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**Failure Makes You a WinnerFailure Makes You a Winner**

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“*I have not failed, I have found 10,000 ways that won’t work*” Thomas Edison

What quality does the Buddha share with Luke Skywalker and Joan of Arc? What links Harriet Tubman with Harry Potter?

It has nothing to do with enlightenment or magic. It has to do with struggle.

These heroes share a key quality: **GRIT**.

There has been [some discussion in the media recently about grit](http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/tomorrows-college/grit/angela-duckworth-grit.html), but many people, especially parents, have been asking me what the term actually means.

I think the best way to describe grit is by starting with Joseph Campbell and his classic analysis of the “hero’s journey.” Campbell explains how the journey always begins when the hero leaves home and all that is familiar and predictable. After that, Campbell writes, “Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed—again, again, and again. Meanwhile, there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land.”

It is grit that makes our heroes face down their dragons and persist in the face of difficulty, setbacks, failure, and fear. They fall down and get back up again. They try their hardest, only to fail miserably. But instead of giving up, they try again and again and again.

And it isn’t just historical or fictional heroes who need to be gritty to rise to the top.

Recent psychological research has found that grit is one of the best predictors of elite performance, whether in the classroom or in the workforce.

Defined by researchers as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,” grit gives us the strength to cope with a run-of-the-mill bad day (or week or season) as well as with trauma or crisis.

It turns out that grit predicts performance better than IQ or innate talent. Grit makes us productive and successful because it allows us to reach our long-term goals *despite* life’s inevitable setbacks. This ability to overcome challenges makes us stronger and more masterful at our tasks. Moreover, the ability to cope with difficulty—or to be resilient after tragedy—paves the way for our long-term happiness.

Grit is not really a personality trait as much as it is a facet of a person’s character that is developed like any other skill. Babies are not born with grit any more than they are born with the ability to speak their mother’s native language. **We humans develop grit by encountering difficulty and learning to cope with it.**

And with that in mind, here’s some perverse “good” news: No life is free from challenges or difficulties—in other words, we’ll all have plenty of opportunities to develop grit.

Out of our setbacks and failures grow the roots of success and happiness. Grandmaster chess players, great athletes, scientific geniuses, and celebrated artists learn, in part, by losing, making mistakes, and failing. Consider this quote from Michael Jordan (who, incidentally, was cut from his high school basketball team):

**“I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”**

The even better news is that most people have the capacity to develop grit. I will be posting more articles about how to foster grit in yourself and others. But for starters, let yourself star in your own hero’s journey. Instead of making excuses and giving up when things don’t go well, dig in. How can your passion help you persist, despite adversity? How can this hard time make you stronger? What unseen benefit might be lurking around the corner?

I’m not suggesting that you invite misery into your life or force yourself always to focus on the bright side. But I do think we’re better off when we see a challenge not just as an inconvenience or injustice but as a chance for what Campbell calls a “boon,” or dramatic win.

Although it might feel hoaky or even arrogant at first, putting yourself on the trajectory of a hero can give you a new perspective on life’s challenges—and new strength to deal with them. (If you want hoaky, choose a theme song! I have a whole “Be Gritty” playlist for when I need to persevere in the face of a setback; my favorite is from one of [Ennio Morricone](http://www.youtube.com/artist/ennio-morricone?feature=watch_video_title)’s soundtracks). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7tIqEgRwJY>)

There are drawbacks to the hero’s journey, of course. For example, you won’t be able to go back to the place where you started: Once you’ve faced down a particularly difficult challenge, you will have grown so much you might hardly recognize yourself. But the advantages to developing grit are great, and the “boon” is almost certainly worthwhile.

**How do you foster grit in yourself? In your children or co-workers?**

\*Duckworth, Angela Lee, and Patrick D Quinn. 2009. “Development and validation of the short grit scale (grit-s).” Journal of personality assessment 91(2):166–74. Retrieved March 5, 2013 (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19205937>).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H14bBuluwB8&feature=player_embedded>