

I'm glad I'm a failure

By Heidi A. Lawson



A little over two years ago I started a company with a co-founder, gave notice at my then-job, and jumped into being an entrepreneur with both feet. However, eight months into the venture, for a variety of reasons — some of which were out of my control — I decided to part ways with the company I had helped create.

Like every failure, there were consequences.

First, there was the painful reality that I failed. Following that was the embarrassment. I confidently announced I was going to do something, and it didn't happen.

To make matters worse, we had an employee and investors. We had gained some traction in a short period of time and had to formally liquidate the company. Even now I continue to have conversations about what happened and why.

So, why am I glad I'm a failure? I discovered something about myself that I had never really appreciated before: I am not afraid. From starting the company, to making the gut-wrenching decision to part ways with my co-founder, speaking to investors, winding the company down, and then returning to the practice of law full time, I discovered that I have less fear and more courage than I realized.

You see, this was not the first time I had failed. In high school, I lived in foster homes, moving from place to place, dropping out of high school and getting embarrassingly low scores on my SATs. By all conventional measures, I was a failure.

In fact, some might say I was born a failure. I was born into a set of circumstances that would never readily

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support any kind of success. My education up until that point had been poor, at best. I was told by teachers, counselors at school, and even my own family that I would never go to college. I was told I had no chance of success.

Regardless of what most people seemingly thought of my chances of creating a better life, being a failure somehow didn't make sense to me. Even though I was a failure by most standards, the idea that I couldn't somehow transcend my current circumstances seemed ... ridiculous.

When I was 18, I went back to high school at night. I worked two jobs for 10 years and put myself through college. I worked three jobs while attending law school full time.

I petitioned my law school to enter a moot court competition in New York because I was determined to win the competition and get a job at a New York law firm.

Our appellate team beat 32 other

law schools. I won the competition (getting an award for best speaker), graduated second in my law school class, and got a job at an international law firm headquartered in New York.

I'll never forget the job interview. One of the lawyers interviewing me had never met anyone who had worked their way through college. At the end of the interview, she looked at me with disgust and said, "You are so lucky we are even considering somebody like you for a job at this firm."

I realized that the cumulative result of these experiences is that I am not afraid to fail. I have failed. In fact, I am a failure, and I couldn't be happier. Because I am a failure, I am almost completely deaf to the voice of negativity. I rarely hear that voice. Instead, I listen to another voice, a deeper inner truth that believes in me, the core of who I am.

Because I am a failure, I was brave

enough to travel to some of the most remote corners of Russia to adopt our two beautiful daughters. Because I am a failure, I wasn't afraid to step off a cliff and start a company. Because I am a failure, I wasn't afraid to then admit that I had made the wrong decision.

I consider myself incredibly blessed for my path in life. I believe that because of the totality of all my life experiences, I appreciate the journey so much more. I laugh harder and love deeper because I have failed. I put my family first, and I teach my team at work to be brave enough to do the same.

For years I felt that I needed to prove to the world that I wasn't a failure. However, that drive and focus to succeed has shifted, and being a failure has evolved into an amazing internal journey that has resulted in an almost strange but peaceful assurance. I know that if I woke up tomorrow morning with nothing, I would still believe in the truth of who I am. I would pick myself up and start the journey again, wiser and stronger than before.

As I was writing this article, I came across a quote from Theodore Roosevelt's speech in 1910 that sums it up best:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

So, yes, I have failed and chances are I will fail again. To my friends, family, husband, three sons and two daughters, thank you for being by my side. I am standing in the arena, covered in dust and more thankful than I have ever been before.

For anyone who has ever been told they are a failure or will be nothing, I invite you to be brave and listen to a different voice and step into the arena with me.