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Allow for Regrets, Failures, and Mistakes

Bob Pittman • Joe Torre • Sir Richard Branson • Dr. Judith Rodin • Mario Cuomo • Anna Quindlen • James Blake • Joseph Abboud • Dr. Mehmet Oz • Daniel Boulud • Preston Bailey • Cathie Black • Matt Lauer • Mark Burnett • Diane von Furstenberg • Norman Lear • Maria Bartiromo • Bill O’Reilly

One of the most compelling things I learned in the process of writing this book was the value of failure. I knew risk was essential for career advancement. However, I didn’t fully grasp that it is important to be willing to fail. We actually need failure in order to grow.

If you get nothing else from the following stories other than the validation that everyone makes mistakes, that’s fine with me. It’s an important thing to understand, because it stops us from beating ourselves up when we mess up. You’re going to make mistakes—as Bob Pittman said, if you’re not making mistakes, that means you’re not trying new things. The question is not how
to avoid failing, but how to come back stronger and incorporate the lessons learned from the experience.

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Yankees’ manager **Joe Torre** continually has to make split-second decisions. Who to put in the game, which plays to run, when to take out the pitcher . . . his choices during the course of a ball game can yield only one of two results: victory or defeat. If his call works, he’s a hero. If it doesn’t, he’s lambasted by fans and a press corps the size of the one covering the White House.

Despite this pressure, Joe Torre manages to remain steady and placid. He doesn’t get overly inflated by the highs, nor deflated by the lows. And he certainly doesn’t beat himself up for making a mistake. In fact, in Joe’s mind, there’s no such thing as a mistake.

“I cannot allow myself the hills and valleys—or allow my players to get too high or too low. Because you need to maintain some kind of excellence that eliminates the real high and eliminates the real low. You have to stay level.”

—Joe Torre

“I never look at a move as being the wrong move,” Joe said. “I look at a move as a move you made that didn’t work out. I mean, I could have bases loaded with the winning run at third base with one out. If you’re going to pull the best hitter in baseball that’s ever played the game, and put him on home plate, and you hit into a double play, all of a sudden, it’s the ‘wrong move.’ No, it’s not the wrong move. It just didn’t work. So I try to gain perspective. When
you’re stressing about something, you’re always saying to yourself, ‘I wish I would have done this.’ It’s like, you know, ‘I wish I’d bet on the horse that ran first, instead of the horse that ran second.’ When you take all your information and you make your decision, that’s the way it goes.”

Joe Torre knows that everyone makes an error at one point or another. The telling question for him is what you do after the stadium lights fade.

“When you start looking at how you respond to negative things—how you pick yourself up off the floor—to me, that’s the person I admire,” Joe said. “Like when Mariano Rivera, in ’97, in his first year as a closer, gave up a home run in the division series to Sandy Alomar that kept us from going on. What’d he do? He just came back to become the best closer that’s ever been.”

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You must be willing to fail big-time if you want to operate on the level of Sir Richard Branson. A multibillionaire with a legion of successful companies to his name, he has made an indelible impression as one of the world’s most dynamic and progressive entrepreneurs of his time.

Sir Richard and I met on a winter afternoon at the Hotel Gansevoort in downtown Manhattan. He was visibly exhausted, having just completed a seven-country tour visiting the thousands of employees who work for his various Virgin companies, but that didn’t detract from his movie-star looks and famously dazzling smile.

Sir Richard is unfailingly resilient. There’s not much that keeps this man down. He has a major taste for adventure and has made news several times with his extreme-sporting endeavors. He attempted to beat the record for crossing the Atlantic Ocean by boat in 1985; the boat nearly made it but sank less than 100 miles short of its destination. A similar fate met his attempt to circle the globe in a hot-air balloon, which, too, ended in a hasty rescue
from the water. Yet Richard recounts these experiences with more glee than regret.

“I strangely wasn’t feeling an enormous sense of disappointment,” he recalled. “It really is, I think, in the trying where people get their satisfaction. Having a gold medal to say you’re the quickest or the fastest or to say you’ve succeeded is not that important. It’s the incredible experiences that you have planning adventures, and the participation of other comrades, and just doing things which man has never done before.”

Sir Richard elaborated on his bounce-back mentality. “I’m not somebody who minds too much if I fail. Maybe I’m just fortunate, because we’ve got so many different things going that a failure is not as important. But I think I’m the sort of person who enjoys the thrill of trying to create. And then if it doesn’t work out, as long as I’ve given it everything I could to make sure it was successful, I can pick myself up and move straight on to the next thing . . . I think that’s important in life. Because whatever your dreams are, you are going to fail on occasions. There’s no point in being too concerned about it for too long.”

Sir Richard Branson’s next big venture is to launch Virgin Galactic, which aims to fly passengers into space in 2008 at $100,000 a pop. A few hundred people have already signed up and paid in full. Whether his space odyssey is successful remains to be seen. Regardless, Sir Richard Branson will likely come out smiling and grateful for having had the chance to try.

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Even when you do everything 100 percent correctly, sometimes things outside of your control can sabotage your efforts. There’s nothing you could have done differently, and you’re left frustrated and disappointed, trying to figure out how to make sense of it all.

Dr. Judith Rodin was a graduate student at Columbia University in 1968 when the historic student sit-ins occurred there. She
had spent a year training laboratory animals and doing the research critical to getting authorized to start working on her dissertation. The animals were housed in the mathematics building on campus, which was one of the places barricaded by the students.

“I think you have to be willing to challenge yourself, to push yourself. To do things that maybe somebody else wouldn’t do. To go places somebody else wouldn’t go, both literally and metaphorically. That’s an important part of really succeeding. If you’re risk-averse, you may be safe. But you probably won’t be brilliantly successful.”

—Dr. Judith Rodin

“Several buildings were taken over,” she remembered. “But ours was the only one that had living animals in the basement. And so we tried to negotiate with them to just let us go in and save our animals, and our research. They wouldn’t because they had a stance, and they wanted to make a point. And so it was a real lesson—first of all, in wrestling with conflicting convictions, because I supported some of the things they stood for, even though I didn’t support all of the ways they expressed it. But I needed to get my research done. The animals died, and I had to start over again.

“I really learned that you’ve got to work hard, but sometimes life intervenes,” Judith continued. “And then you have to start over, and work harder. It was a really important lesson. Because up to that point, I was successful. You know, I worked hard, and I got good grades, and good things happened. I got into graduate school
when I applied. But this was a lesson in perseverance that stayed with me.

“Now I’ll use my psychology,” she said, smiling. “You need to learn how to cope with failure. In some ways, the earlier you use that, the more potentially successful you will be. I’ve seen, in my lifetime, both as a psychologist and by watching people, the people who have too many successes don’t learn how to fail. And there’s a set of coping skills around learning how to fail. You pick yourself up. You know, that’s why sports are good for some people, and other vehicles where people learn how to fail successfully.”

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I’ve observed that people continue to repeat patterns of behavior—self-destructiveness, carelessness, closed-mindedness, and so on—and the patterns tend to produce a series of similar failures. Nothing will change until an individual gains enough self-knowledge to see the pattern clearly and understand what they’re doing. It then takes a concerted effort, sometimes very painful, to break those old bad habits. A series of seemingly coincidental failures can be an opportunity to look at ourselves more closely and break a negative cycle of actions.

Multiple lost elections made Mario Cuomo realize that he needed to reconsider an element of his political persona. Though today he is generally regarded by the public as a warm, engaging man, early in his campaigning career, he would unknowingly alienate potential voters.

“I lost twice before I won,” he said, referring to his failed attempts to become mayor of New York City and lieutenant governor of New York State. “I learned that the skills that made me a competent lawyer—which I took for granted would also make me a competent politician—those skills were not sufficient,” Mario said. “I had to add dimensions to my persona. I was not a chatty kind of guy, you know? I could have a conversation with you, but
I wasn’t a guy who would go to parties and spend a lot of time socializing and trying to win friends. I was mostly a loner. Even as a young lawyer, I took cases against the mayor and against the governor, and got into New York magazine for beating [Mayor] Lindsay and [Governor] Rockefeller. I saved three people from the electric chair. But you know, I did it by myself.”

“But you can’t do that,” he continued. “You have to grow in many dimensions. You have to get out there with the people. You have to be with them as much as possible. I learned from my defeats. I was talking at a level that I was accustomed to in the courtroom—not just the way you talk to a jury; that’s the proper level for a politician. I was talking to them the way you talk to an appellate court, which is all very intellectualized. And you can’t do that. You have to talk in a language they understand. As a lawyer, I can write a twenty-five-page brief and expect it’s all going to be read, and so it takes me twenty-five pages to get the argument made. But in politics, you get past the first couple of sentences, you’re finished.”

“Some people have a defeat, learn nothing.
And that’s a real tragedy.”

—Mario Cuomo

Mario Cuomo regrouped and learned better ways to communicate, and his distinguished career in politics—three terms as the governor of New York State—is the prize he has to show for it.

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Just as Mario Cuomo became a better politician as a result of being defeated, Anna Quindlen became a better writer because of a botched opportunity when she was a neophyte reporter.
“The night that Nelson Rockefeller died, the city editor of the *New York Times* pulled me in to do the lead-off story for that night’s paper,” Anna said. “I had a little bit of a reputation as a wordsmith. And I think that he thought he wanted a more impressionistic, big-picture rendering, as opposed to your standard-issue, ‘who, what, when, where, and why’ story. We were under a really tight deadline. I was getting some fairly contradictory signals, and to be honest with you, I blew the story in the way that I wrote it, for a variety of reasons. Some were not my fault, but some of it was that I just wasn’t up to the task. The crack rewrite man of my generation, a guy named Bob McFadden, took over and pulled the story together as I was sitting there pounding away. He did his usual impeccable job. The next morning, when I woke up and saw one edition with my byline, one edition with no byline, and one edition with McFadden’s byline, I knew I was in trouble.”

“In what sense?” I asked.

“I’d blown a really, really big story,” she said. “It was a perfect opportunity to be marginalized the rest of my career. It became pretty clear to me that the perception was going to be that I was a dab hand with a phrase—you know, I could produce a metaphor or a simile, but I wasn’t a real bedrock reporter. Over the space of about twenty-four hours, I decided that what I needed to do right away was get myself in a job in which I would basically churn out one ‘who, what, where, when, and why’ story after another, for a year or two.”

The next morning, Anna went to see the city editor and asked him if she could cover City Hall. He said yes, and Anna worked in the City Hall bureau of the paper for two years. After that, she said, she’d written so many lead stories that nobody ever questioned again whether she could churn out a hard news story.

Those two years weren’t fun, or glory-filled—in fact, Anna described them as “castor oil.” But they were necessary for her growth
as a writer. It took a big, public flop to make Anna Quindlen a great reporter.

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James Blake, as you already know, has been with the same trusted coach, Brian Barker, since he was eleven years old. Yet when James was transitioning from the juniors to the pros, a lot of other coaches started swarming around, intimating that James should trade up to a “real pro coach.” James was just insecure and vulnerable enough to allow those voices into his head.

“There were a lot of coaches giving me advice,” he remembers. “At the beginning of my career, I didn’t have success right away. So I thought, maybe all these guys have quick-fix answers, and this is how I should play. And I played a much more passive game than what Brian would have had me doing. I basically listened to too many people telling me things they didn’t really know about. They might be good coaches, but unless you know a person’s game, you can’t be an effective coach, I don’t think. So I was listening to people who didn’t really know my game. That mistake cost me for maybe a year or two, where I wasn’t playing the way I should be playing.”

James won’t make that mistake again. “There are still people who give me unsolicited advice,” he said. “Whether it’s an older coach, or an older player. And now I know much better to take it in one ear, and maybe I’ll mention it to Brian, but it’s not something I’m gonna take and run with. They might be great tennis minds, but they might not know exactly what I’ve been dealing with, or what I’ve been working on. You have to surround yourself with the people who are really going to help you.”

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Mistakes can be costly, as Joseph Abboud regrettably learned.

Boston was Joseph Abboud’s original home, so when his private
label flourished, he quickly set his sights on opening a store on Newberry Street, which is the Fifth Avenue—or Rodeo Drive—of Boston. It was, he said, like coming home for him, a real “local boy makes good” story.

But the story didn’t have a happy ending. Joseph signed a long lease without doing enough research, and he quickly discovered that the street lacked sufficient parking. Customers couldn’t get to the store, and if they couldn’t get there, they certainly couldn’t buy enough clothes to make the venture profitable.

“I learned that you don’t make big financial investments strictly on emotion,” Joseph said, flashes of regret still in his eyes. “I think you let your passions drive you to a certain point, but when you think about financial commitments, and you realize that a lot is riding on this . . . not just my money, but our company’s health, and all that. So I think you have to sometimes step back. I mean, there’s a very fine line between just being so passionate and driven. But sometimes you just have to step back and look at it.”

Therein lies a basic business lesson: Trust your heart to lead you in the direction of your passion, but consult with your head before shelling out the money.

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One particular memory of regret for Dr. Mehmet Oz set the marker for many of his future decisions.

“I haven’t told anybody this,” Mehmet confessed. “But when I was in college, I was given an opportunity. I was nominated to a position on a sports team. And I turned it down because, at the time, I didn’t think I was the best candidate for it. I thought there were other people on the team who were better. Afterward, I had a large group of individuals approach me and say, you know, ‘We nominated you. We wanted you. It was our belief that you were the best person to lead us, and you turned us down.’
“I’ve never turned down a leadership position since then,” he said. “Even if I didn’t think I was the best person. The fact that others thought that I could do it, or should do it, gives me confidence that at least I ought to give, in fairness to them, a shot at doing it.”

“The things I regret most, the failures I regret most in life, are things I didn’t do, not things I did. That’s really been a guiding light for me.”

—Dr. Mehmet Oz

Before you say no, it might be helpful to ask yourself, “Might I regret this one day?”

Certainly delegating is important, as we heard in a previous chapter. But when everything is on the line, it’s usually wise to oversee the details yourself. That is definitely not the time to trust someone you’ve never worked with, as chef Daniel Boulud learned when he just barely escaped career ruin.

Around 1990, when Daniel was the executive chef at Le Cirque, the restaurant was asked to prepare sumptuous breakfast baskets for three planeloads of people. They were not just ordinary passengers—they were eight hundred celebrities and notable public figures being flown to Malcolm Forbes’s birthday party in Morocco. Liz Taylor, Nancy Kissinger, Barbara Walters . . . the A-list of America, basically. The contents of the baskets had been planned for months and were calculated down to the most minute detail. Daniel and his staff worked until 3:00 AM the morning before the planes were scheduled to leave. The catering company
that Sirio Maccioni (the owner of Le Cirque) and Daniel had hired to assist them with the logistics arranged for a refrigerated truck that would hold the baskets overnight. The driver was supposed to sleep in the truck in front of the restaurant and be ready to head out for the airport at 6:00 AM.

At 6:00, neither the driver nor the truck was there. Daniel and Sirio headed to the airport, assuming the driver had just gone ahead.

“Then it’s 7:00 . . . 7:15 . . . 7:30, no truck,” Daniel recalled. Although he and I were sitting in his skybox office—a glass-enclosed room above the kitchen of his four-star restaurant, Daniel, on Sixty-fifth Street in Manhattan—I could tell he was reliving the tense scene on the tarmac as though it were yesterday. “Eight, no truck. Everybody was fuming. All the biggest society and movie stars were coming in, and me and Sirio were going crazy. We were trying to call the police, the chief of police, a helicopter . . . I mean, we panicked, totally. It was a nightmare.”

Turns out that the driver had gone home in the truck and had fallen asleep in his driveway. Someone reached him just in time, and the baskets made it onto the plane only twenty minutes before takeoff.

“That is one of my biggest failures in my life,” Daniel said. “It’s something where you work so hard to make sure you don’t disappoint anybody—your customer—and yet . . . I hated that caterer for the rest of my life, for sure! If it’s going to concern me and my organization, I learned to never depend on a third party to organize the logistics. That third party should never have been in the mix. That was my mistake.”

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In the glittery world of gala events, part of the illusion is that all is perfect. Yet event planner Preston Bailey knows that is far from the truth.
“One of the realities is that sometimes you’re going to screw up, and there’s nothing you can do about it,” said Preston. “You have to understand that one time, sometimes at the party, something’s going to go wrong. You’re just going to have to make sure that if it goes wrong that you accept it, and not take it like it’s the end of the world. Not take it so seriously.”

Things do go wrong, like the time a large floral arrangement fell on a woman’s head because the mechanism Preston and his employees built wasn’t done properly.

“It seems a little bit simple, but it really is. Anything that you have screwed up, look at it. Analyze it. Not ‘What should I have done?’ but ‘What could I have learned from it?’”

—Preston Bailey

“What are you gonna do?” Preston said. “You learn that from there on, you have to do better mechanisms. Learning from your mistakes is a really big thing, I think, in any success.”

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Mistakes will happen. Of that you can be sure. The real test of whether you’ve got what it takes is what you do as a result. The key thing is to remember that whenever one door closes, another one opens. No matter how big your mistake or colossal the failure, there is always something to be learned.
End Notes

“I’ve always had a fairly simplistic view. You just have to pick up, get on with it, and try to learn from it. What could you have done differently? Did you read the tea leaves? Did you really give enough thought to it?”—Cathie Black

“There’s a big difference between having a goal, and moving in that direction, and taking no prisoners and getting there at all costs. I didn’t do that. But having a goal is a very healthy thing. Sometimes you reach it, and you’re thrilled, and you should stop and thank your lucky stars. Sometimes you don’t reach those goals. I had a lot along the way I didn’t reach. But that was valuable, too. There was a lesson to be learned in falling short, as well.”—Matt Lauer

“There are always situations that don’t go exactly right. And you know, you’ve got to make up your mind how you’re going to deal with it. Don’t start crying about it. The truth is, no one else really cares. You like to think they do. And you like to go in there and tell them your hard-luck story. But the truth is, everyone’s got their own hard-luck story. Don’t make your problem my problem.”—Mark Burnett

“That’s another major, major lesson—you have to realize that sometimes the worst thing that happens to you can be the best thing, if you turn it around.”—Diane von Furstenberg
The Challenges of Success

“One of the big surprises in life, and in show business, is thinking you got something right and it fails. And sometimes it fails, and you think you still got it right. But sometimes it fails and, ‘Oh, shit, how did I not see that?’” —Norman Lear

“I do think I have made mistakes in the past by taking things too quickly and lightly. In the rush of work, stuff comes at me. And you know, it’s very important to think things out. To look at a project and deal with a person who you may be working with and give that person and that idea proper time and thought. I’ve learned that every idea and every person in your life deserves the time and the respect that you should be giving.” —Maria Bartiromo

“If you fail, that’s fine. It doesn’t matter. At least you gave it your best shot. Failure is in the eye of the beholder. I say that anybody who’s given it an honest shot is a success, because they’ll always land somewhere, and do something.” —Bill O’Reilly