

Chapter 2

Learning to See Failure in a Whole New Light

Martin Parnell – Winning Is Not About the Finish Line

Martin Parnell never considered himself to be sporty.

Raised in an “active” household, Martin was willing to try anything even if it meant he wasn’t as good as his parents or siblings, but he never felt he was good at any one sport. This didn’t bother him; he didn’t define sports as how many times you won or being the best, but rather the quest for being active and experiencing new things. When he immigrated to Canada as an adult, he tried many Canadian sports for the first time – for the fun of it.

Martin’s mantra is “Give it a go.”

As an active, successful professional, loving husband, involved father of two great kids, life was pretty good. Until in 2001 he lost his wife. Around the same time, his kids were launching into the world and leaving home. Suddenly, his whole world shifted on its axis.



For most people, this would be an excuse to wallow in self-pity, lay on the couch and lose hope about a happy future. However, when one of his brothers called to ask if he wanted to run a marathon the following year, despite having never run for sport before, he joined a running club to learn. Martin will be the first one to tell you that it's never too late to try something new.

He trained and ran a 5k, then a 10K, then a half marathon. Just one year from when the idea was first planted, he ran his first marathon with his brothers. This is an incredible accomplishment for anyone, particularly when it's mid-life and you're a non-runner. Completing this event evolved into triathlons and ultras. The goal was not to beat his time or rack up medals. It was the beginning of a new mission.

Martin learned about the charity Right to Play and started his Quests for Kids initiative. His first undertaking was Marathon Quest 250, in which he ran 250 marathons in one year to raise \$250,000 for Right to Play. Over the next five years, Martin undertook ten quests and raised \$1.3 million for the charity.

A massive blood clot in 2015, however, threatened his philanthropic efforts and almost cost him his life. Again, it would have been very easy to cry "why me?" but this is not Martin's style. What caused him to get the energy and focus to run again? A 25-year-old Afghan woman.

Today, Martin is remarried to a wonderful woman, Sue. She brought him an article about a woman in Afghanistan who was committed to running a marathon despite not having a place to train, a coach, proper hydration and, on top of this, endured verbal and physical abuse. As she ran, onlookers yelled obscenities and she was pelted with objects to try to stop her, but she kept on. Martin realized he wanted to run a marathon in Afghanistan and encourage women to pursue sport.

While there, he met Kubra who had been unable to train sufficiently because of a bombing at her school. Martin couldn't face her giving up on her dream. So he ran with her. They did the marathon using



a run-walk method (they ran for nine minutes, then walked for one minute) – and seven hours later, they finished the race. If marathons were all about time, Martin and Kubra would have failed, but it wasn't and isn't about that for Martin. It's about what running can do – for your health, for empowerment, for women's liberation, for surpassing your limits. You can choose to see failure or choose to see success. Realizing greatness can be unconventional. When you consider it from this vantage point, you can decide what the story of success is and what failure means to you.¹ As Martin's favourite quote goes:

"You never lose, you either win or learn."

Nelson Mandela

The Tough Stuff is Worth It

Now, to be clear, this is advice I never thought I'd tell anyone, advice it's taken me a long, long time to learn and a lot of researchers' work to demonstrate the evidence for it:

We've got failure all wrong. And we're suffering big consequences personally, professionally and in business because of our unhealthy relationship with failure.

We think failing is something terrible. Would you agree? Did you wake up this morning wondering with glee, "Oh, I wonder how I can fail today?!"

No. We believe failure is to be avoided. Failing makes us un-hireable, unlovable, un-friend-worthy. Failure is something to cover up, hide, ignore or, at the very least, only be admitted to in the privacy of our journal or with a most trusted confidant.

But what if failure wasn't such a bad thing after all?

What if failures were the most wonderful, juicy, meaningful contributions in our lives? What if they shaped us, made us who we are and made us the stuff that other's admired? What if, in fact, it were our becoming?

**What if failures were
the most wonderful,
juicy, meaningful
contributions in your life?**



This relationship with failure, I have come to believe, is the antithesis of our greatness. I don't just believe this from my personal experience. It's from my research, and from having had the privilege of coaching hundreds of professionals, speaking for thousands of people and being a student of human relations.

We all fail. And we all need to fail, sometimes.

*"It's failure that gives you the proper perspective on success."
Ellen DeGeneres*

Why We Need to Fail

Failure is the answer to your greatness and when you embrace your greatness you open the door to being able to see and acknowledge others' greatness. What incredible power you have to make a life-changing impact on another person. Seriously think about it for a moment. Your acknowledgement, recognition, praise could be the thing that somebody needed in that moment on the worst day of their life. Seeing that person who doesn't feel seen could be the gateway to them believing that something is possible when they had given up.

Recognizing yourself first, all of your imperfections, all of your efforts whether they proved fruitful or not is still better than not trying at all. In other words, even failure is better than not trying at all.

The importance of failure goes well beyond the field of recognition, employee engagement and employee experience (where I spend most of my professional time). It is your gateway to achieving things that you may not have ever thought possible in your personal life as well.

I'm going to ask you to suspend your interpretations, your assumptions, your beliefs about failure. These are not just your beliefs; as noted earlier, they can be found in any dictionary definition of failure, from the origins of the word. And you can be sure they have permeated your beliefs about yourself, how you relate to others, how you run your team or organization.

Why Talk About Failure

As I shared earlier, what got me fascinated about the concept of failure and became the core focus of this book is that the great Canadians we interviewed spoke of their failures as essential to getting them to where they landed, even if it was a much harder road and one they may not have understood at the time. Failures, traumas and obstacles weren't their undoing (or not for long), it was where the learning, growth and clarity happened. They don't begrudge people or the world for the opportunities they lost, the struggles they endured, the extra effort they had to invest. It made where they are today all the sweeter. Although no one in this humble group would even consider where they are that different from anyone else ... no matter how decorated or famous they are.

They also point out failure is everywhere. Failure is every day. Failure is inevitable. It's not trying to avoid failure that deserves our energy, but harnessing the mindset and consciously creating the life and work context that supports it to enable versus deflate.

Taking a Solution-focused Approach Instead

The root of this book is taking a solution-focused approach. As my co-author and I shared in our first book, *Forever Recognize Others' Greatness*,² embracing this approach is about rejecting the notion that we need to pay attention to all the problems around us. Rather, it is more fruitful, motivating and productive to look for solutions and what is working, even a little bit.

Holly Catalfamo has a great perspective. "I'm known to put my energy into things that I am passionate about and that I feel I will be successful in." She knows what she is good at and pursues those opportunities. For tasks that she doesn't enjoy, she steers in another direction. This approach has earned Holly the Colleges and Institutes Canada – Gold Leadership Excellence Award in 2018 and the National College Sector Educator Award in 2016, from the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.



At its core, a solution-focused approach can be drilled down to three main elements.

1. If it's working, do more of it.
2. If it's not working, try something else.
3. If it's not broken, don't fix it.

Ironically, the nature of speaking about failure in the first place flies in the face of a solution-focused approach. Instead, we'd be more likely to inquire about what's working, get curious about the many more times something works than the few times there is failure or even to avoid using the word failure entirely. I value this perspective. *And*, failure is a part of our daily ruminations, is named in our discussions, is an undercurrent of our cultures (whether it's admitted directly or not), so we must use the word. We must honour where we are in our relationship with failure, be curious about it when it comes up and be able to leave it in the past. This is one of the ways we embrace a solution-focused approach. By dialing down the intensive negative meaning connected to failure, we can begin to focus forward rather than looking back.

The reality is failure usually triggers a focus on problems, gaps and deficits. What one person sees as a problem, however, another may not. More importantly, it gets us stuck and roadblocks progress. When we use a solution-focused lens, we evolve our mindset about failure and we begin to naturally look for the opportunities a failure brings, seeing possibilities.

When you fixate on the problems from failure, you limit hope. As much as hope may sound like an airy-fairy word, it is actually very action-oriented. Think about the last time you lost hope. You were probably not motivated, and you stopped trying, and you may have settled. Now let's think about the last time you were hopeful. According to Hope Theory,³ hope is not just a positive state. It's about setting goals, generating energy to pursue those goals and planning the pathway to realize them. Was this true of your experience?



When people don't accept that failure will happen or are in a context that doesn't accept it, hope shuts down. There is no energy to direct toward goals and steps aren't taken to realize what's possible. People who have a failure-resilient mindset can still feel hopeful in the face of disappointments and setbacks. That is the genius of the individuals we showcase in this book. Failure doesn't set them back but rather propels them forward, to prove people wrong, to realize their goals and to create their own definition of success.

Simply put, the solution-focused approach to failure is that there is nothing broken about us or our context (family, team or organization). If it's not working for us, we can tweak something, change our mindset, make adjustments. One step at a time.

Considering Other Possibilities

One of the reasons we value history (even the painful parts we look back on and wish we could change) is that we know we can learn from our past failures. What caused that dictator to brainwash millions of people to do terrible things? What started the war that led to so much pain, destruction and loss of life? What led us to repress, oppress and cause duress to a group of people (or stand by and watch other nations do it)? Inevitably we ask the question, "How can we keep it from ever happening again?"

Through our failures we seek to learn how to have a better world, be more humane and stop tragedies before they start.

What if we could do the same in our lives? What if we could see past failures as a good thing? I'll be the guinea pig in this exercise (see Figure 2.1). Take some of my failures for example.



Figure 2.1: Flipping Failure for Possibility

Failures I Faced	The Possibilities that Failures Created
I got fired from my first job.	It got me away from an unhealthy work culture.
I had postpartum depression and didn't enjoy my foray into motherhood.	I am more empathetic to people with mental illness.
I didn't get into med school.	It wouldn't have been a good fit with my personality.
I didn't get fast-tracked into my Ph.D.	I would have been five years behind starting my career (and I didn't want to do research for a living anyway!).
I was bullied in school.	It gave me courage to leave everything I knew to save my child from the same fate.
I made poor choices about who my friends were and what I did as a teen.	I'm super honest with my teens about risky behaviour and not to follow in my footsteps.
I followed society's direction to climb the corporate ladder on autopilot.	I jumped off the ladder to start the career I love <i>before</i> I retired.
We got into massive debt that took away our choices.	We dumped the debt to live debt-free (and feel liberated!).

What if you didn't have to believe that failure was the omission of performance, but an awakening to another way of being? What if you only fell short if you didn't make the most of the failures you've had (and will have)? What if success was taking the risk to fail in the first place?



Your Turn: Failure Debunked

Now it's time to get all your failures out of your head – things from your career, your relationships, your health, your leisure, your well-being. Beside each point you make, ask yourself what benefit that failure has had to you personally or professionally. As you will see from my example, some are mindset shifts and others are whole changes to your life course.

Failures I Faced	The Possibilities that Failures Created

Big or small, record what possibility opened up as a result of that failure. What do you notice?