

The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery (Lewis, Sarah)

The mastery I witnessed on the archery field was not glamorous. There was nobility in it all, but no promise of adulation. There is little that is vocational about American culture anymore, so it is rare to see what doggedness looks like with this level of exactitude, what it takes to align your body for three hours to accurately account for wind speeds and hit a target—to pursue excellence in obscurity.

In hindsight, I realize that I was focused on improbable rises because I was beginning to live with the gift of what it means to be underestimated.

Who apart From ourselves, can see any difference between Our victories and our defeats?

Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish. —MICHELANGELO

We thrive when we stay on our own leading edge. It is a wisdom understood by Duke Ellington, whose favorite song out of his repertoire was always the next one, always the one that he had yet to compose. Like trying to find the end of a sound wave, the endeavor is never complete.

“What would you say increases with knowledge?” Jordan Elgrably once asked James Baldwin. “You learn how little you know,” Baldwin said.²⁴

the greater our proficiency, the more clearly we recognize the possibilities of our limitations.

ignorance protects us from the knowledge required to perceive just how unskilled we may actually be.

The mental discipline and flexibility required to sustain excellence is different, and often harder, than the exertion it took to get there in the first place.³⁴

often attributed to Winston Churchill: “Success is going from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.”

Masters are not experts because they take a subject to its conceptual end. They are masters because they realize that there isn't one. On utterly smooth ground, the path from aim to attainment is in the permanent future.

the crevasse “when your views are in advance of your work.”³⁶

Artists have to learn to shield themselves from criticism. They also have to know when to engage with criticism to see their work anew.

To some, insisting on an inner vision amidst a chorus of complaint can seem like madness, especially when declining opportunities that might lead to greater popularity.

Like leading an orchestra, you have to know how to turn your back to the crowd, as the saying goes.⁴⁶

They create safe havens for good reason, sometimes to preserve innovation. Innovative ideas, after all, are often so counterintuitive that they can, at first, look like failure.

Neuroscientists describe this permissive state where the mind allows for failure without self-condemnation as disassociation in the frontal lobe.⁵² The rest of us call it a basic tenet of improvisation in jazz—not to negate, but to accept all that comes and add to it, the foibles, the mistakes, the exquisite beauty and joy.

This means that every player has the ability to convey their own unique sound, to use that personal language to communicate how the world feels to them. They learn to accept all that comes, keep their equilibrium in the midst of it all, and do it in the time signature of swing.

Knowing when to ignore criticism is a riddle.

It is perhaps what a lab study cannot fully account for, but our life stories can—how the act of playing in time allows for jazz musicians to be permissive enough not to condemn themselves for a mistake, but reflective enough to know when they've made one.

Sticking to our own views might be best achieved by finding lessons from the people who oppose us.

As composer Leonard Bernstein said, “To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan, and not quite enough time.”

I reached into my bag and pulled out my blank-paged, curved-cornered, leather Moleskine notebook. I started buying them about eight years ago. They had me when I heard that the

notebooks' design is based on ones that Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Bruce Chatwin used.

The kind of surrender that Saunders means is more akin to Nietzsche's idea of amor fati, to love your fate. "The demon that you can swallow gives you its power, and the greater life's pain, the greater life's reply."²⁷

He asked King how he overcame it. King replied, "Once I'd made my peace with death, I could make my peace with all else," and the tic just disappeared.³⁹ How leaders handle pain is something rarely discussed.

-Having disempowered what threatens to do us the most harm, we are shored up with the knowledge that nothing else truly can.

How do we stand in a place where we would rather not and expand in ways we never knew we could?

It results in the Einstellung effect: the cost of success is that it can block our ability to see when what has worked well in the past might not any longer. In the face of entrenched failure, there are limits to reason's ability to offer us a way out.

Success means something is wrong, Brodhead said. "It means that we're either choosing very simple issues, or we're deluding ourselves about our results."

Not only do we often give up on ourselves when faced with holding a minority opinion. We don't even know that we're doing it.³³

Standing your ground in the face of a majority requires courage, the hallmark trait of the iconoclast.

The amateur's "useful wonder" is what the expert may not realize she has left behind.³⁶ Psychologists call the unintended routine that comes with expertise the Einstellung effect. It is the cost of success: The bias that creeps in without our notice and can block us from seeing how to do things any other way.³⁷

There are three kinds, as they saw it. The first is adversity, something that happens effectively to you—things implode, break down, or catastrophe strikes. There is also failure, hardship for which you are largely responsible. Then there are plateaus, a more subtle form of stultification where there is no visible movement forward. There may be no progress for decades.

What surprised Duckworth was that grit is not positively correlated with IQ. Grit is connected to how we respond to so-called failure, about whether we see it as a comment on our identity or merely as information that may help us improve.⁵ I wanted to see if she could help me with a riddle, which for now let's call the riddle of Samuel Morse: how to cultivate grit and when to stop before it becomes dysfunctional persistence.

Grit is not just a simple elbow-grease term for rugged persistence. It is an often invisible display of endurance that lets you stay in an uncomfortable place, work hard to improve upon a given interest, and do it again and again.

It is not just about resisting the "hourly temptations," as Francis Galton would call them, but toiling "over years, even decades," as Duckworth argues, and even without positive

reinforcement.⁶ Unlike dysfunctional persistence, a flat-footed posture we ease into through the comfort of success, grit is focused moxie, aided by a sustained response in the face of adversity.

“I realized that working hard is not enough. I needed to work hard consistently on a given path to accomplish anything.”

“I think in life, most people are giving up too early.” If we go by the studies, it is not talent, not even self-esteem, but effort that makes the difference in measurable forms of achievement.

Higher self-esteem without higher levels of achievement means “many American kids, particularly in the last couple of decades, can feel really good about themselves without being good at anything.”²⁰

Gritty people often sound, says Duckworth, like one of her favorite actors, Will Smith. He once said, “The only thing that I see that is distinctly different about me is I’m not afraid to die on a treadmill. I will not be outworked. Period. You might have more talent than me, you might be smarter than me, you might be sexier than me; you might be all of those things—you got it on me in nine categories. But if we get on the treadmill together, there’s two things: You’re getting off first, or I’m gonna die. It’s really that simple, right? . . . You’re not going to outwork me.”²⁸

“It is possible to switch course, and still be gritty underneath it all,” Duckworth said.⁴⁶

“Gritty people have a pattern of staying with one path,” Duckworth has said. “Grit is choosing to show up again and again.”⁵⁷

“The idea of building grit and building self-control is that you get that through failure, and in most highly academic environments in the United States, no one fails anything,”

In the arts, to persist regardless of public opinion is a matter of survival. This skill, nearly as important as talent, means focusing as much on process as outcome.

You can't sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying, 'I won't do anything until I do a masterpiece.'"64

“to be right doesn't mean that everyone else has to be wrong.”
If we fail to cultivate grit, it is also because we often grant little importance to the practice of making and the process that it can teach us throughout our lives.

There's a great story in Jade's book that talks about a famous opera singer named Pavarotti, who said 'Most singers want the audience to love them, but I love the audience.' This singer has the right approach.