth year...and that's not too shabby for a martial arts school.

Now comes the tricky part....success is

relative. Success is what I decide to call it. From the perspective of other university professors, my accomplishments might not look that impressive. Equally I am not a world famous martial arts competitor, nor has my business been traded on the stock exchange, making me a billionaire overnight. But you know what? None of that matters to me.

I define success in my own way and do not seek the world's approval for doing so.

Success, much like failure, is an internal thing. In the eyes of the world we may fail time and again, but in our own hearts we are successfully discovering all the ways that do not work. On the one hand (from the outsider's perspective) we have not learned anything, on the other, we are that much closer to our ultimate success. It does not matter how many times we successfully discover the ways in which the thing will not work, what matters is that we have faith in the process, believe in the eventual inevitable success of the enterprise and cling to hope.

One of the nagging residual thoughts that I would like to leave you with is this: If success truly is what we wish it to be and is an inevitable outcome of staying the course....why is it that we aim so low? Why don't we shoot for the stars? Why do we settle for less than our fullest potential?

Could it be that we fear not our failures, but our very own success?☺

"We never reach our ideals, whether of mental or moral improvement, but the thought of them shows us our deficiencies, and spurs us on to higher and better things."

Tyron Edwards

Try and can't....again

If you have been around me for any length of time either at the university or at the dojo, then you will know that two of my pet peeves are “try” and “can’t”.

My personal take on these two words is that they are two of the most corrosive words in the lexicon. From twenty years of teaching and advising students I can tell you almost categorically that when a student tells me that he or she can't or will try, I can predict the outcome with a high degree of certainty. Students who tell me at the beginning of the semester that they will “try to get an A” rarely do. Students who tell me that they “can't do science” have an extremely tough time overcoming the mental obstacles that they have created for themselves.

For me it was foreign languages and math. I loved French when I was in my pre-teen years, but developed a major phobia for it by the time I was in the equivalent of Junior High. It was not until my doctoral supervisor announced that I was going to take classes in German and Russian, that I faced that phobia and actually began to enjoy foreign languages again. I never have quite overcome my math phobia. I'm still trying! (Yes, that was a deliberate point...we are, all of us, works in progress.) With foreign languages it was a non-negotiable hurdle of getting my doctorate. There was no point trying...it was either do it...or not get the doctorate.

So we have a choice at these moments. We can either do a thing

grudgingly or we can do it with an attitude of learning as much as we possibly can from the process. The net result as far as foreign languages went for me, was that I re-discovered the fun in learning them.

Over the years I have learned that saying “I'll try” and “I can't” are almost guaranteed obstacles to the successful negotiation of any challenge we face in life. They are the roadblocks that we erect along the way that trip us over time and time again...simply because we let them do it. I think that part of the problem is that we have been habituated to believe that trying is somehow noble and praiseworthy....which, in itself is alright. The problem comes because we develop subtle overtones to the meaning of the word “try.”

An example from mythology could be useful here...Arthur pulled Excalibur from the stone. All the other knights tried and failed, Arthur tried and succeeded. In my view of things, Arthur didn't *try* at all...he simply *did*. So we are either trying and falling short of the mark or we are doing and succeeding. Yoda is right: “Do or do not! There is no try!” Perhaps if we took Arthur's mythic example and Yoda's philosophy to heart we would all be engaged in a lot more *doing* and a lot less *trying*.

As for “can't”...I have even fewer nice things to say. “Can't”, is, quite possibly one of the most devastating things we can say to ourselves, simply because it is an immediate self-limiter.

Whatever it is that I believe I can't do....I can't do....and what's more to prove it, I'll try to do it and fail....see I told you! Can't is a self fulfilling prophesy. It is a word that sells us short of our true abilities every single time.

All of which brings me back to my students who “can't” do martial arts, or “can't” do science. My task is always to get them to see past their own limitations and take a risk....and another risk....and another if needs be. During this process my students have to lean on my confidence in their nascent abilities, because I am the one with the hope. Often times my students will tell me that they don't believe that they can achieve the desired goal.

If we go back to the previous two articles, people whose credo is “can't” neither have faith nor hope in a successful outcome for whatever it is that they believe they can't do. And this is what does them in, every single time.

“Can't” robs us of faith and robs us of hope. “Can't” shackles our abilities and cages our potential until old age and comfort simply accept the self imposed limits of performance.

How truly, truly sad.

So the next time you feel like saying “I'll try” or “I can't” think twice. Think of the consequences that these words will have and replace them with “I will do” and “I can.”

Ultimately though, it is your choice, no-one else can do this for you, only you can do it!☺

“Progress is always the product of fresh thinking, and much of it thinking that which, to practical men bears the semblance of dreaming”

- F.D.R

Success and Our Children

It is odd to me that we measure success and failure against one another... as though one were the antithesis of the other. Throughout this newsletter I have endeavored to show that they are in fact like a yin and yang of life. In one is a small element of the other, and one cannot exist without the other. Like the little yin yang symbol at the end of each article the two so-called opposites are completely entwined and inseparable. One defines the other, but seeing them as opposites creates the problem.

If I am a failure at something I cannot be a success...or at least that's the conventional wisdom. I have never exactly seen things this way. We can learn from both success and failure. In fact, it could be argued that some of the most well-adjusted children learn this lesson early on in life. They fall over, they get up and they go at it again...whether it's climbing on the jungle gym, riding a two-wheeled bicycle or learning algebra.

I think that we do our children a disservice when we leap to their aid. When we fix their problems and do not allow them to fall over (literally and figuratively), we rob them of valuable life lessons.

One of the lesson plans we have in the dojo is to set the children a task and let them figure out potential solutions on their own. Sometimes the answers work, sometimes they don't, but what we don't do is provide the answer. In this sort of lesson plan the children learn to work as a team, take risks, share ideas, get it wrong, fail bunches of times and eventually enjoy some modicum of success.

There are consequences to failing, there are consequences to success and there are consequences to robbing people of the learning opportunity that exists between the two end points.

If, however, we look at failure as an end point in itself rather than as an inadequate supply of the right infor-

mation, tools, skills and / or method, then we are blinding ourselves to the lesson. Failure teaches us to change the mix of resources or to attempt a different approach or find a new way of doing something. If we fall over as children often enough in a nurturing and relatively benign environment, then we learn to take risks and we learn to take possession of the problem. We learn to see the world as a place where failure is not a devastating attack to our self-esteem. We also learn to figure things out on our own and are less prone to say things like "I can't" or "I'll try". We begin to cultivate a sense of "can do" and begin to believe that there is little that we will face in life that, given the correct resources, we will not be able to master. This is a rich gift to give a child.

All we have to do is step aside and let the lessons do their work. Our main task, therefore, as parents and teachers is to provide the opportunity, warn of the positive and negative consequences and let the child figure things out for him or herself.

One of the really neat things about this approach to parenting and teaching is that sometimes our children come up with completely unforeseen solutions to problems...some of them are successful, some are total disasters...but each of them is a wonderful brick in the child's fortress of self-esteem. Each brick will build a solid foundation for later life, when the lessons come with larger price tags.

One of the unforeseen benefits is that we do not burden our children with our own preconceived notions of how things are supposed to be done...we don't burden our children with our own baggage.

So...anyone want to give a really nifty gift to their kid???

November						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

December						
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11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

January						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

- ◆ Akayama Winter Camp, Mobile, AL, MLK weekend, January, 2006
- ◆ T'ai Chi Clinic, SMAA, January 28th, 2006

Give a gift to someone you love for a

REALLY

NEW YEAR!

*Take advantage of our offer:
20% off enrollment fee for the holidays*

Get involved in some fun cardio

*Come out and join our newest classes in
Aerobics and Cardio Kickboxing*

Have fun AND get fit!!

Monday, Tuesday at 12:00 noon

Thursday, Friday at 6:15 a.m.