

## Happiness, Failure, and Grace

We do try, and there is progress but, you know, happiness is not the answer.  
The answer lies in doing the work.

“Happy, happy, joy, joy, happy, happy, joy, joy, happy, happy, joy, joy...”  
— Stinky Wizzleteats, *The Ren & Stimpy Show*

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## Happiness

What makes you happy? Is it reward, security, growth, appreciation, helping others, recognition, friends, love, nature, excellence, achievement, novelty, amazement, humor, sharing, wealth, solitude, excitement, ecstasy, self-improvement, great performance, power, celebrity, self-expression, exercise, discovery, adventure, sex, attention, guiding others, helping others, being valued, community, intimacy, shopping, or revelation? Maybe it's a mix of all of these, or something more than any of them.

Nothing makes happiness. It's a state, not a thing. It's generated by chemicals produced in your brain. If you don't produce them, then nothing will make you happy.

A healthy dog is always happy. It doesn't need anything to make it so aside from a lack of stress. If you're not similarly always happy, then I don't think you're really happy, you're temporarily unstressed. You say you're happy because that's your best guess and all you can think of. Happiness is what you remember happiness to be.

Unless you are always naturally happy, like a dog or the Laughing Buddha, then you're provisionally happy and it will only last as long as there's something to stimulate it. For you, if you're like most people, happiness is a state of relief and satiation that can be brought on by many things.

Is your happiness like other people's happiness? Do you act like them when you're happy, do you smile and talk like them? Is happiness more real when it's being shared by many people at a party, in a group, or just with a friend? Maybe—just to be completely chemical about it—anything is happy if you feel happy and it's just a matter of degree. Something causes it and the more of "it" there is, the happier you are.

Heroin users say the rush is better than any happiness you can imagine. I don't doubt it; it's chemical. Do you think you could be as happy as they can be? Does it have less merit than your happiness because it fails to contribute to society, or is not a reward for responsible action? Should we aspire to a happiness that's so great that it's worth dying for?



We're trained to accept provisional happiness as true happiness. We're given a happiness that's like a cork on a choppy sea and we're asked to trust in the good times—love and family—and shrug off the bad like water off a duck's back; to dismiss them as other people's problems. Be happy with the circumstances you've been accorded on the provision that we do what we've been taught to do.

What if social norms turned against your pursuit of happiness? Many people like to hunt animals. There have been times when burning people was considered a fun and positive moral lesson: jews, arabs, negros, witches, christians... It's fairly common for heroic warriors to feel good only when they're killing the enemy, and any enemy will do. It's understandable: it's chemical. If you don't know

about this, I'll spare you the details, just take my word for it. It's not as uncommon as you may think.

## Success

We're taught success is good, we're rewarded for it. We're encouraged to try if we might succeed, and attention is drawn to the reward when we do. Failure is rarely rewarded. Trying is rewarded when it's trying to succeed. We're taught to be depressed by failure. We're taught to see the results of our actions as a reflection of our self-worth. We have so confabulated success with being successful that we've lost sight of the fact that success is not a "doing" of anything. Why have we done this?

Can you remember ever being rewarded or even encouraged to try to fail? Success is good. Trying to succeed is good. Failure is good when it leads to success, or a greater commitment to success. It's OK to fail if you're trying not to. What about failure that's just failure, and that's it. Is it OK to stop there or must it be reframed as some kind of success? What if you tried to fail and did, would that be reframed as success? Do you think this is just a word game?

Success has to be framed. Animals can't conceive of it because it's not a simple thing. We are the only animal that can construct a sentence that defines success. The most that any other animal has been able to accomplish with words is to create an action/object statement, (see "Can an Ape Create a Sentence?" at <http://nottrivialbook.com/2012/03/11/can-an-ape-create-a-sentence/>)

Most of my work in therapy deals with people's confusion around the notion of success and personal value, such as where other people succeeded at my client's expense. People take too short a view of the enterprise in which they find themselves. The proper time-frame is a lifetime, or several.

Many people think they're going crazy when confronted with the choice between upholding their sense of moral value or sacrificing the values they've been taught. What would you think if you loved your father more than anything in the world and then he raped you? To these people I say, "Let go of what you think is crazy. Crazy is where you'll find healing. Crazy is good."

Success may be profitable but it is not good. Success is nothing more than completing the program. Value is defined by the program, not the success in completing it. When you're awarded a high grade you've done nothing more than complete the program. Computers do this all the time and they're not rewarded for it. If they fail they're fixed or discarded. It's nothing personal, it's just the natural order of determinism in a situation that lacks free will.

The next time you're rewarded, awarded, applauded, or commended recognize it's because you acted without free will and performed in a mechanized fashion. Maybe you did something that someone needed, like a surgery or a tax return, or you outperformed someone else for no particular reason, like you held your breath longer or ran a faster mile.

What about invention? That's different.

*I have failed more often, and in a greater variety of attempts, than anyone I know. I also have had some spectacular successes that I would not have experienced if I had not been willing to risk failing. I'll take that a step further and admit that I've learned far more from my mistakes and failures than from any of my accomplishments. You cannot learn without risking failure... Learning requires failure; you won't learn if you are not willing to make mistakes and fail.*

— Curtis M. Faith, in *Way of the Turtle*

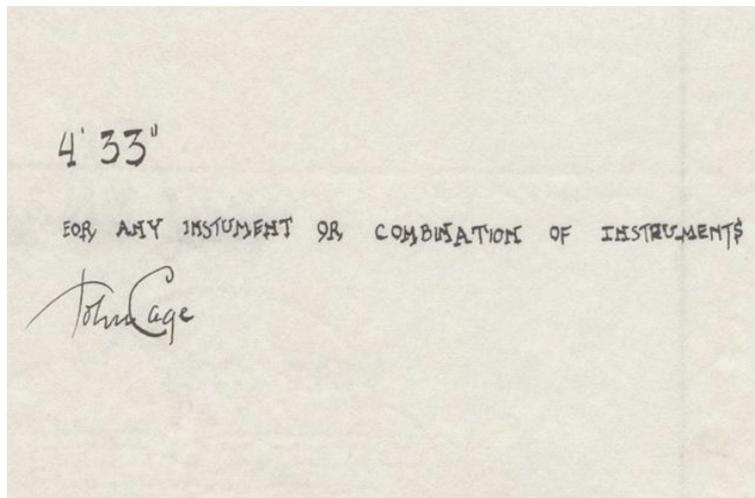
## Invention



“Walking Man II,” by Alberto Giacometti. Sold in 2010 for US\$ 104,000,000.

To create is to fail. You cannot succeed in creating something new because there is nothing yet there to be judged against. When someone succeeds in powered flight, or succeeds in gene therapy, the word “success” is misused. Most people who “succeed” in creating something, create something that is different from what they set out to create. You don’t know where you’re going and there is no test of whether or not you’re getting there. You can’t entirely know what you’re going to achieve if it’s never been done before.

Most of what we recognize as successful creations are creations that achieve something known. That is, they are paths through the unknown that lead back to the known: a heart transplant, flying across the ocean, or striking it rich.



Did John Cage “succeed” with his piece 4’33” which was four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence? If someone comes to me to improve their sleep and they do, have I succeeded or have they? Have I succeeded in therapy when a client feels they are finished? What if I’m trying to crack a nut and I crush the whole thing? What if I take something apart and I can’t put it back together?

The celebrated teacher John Taylor Gatto said that to really succeed on a test, make sure that you get every answer wrong. Jerry Lettvin, another celebrated teacher, used to greet his students by saying, “How can I piss you off today?” Clearly, performances such as these have their place.

What we seem to mean by success is “prevailing over adversity.” Implicit in this is the idea that the resulting goal is known, but the means to it is not. Success, then, is the creative effort to an uncreative goal.

Picasso could not succeed in painting his Guernica, but you can succeed in painting your house. You might think Picasso succeeded, but that is really up to him, and he could call it either way and it wouldn’t make a difference, at least not for that painting. There is a story, probably apocryphal, that Giacometti’s emaciated figures exist only because his agent took his work away from him before Giacometti destroyed them completely.

*From a very early age, the message is drilled into our heads: Failure is bad; failure means you didn’t study or prepare; failure means you slacked off or—worse!—aren’t smart enough to begin with. Thus failure is something to be ashamed of...*

*We need to think about failure differently... Mistakes aren’t a necessary evil. They aren’t evil at all. They are an inevitable consequence of doing something new (and, as such, should be seen as something valuable; without them, we’d have no originality). And yet, even as I say embracing failure is an important part of learning, I also acknowledge that acknowledging this truth is not enough. That’s because failure is painful, and our feelings about this pain tend to screw up our understanding of its worth. To disentangle the good and the bad parts of failure, we have to recognize both the reality of the pain and the benefit of the resulting growth.*

—Ed Catmull, in *Creativity, Inc. Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand In the Way of True Inspiration*

## Failure

Here's the thing: if you think failure is bad then you'll never create anything. Only in the most trivial of cases—those in which success is just a matter of waiting—are you accomplishing anything useful by avoiding failure. To put it another way, creative success is mapping the territory of failure. What's important is the map of all that's there, the discovery of the new territory. The path to the goal is an afterthought.

What if Galileo succeeded in convincing the clergy of the moons of Jupiter and that was all? Then we'd have nothing. His success was revealing the failure of theological knowledge of the cosmos. His success was the public revelation the church's complete failure, and that's why they wanted to kill him.

I think this works in science, too. The Dirac equation is the equation of motion for relativistic electrons, and that's a concrete result. But what's really important is what says that no one thought to ask. From the Dirac equation came antimatter, and that was never the intention. The Dirac equation "succeeds" in predicting antimatter, but it could never have been expected to.

## Sorrow

What if your task on earth is to succeed at a task that you are not aware of? How would you know whether you succeeded or not? If your happiness is based on your success, then how would you know when to be happy?

I think my task on earth may be to understand relationships. I think I inherited this task and that all the members of my family have been working on this project for the last three generations at least. We're making some progress but no one's completely figured it out yet.

If we were happy with our relationships, then we would not be seeing them as failures. Let me put it another way: if the members of my family, including myself, were happy with our relationships then we would not be changing them. They would be stable and we would maintain them as they are. A number of my relatives and ancestors did this: they maintained their relationships with their spouses, siblings, and children without change.

Many of those unchanging relationships were poor. The best relationships were fluid and changed over time. Even when the relationships "failed," it was usually for the better, and some of the relationships that endured were for the worse.

At the same time, I feel my own failed relationships should not have failed, and I'm not going to happily write them off. I'm going to let them nag at me because I know there is something there that's not right. As has been said by generations of sages and poets, "Cultivate heartbreak, it's where the light comes in."

## Money

Happiness is like money. According to Peter Drucker, the scion of modern business management, money is the juice of the fruit of productivity and cannot sustainably exist outside the context of the healthy organism that produces it. One does not acquire money, one harvests it. You reap what you sow. The same is true of happiness.

I would like to suggest that it's not for you to determine when the fruit is ripe. You may want the juice and you may need the juice, but the fruit may take longer to ripen than you can wait. And if the juice is happiness and the fruit is your life's purpose, what then?

My role in my family's project of understanding relationship has gifted me with a family relationship to someone who is emotionally unstable. More than unstable; they cannot sustain happiness for or with anyone. It's an emotional thing. They're broken.

Parents of unhappy children are themselves unhappy partly because they feel responsible—regardless of the truth of the matter—and partly because they cannot help but absorb their children's feelings. When my connection results in a personal attack on me, I cannot help but feel the injury. But it is an act of madness. I should not take it personally. How can I not?

This is an example of where happiness and success conflicts with purpose and necessity. There is much to be learned, and I count my blessings that I can endure these lessons to pass this knowledge to others in my family, community, and to my clientele. Should I be happy? Perhaps. Does it feel good? No.



## Grace

You might say the path is one of grace; to be happy like the Laughing Buddha. I could say the same for many of my clients who also find themselves in inextricably difficult or painful situations. We do try, and there is progress but, you know, happiness is not the answer. The answer lies in doing the work.

As Peter Drucker indicates, happiness, like money, comes when the system is working. You don't aim for the money and you don't aim for happiness, you aim to make the system work. If you aim for the happiness or the money without making the system work, then you may get some of it but it won't last. You might consider yourself a success if you make it last for your lifetime, but the mess you'll leave will be inherited by your children, your clients, and the earth.

Think of environmental destruction as the mess our successful ancestors have left us. Think of your emotionally dysfunctional family as a result of the personal growth work your ancestors chose not to do. Think of the consequences of your success in business for your co-workers, clients, and those who will come after them. Whose happiness is important?

As long as happiness is a goal you will be the tool, and you will be used like a tool. You will be manipulated and you will manipulate others. On the other hand, if sorrow and happiness are states, then you simply let them pass. What you will feel when the work is done right and the system is working is not the happiness of success, it will be something different. A liberation. It will be a feeling that you may not have known before.

*Successful people aren't born that way. They become successful by establishing the habit of doing things unsuccessful people don't like to do. The successful people don't always like these things themselves; they just get on and do them.*

— William Makepeace Thackeray

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