

The Key to Success

A commencement address

delivered by Ralph Keyes

Antioch University Midwest

July 15, 2012

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Fifty years ago this month I came to Yellow Springs from Illinois and enrolled at Antioch College, never imagining that half a century later I'd stand here addressing this years' graduates of Antioch University Midwest.

I'd like to thank President Hall, Chancellor Nudelman, Chairman Parker, the esteemed faculty, and you, dear students and your families, for giving me this opportunity. It's an honor to be invited to say a few words to you.

Since this is the first commencement I've ever attended as a participant, it's also the first time I've been able to dress up in *regalia*. Don't you just love that word? I looked it up and found out it's nearly six centuries old. *Regalia* is related to *regal*, and refers to royal rights and privileges. I'd like to think that's what you've earned with your diploma today: the right and the privilege to set out toward your chosen destination in a regal, even a royal fashion.

I believe I'm supposed to convey some sage advice to see you on your way: "How to succeed," say, or "The key to success." Instead what I'd like to do is put in a word for *failure*. Let me explain:

You'd think that the most successful people in any field were the ones who were most determined to succeed. Not necessarily. There's a downside to this type of determination. Those who focus too hard on succeeding can be afraid to do anything that might fail. So they're prone to play it safe. Those who don't play it safe, who take risks, who fail, fail some more, and learn from their failures, are the ones who rise to the top like cream in raw milk.

Put somewhat differently, those who are too afraid to make a mistake report to those who aren't.

A company's CEO once said that if he had any knack for leadership at all, it was in his ability to make lots of mistakes as quickly as possible in order to learn what not to do. That isn't an uncommon trait among leaders. According to management expert Warren Bennis – an Antioch graduate and a former trustee of this university – the most effective managers not only don't shy away from ventures that might fail, but actually seek them out.

We all learn as much from our setbacks as our triumphs, if not more. In fact it isn't always clear which is which. Think about your own life. Can you see a seamless path that led you smoothly from one success to another? I can't.

The résumé I gave President Hall lists my achievements. But there's a second version that I didn't give her: my "shadow résumé." Everyone has one of these: a private vita lurking in the shadows behind the public one. This vita records our life's failures. My own shadow résumé includes all the rejected book proposals, aborted projects, missed deadlines, critical reviews, unreturned phone calls, spinning of wheels, twiddling of thumbs, discouraged days, staring out the window, checking my e-mail, posting on Facebook, and reviewing a long list of setbacks that have been a large part of my career. Too large.

You could even say that I failed my way into becoming an author. If anyone had hired me for one of the many jobs I applied for after leaving Antioch, I might be delivering mail today instead of writing books. This failure, to get a job, forced me into the freelance writing career that I've enjoyed for most of my adult life.

I'm currently working on a book about regrets. There's an interesting, counterintuitive dynamic at work here. One would think that our biggest regrets focused on catastrophic failures. Goofing up. Going broke. Getting egg on our face. Not so. Based on my research I can assure you that *the biggest regrets in life are not for acts that failed, but for failing to act.*

Most of those I've interviewed tell me that they seldom regret taking chances they wanted to take, even ones that didn't work out. On the other hand, they obsess about occasions when they *wimped* out: didn't dare to do things they yearned to do. During hundreds of interviews, I have regularly heard regrets bordering on mourning for action avoided: loves abandoned, poems unwritten, enterprises not started, words left unspoken.

"I wish I had" is a far more common, and poignant lament than "I wish I hadn't," even when *I wish I hadn't* refers to big-time blunders.

Blunders are not only an inevitable but a welcome part of an adventurous life. How better to demonstrate your daring? Setbacks constitute evidence that you've taken a risk. The bigger the setback, the bolder the risk. That's why William Faulkner liked *The Sound and the Fury* best of all his novels. He considered it both his biggest gamble, and his greatest failure. Faulkner once said of himself and writer-colleagues, "All of us have failed to reach our dream of perfection. So I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible."

A huge failure suggests you've overreached – tried for something grand – rather than settling for a modest success. In pursuits of all kinds, apparent success is too often a result of keeping one's aspirations low. Big wins are reserved for those who risk huge losses, and fail repeatedly along the way.

Michael Jordan – perhaps the greatest basketball player of all time – once said, “I’ve missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

This type of attitude is common among pathbreakers like Jordan. Any innovator worthy of the name knows that when it comes to breaking new ground, success is the exception, failure the rule. That’s why they consider setbacks essential to the creative process. These pioneers don’t just tolerate failure; they embrace it – as proof that they’re trying new things, including things that might get them laughed at.

Four decades ago, when Paul Lauterbur sat in a Big Boy restaurant in Pittsburgh sketching on a napkin his idea for using magnetic resonance to create body images, he knew this outlandish idea was likely to be ridiculed. Sure enough, it would be many years before anyone took seriously the suggestion that led to the MRI. *Nature* magazine wouldn’t even publish Lauterbur’s early accounts of his work. Thirty years after his Big Boy brainstorm, when he was awarded the Nobel prize in Physiology and Medicine, Paul Lauterbur observed ruefully that a history of this prize could be based on those whose submissions – like his – had been rejected by *Nature* magazine.

Not that he was discouraged by this rejection. That wasn’t part of Lauterbur’s mindset, or the mindset of anyone who chooses to sail in uncharted waters. After all, the first novel written by his fellow Nobel laureate – Samuel Beckett – was rejected 42 times before it found a publisher. In a subsequent work Beckett wrote, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

For visionaries like Beckett, failing is a precondition to success, and they don't mind saying so. They are *bards of failure*. Today the highest concentration of these bards can be found in the Silicon Valley. Out there, venture founders consider failing to be an essential rite of passage. One startup investor in the Valley said he wouldn't commit money to any entrepreneur who hadn't gone belly up at least once. They themselves say they don't take fellow entrepreneurs seriously until they've had a setback or two (or three, or four). Their mantra is: *If you haven't failed, you're not trying hard enough*. The best way to find out what works, they say, is to first find out what *doesn't* work.

Just look at Apple. As the incubator of iPods, iPads, and iPhones, Apple today is considered the epitome of successful innovation. But does anyone here remember the Newton? That was the disaster of a touch-screen notepad Apple introduced a couple of decades ago. Apple also failed catastrophically with a video game called the Pippin, a desktop computer known as the Cube, the late, lamented Lisa, the Macintosh TV, and a mouse shaped like a puck that users hated. Except Apple didn't consider these failed products to be "failures." Quite the contrary. They were integral to the trial and error process that is the essence of their approach to innovation. At one time Apple's product developers were told they should have at least an 80% failure rate as proof they were trying new things.

Like so many innovators, Apple's late co-founder Steve Jobs was an avatar of failure. In a commencement address like this one, Jobs told Stanford graduates how valuable he'd found it to be canned by his own company before returning in triumph. After he was fired, Jobs explained, "The heaviness of being successful was replaced by

the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.”

Successful entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs love to talk about their setbacks. That’s how they win their stripes, prove their mettle. It’s fun to watch them one-up each other: “You think *you’ve* failed a lot? Let me tell you how many times *I’ve* failed!”

The Wright brothers certainly fit this failure-friendly profile. Think of how many times they couldn’t get their aero-plane off the ground at Dayton’s Huffman Prairie before one finally stayed aloft in the brisker winds of Kitty Hawk. Years later, when Orville Wright had dinner in Dayton with the scientist and inventor Vannevar Bush, what they mostly talked about was projects of theirs that hadn’t panned out. Orville then took Bush to his home’s attic where he showed him models of various weird gadgets. All were unsuccessful inventions of his. Vannevar Bush later recalled, “I had plenty of similar efforts to tell him about, and we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly.”

It wasn’t so long ago that the Wright Brothers’ hometown was a citadel of entrepreneurial failure-tolerance. You could even think of the Miami Valley as the Silicon Valley of its day. Like Steve Jobs at Apple, Thomas Watson found it invaluable to be fired from his job at National Cash Register a century ago. After that humiliating setback Watson left NCR for IBM, which he transformed into the Microsoft of its time. When asked for the secret to IBM’s success, Tom Watson said that the fastest way for any organization to succeed was to double its rate of failure.

No one promoted failure with greater gusto than another refugee from National Cash Register named Charles Kettering. After leaving NCR, Kettering co-founded the Dayton Engineering Laboratories, or “Delco,” and became a generous benefactor of

Antioch College. Until recently the offices of this institution were in a building named after him.

By the time he died in 1958, Charles Kettering was considered second only to Thomas Edison as America's quintessential inventor-entrepreneur. His 200 patents included one for an electronic self-starter of car motors that revolutionized the auto industry. Others improved diesel engines, quick-drying auto paint, and home air conditioners.

The key to Kettering's success lay in his poor eyesight. This engineer's eyes were so weak that college classmates had to read his textbooks aloud to him. He dropped out of Ohio State more than once due to severe eyestrain. Later, Kettering had a hard time reading the blueprints, spec sheets, and statistics of his trade. This forced him to rely on his own vision. In the process he saw a bigger, richer, more imaginative picture than the conventional one visible to colleagues who had better eyesight. But bringing this picture to life involved continual setbacks.

Not that Kettering cared. He dismissed those setbacks as "practice shots." A good researcher, "Boss Ket" liked to say, failed every time but the last one. If he failed 999 times and succeeded on the thousandth, the last effort was the only one that mattered. Kettering told younger colleagues that he himself had been wrong 99.9 percent of the time. What every educated person needed to learn, Kettering concluded, was that "it's not a disgrace to fail ... One fails toward success."

Obviously it's not failure itself that Charles Kettering advocated any more than I am, or William Faulkner did, or Samuel Beckett, Steve Jobs, Tom Watson, or Michael Jordan. It's a *willingness* to fail while pursuing one's dreams.

That's what I was getting at when I began this talk by saying I wanted to put in a word for failure. When urging you now to leave here and pursue failure, I hope this makes a bit more sense. I hope you'll leave here a little less concerned about failing, a tad less afraid to fail when doing something you want to do.

Failing hardly equates with being *a failure*. Quite the contrary. What it does mean is that you have the courage to push off from shore, knowing you'll be likely to capsize at least once before reaching your destination. Even if you don't reach that destination, you won't necessarily have failed. Because by risking failure you'll have invested in a life imbued with far fewer regrets than if you'd played it safe.

Being a graduate of this institution – an *Antiochian* – suggests that you won't play it safe. That you'll take risks knowing they all won't work out. And that your risks that don't work out will build a foundation for ones that will. At the very least they will confirm that you're someone who can cope with setbacks while taking adventurous paths to where you most want to go. A willingness to put up with setbacks along the way will be conclusive evidence that you're not playing it safe, that you're willing to fail as the price of succeeding.

And that, my fellow Antiochians, is the true key to success.

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