

ALL MY HEROS ARE FAILURS

A NON-FICTION WRITING SAMPLE

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CHAPTER 1

Writing a book is always fun, especially when it is on a favorite subject, particularly one you know a lot about. As you can tell from the title, “All My Heroes are Failures,” I am going to be speaking a lot about my favorite people, some you may have heard of and some you may not have. All of them have failed a lot. In studying their lives, I have come to some surprising conclusions. One of the main one is- great successes are often built on persistent familiar. Like the alchemists of old, I believe, f persistent failure teaches the right person something about turning lead into gold and troubling times into better times. How? By learning how to fail- in spades.

Now for those of you are wondering why a self-styled self-improvement book should even dare tout a dirty, little negative word like failure, I can say from the get-go I don't really blame you.. Isn't failure a word we need to shove into our closet and forget about? Shouldn't we basically forget about failure and start thinking positive?

Sorry to say- not as far as I'm concerned. Because you see, “All My Heroes are Failures.” They are experts at failure. They have had probably more failures than successes and, for that reason, their closets are probably full of skeletons. But, to tell you the truth, these skeletons, although hidden away, are very important keys to their success. But, even though in a sense that is important, there are certain things about success that, for many people, are somewhat outside of their umbrella of control.

Oprah Winfrey, one of the most successful people in the world financially, has paraded her weight and relationship failures all over the world. And, as she moves forward into the world of television talk shows, major commercial film-making and magazine entrepreneur, she probably remembers her own quotation, "I don't believe in failure. It is not failure if you enjoyed the process." It is fair to say that Oprah's landscape, filled with many different types of endeavors, is littered with her failures.

But how can you really enjoy the process of failing. I will tell you why. Because failing is a result, not a cause. Success is also a result. Both are based on trying to achieve a goal. If you succeed, the applause, the money and the notoriety may be there; if you fail, none of those things are there- except for one thing. You are there. That's right, you are there in all your failed glory because you tried to make something out of nothing. Just like God. Only he made the world and you made a dirty little mess- whether financial, domestic or artistic. Yet at that moment, that precious moment, when the tickertape rolls in- and when your stock has plummeted, that's when you see who you are and that's when you determine the rest of your life. That's when Budd Fox in Oliver Stone's Wall Street comes back to the office, which is deathly silent and is taken aside by Lou Mannheim, the older stockbroker, who gives him a little speech, a few moments before his arrest for inside trading. Lou tells him something like- Budd, you are about to stare down a very black abyss and, at the end of that abyss- you will see yourself.

We have seminars on Negotiating, on Closing Sales, on Marketing with the Media, on Telemarketing, on Sales Management. But what good is any of this if it doesn't bring you closer to what you really want. But, sometimes, on our journey- we need a little push, a little shock... to help us move forward. My little shock is to expose the shocking truth about success...that it is built on coming to terms with failure. That failure itself can be a great impetus to success.

I guess, you could say, every stick has two ends. And so does the entrepreneurial stick. One side is success and the other side is failure. We are going to look at it from both sides. In my book, I look at some of the greatest failures who ever lived- people like Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, Walt Disney and Donald Trump. And for greater measure, I throw Oprah Winfrey in- and, believe it or not, King David? But, at this moment, today, I will talk about only one of my heroes- the irrepressible maverick of mavericks, the King of Cable, Ted Turner.

When Ted Turner inherited his Estate, his father had basically sold his sign business and Ted Turner proceeded to try and buy it back. At the time, owing to the stresses of his father's life and temperament, the business wasn't exactly great. But Ted Turner turned the Outdoor Sign business around only to push forward into the most ridiculous and absurd wasteland at all- the field of television broadcasting. Not the kind of television with the bright, commercial future of a network station, but UHF, which possessed, at the time, the most unappetizing prospects that could be imagined. UHF television in a station that was located in the middle of a cow pasture, run by drug addicts, demanding an antennae that nobody knew how to use, with audience numbers that were descending to record low levels

in their viewing area. Looking at that situation and the plummeting, sucking sound of the station, as it drained all of Turner's resources

But, Turner, whose little station was failing, behaved as all my heroes do- he kept on going ignoring the warnings, laughs and jeers of his colleagues. Was that practical? Was that sensible? Not really. Not only was he risking all that he had inherited and rebuilt, but he was risking the very foundations of his business, the outside sign business, which was beginning to blossom under his adventurous, competitive management. But Turner didn't care. He began to make changes, while utterly ignoring all the voices around him.

The changes worked. He started to put on the old family-oriented series, Star Trek episodes, older situation comedies and people started to watch him. Then, in a kind of surprising move, he began to buy the rights to older movies, movies that people would generally not care about- he began to develop his own library of relatively undesirable films. It didn't help that the druggies who ran his station often played his films- and commercials- upside down. It didn't help that the clients who came into the station had shoes dripping with soggy cow dung mixed grass and straw or that they had to sit on dilapidated sofas, half-torn up and dirty, while they were pitched on a station that was touted as a station of a smarter audience, a more educated audience. Why was the audience smarter? Because they could figure out how the damn UHF antenna worked. They were buying into an upscale, elite audience. And, for a long time, as you might believe, this pitch didn't exactly work. Ted Turner was not only in the middle of a gigantic failure, it was one that he had courted. He had invited failure into his life, all for one reason- he wanted to get in television.

As the station failed more and more, the ordinary options were out. So to prevent being forced to liquidate that station, which he loved, he held a Beg-a-thon. Yes, you may not know about this Beg-a-thon or even what a Beg-a-thon is, but its very simple- it's when a guy whose broke, with a mediocre broadcasting product, begs his public to send him money. And that's what Turner did. He got on television and implored, begged and groveled his audience to send him money. And that's exactly what he did.

And, you know what, it worked. And, even more important to the story, he paid them all back. It is quite possible that Ted Turner, who pioneered the first Super station and the first cable news network in the world, would never have gotten anywhere if hadn't begged his audience for money- and thrown away any semblance of business savoir faire or commonsense that he might have possessed in the Atlanta community. Sometimes it even worked when the mighty and great Ted Turner, also one the greatest competitive yaughtsmen in the world, would lie down on the floor in a banker's office and threaten not to get up unless he made the loan.

Now, what kind of actions are these? If we listed them, it would probably be "bad planning," "investing critical funds in complete ignorance of the broadcasting market," "poor business etiquette,"- reckless, foolish, stressed-out, borderline business psycho? That is basically how Ted Turner was looked at by his associates. And so he has been looked at throughout the years, as he pushed his way into broadcasting, sports ownership, competitive yaughting, and the film business.

Perhaps we could be tempted to use the Yiddish word, Chutzpah, which means “nerve.” This is definitely a quality that Ted Turner had. Look at when he was censored by the Commissioner of Baseball for his antics, as an owner of the Atlanta Braves, on the playing field. But, Chutzpah, I believe is the external characteristic, one manifestation of something that Turner had consistently that other people around him didn’t really have.

In the Academy Award winning comedy, “As Good as It Gets,” Jack Nicholson plays a very depressing, obsessive-compulsive neurotic named Melvin Udall. His sick, isolated life suddenly undergoes a change when he falls in love with a waitress, played by Helen Hunt. But he is afraid of the relationship and he is afraid to deal with the immense emotional and spiritual issues raised by his inability to relate to people in any way. At one point, he is encouraged to go after her following one of their more serious altercations. A recent friend and former hated homosexual neighbor, Simon, played by Greg Kinnear says to him, in so many words, **“Melvin, go after her. Appreciate who you are. You have one thing that I don’t have, that I desperately would like to have. You know what you want.”** And that is one quality that Ted Turner shares with Melvin Udall- he has the one thing that Melvin Udall has, above all other things, he knows what he wants.

Knowing what you want may sound like a relatively small thing, but I can assure you it is not. Often what we know is what our parents want, our wife wants, our children wants, our school wants, our boss wants. We define our wants with what is expected of us. Our wants feel tiny. We feel like a cog in a bigger wheel, doing what is expected of us. We chug along, feeling empty.

Probably not you, though. Many people reading this book have felt something a little bit more pulsing than that. They have felt an urge to move forward, sometimes as a vague, almost amorphous push, but some of you have felt a torrent of emotion, even divine energy pushing you towards a goal. There are two things that all the entrepreneurs that I will talk about have in common. They know what they want. They have passion. And, there is a third- they are not afraid to fail.

One of the most interesting stories I have concerns my best friend in elementary school, someone you may not have heard of, named Barry Meltzer. Back in school, Barry and I did everything together- from playing ball to chemistry experiments. Barry wanted to be a painter, to some extent, but primarily he wanted to be a doctor.

In our school system in Merrick, New York- when you entered into Junior High School, there was an important curriculum change. People either got into Advanced, Regents or Vocational. I went to Advanced. I was a good student, then. Barry couldn’t make it and wound up in Regents. He wasn’t a good student and he couldn’t pass the various tests, for one reason or another. So, he became known more for his prowness with girls than maybe his academic expertise. Cut to years and years later when I saw Barry on the streets of New York, near a subway, selling crude African objects, on a blanket. This was the early seventies and Barry’s life didn’t seem to be shaping up.

About three or four years after that, I wound up in San Francisco, with a skin problem- an itchy, scratchy affair that professional diagnosticians couldn't identify or cure. I had diseases that I couldn't even possibly have contracted. But I never stopped trying and wound up in a clinic seeing an herbalist with extremely long hair on the edge of Telegraph Street in Berkeley. He said he didn't know what the problem was but would call me if he did. He wound up calling me later to ask me if I knew who he was. I said, no. Well, he was Barry Meltzer. I had taken off my glasses and he had grown hair and neither of us recognized each other- but I had signed the guest book.

So, now we met again- my oldest friend and I, who couldn't even recognize each other. And Barry took me on a perplexing little tour of San Francisco. San Francisco was littered with his former businesses- like the Lark Natural Food Store in Larkspur, the New Life Restaurant, another natural foods store and the Musical Art Company on Natoma Street, which sold records, glass pipes and candles- sort of like a head shop. I'm mentioning just three of maybe fifteen potential parts of the tour. Barry went out of business almost as fast as someone would change clothes.

After the tour, Barry invited me into his office. His "office" was in this gigantic warehouse. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why a holistic health practitioner would need so much space. Also, he had these four giant desks and people running around- moving things. I felt a little like Gulliver. When we got in, Barry moved into action- he was barking orders at people, gently and politely, though. "Two tons of ginseng. That'll be OK. I'll have about thirty pounds of chamomile. Could I have a few hundred pounds more of gota kola?" What on Earth did his patients need so much tonnage? Were his patients some kind of pachyderms? Was he some kind large animal herbalist?

Then, I found out. Barry was an herbalist, but that was only part of his operations. Right now, I was right square in the middle of the San Francisco Herb and Natural Food Company, the second largest herb and tea company in the United States, right up there next to Celestial Seasoning. Barry had built this entire business, which imported and exported herbs throughout the world and serviced many of the health food stores in the United States- from \$500. Remember the business that was sort of like a health shop? Well, during his time there, he would experiment with ways of coloring and making candles. Finally, he developed a candle formula that worked so well and it became the specialty item of the Musical Art Company. Someone bought the formula for \$500 and off Barry went into the herb business, with his garage as the fulcrum of his enterprise.

Barry and I spent some time together. But, at one point, I got a job in Oklahoma and was about to leave. Around that time, we were walking down the street. He said, "You still have that skin condition." "Big time, I said. Nothing works." "You know, it could be kind of pro-biotic deficiency. You should take acidophilus." "I have yogurt every once in a while." "No, get it in a purer form. A concentrated form. It will cost you about three bucks."

So I went to a health food store and bought a small bottle and popped about six in my mouth. I felt this strange, not unpleasant, gurgling in my stomach. And then some kind of

subtle release in energy. In a half an hour, my itching completely went away. By the next day, there wasn't a sign of any of it.

Remember how Barry, as a child, had wanted to be a doctor? Well, God delivered him his own version of a medical degree- something similar, but maybe even better. Barry became an herbalist and an herb packager and wholesaler. Remember how Barry wanted to be an artist? Well, one of the things most memorable about the products of San Francisco Herb and Natural Food Company- are the packages themselves. They were designed- by guess who? The guy who changed businesses faster than most people change clothes has now been in the industry for over thirty years. Not only does he practice herbology, import and export herbs, package and distribute them- but now, with his new enterprise, "The Farm," he is a certified organic grower of herbs and other medicinal specialties. Barry became a healer and facilitator of healing. In some circles, they say, "Give me _____, God. If not that, something better." In a lot of ways, as a healer of lost causes, Barry got something better. Something he struggled for. But, also, something he really wanted.