

**5 The importance of Failure** - why turning away from success leads to the creation of successful messages

Watch a biography of any talented visionary/inventor/artist and you'll see them trace everything back to the emergence of the great idea, showing you how he/she became that great creative force with great clarity. The story told makes the vision of the discoverers in question sound sharp, clear and focused, as if nothing could stop him/her/them. They can make it look so simple, using 20/20 hindsight the way they can. But life doesn't happen like that. It moves slowly forward into the unknown, and people meet their fortunes and fates on a minute-to-minute basis. I believe some choices do seem clear; but others are determined adding in doses of timing, luck and other factors, too. The reality is that our choices are far more fluid.

I'm interested in the power of the accident and the openness it takes to see the mistakes and go with them, not because they provide answers but because they open up the possibilities all around. Sir Isaac Newton was lucky to be sitting under a tree and have an apple fall on him when he was able to ponder the reason it did so. I was sitting in my room once when a sheet of paper suddenly slipped off the printer and floated to the ground. The windows were closed and I'd been working seated for hours. How'd that happen? I've never forgotten it. Had I been out and returned to pick it off the ground, I'd have wondered who or what force, but seeing it merely succumb to an invisible tipping point... that resonated.

I could bring up numerous examples of discoveries revealed through the power of the accident - it is all available on the web. But in a way, I see so much of what we are and what we do reflected in that quiet moment when I bore witness to the magical floating sheet of paper. Timing allowed me to be there. Fragility allowed forces to act on it so it might ultimately loosen its position and fall. Persistence kept at it slowly over time, until it did so.

We open our eyes and see what is there before us. If it is luck, that's fine with me. But I see every awakening to the power of mistakes as a function of timing, persistence and fragility.

Failure means we are trying. When we are young we know this. We screw up, fall down, get cuts, taste dirt, cry and get up and do it all over again and never once consider any of it failure. We only begin to see it as failure when we are told 1. It IS failure in another's eyes, and 2. Failure is BAD. Then we begin our indoctrination into the conformist rules of society.

There is a story about Thomas Alva Edison's repeated attempts at discovering a good design for a consumer light bulb. Once when getting from the local general store yet another shipment of a metal to be used as a possible filament for his "new invention", the clerk commented on Edison's 700 failed attempts so far, to which he replied with this: "I have not failed 700 times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work."

If Newton's example demonstrates timing and Edison's persistence, we can add an example of fragility by including the following statistic: you are the result of one spermatozoa out of a few million in that one glorious moment of copulation that found the egg. Any other one in that batch and things would have turned out very differently. Enjoy the fragile balance that made you into you.

*[Note: Here below is a reprint of the most credible citation I've found for Thomas Edison's quote on his invention of the light bulb filament:*

*"After we had conducted thousands of experiments on a certain project without solving the problem, one of my associates, after we had conducted the crowning experiment and it had proved a failure, expressed discouragement and disgust over our having failed to find out anything. I cheerily assured him that we had learned something. For we had learned for a certainty that the thing couldn't be done that way, and that we would have to try some other way."*

*The quote above comes from an interview with Edison that was published in the January 1921 issue of American Magazine.]*