

FOCUSED ON FEAR OF FAILURE**By Rick Boxx**

In 2000, TV host, comedian and entertainer Conan O'Brien spoke to graduates at his alma mater, Harvard University, the distinguished Ivy League institution. While many commencement addresses focus on striving for success, he elected to focus on failure.

O'Brien told the young people about to enter the real world of work, "As graduates of Harvard, your biggest liability is your need to succeed." An interesting observation – the need to succeed being a liability, rather than an asset. Then he elaborated.

"Success is a lot like a bright, white tuxedo," O'Brien stated. "You feel terrific when you get it, but then you are desperately afraid of getting it dirty, of spoiling it in any way." He closed his talk by exhorting the college graduates, "Fall down, make a mess, break something occasionally. And remember that the story is never over."

As Conan observed, failure is a part of life. Rather than fearing it and desperately trying to avoid it, we should learn from it and embrace it, recognizing that failure can be one of our greatest teachers. If you are a parent, you understand this well. When a child is learning to walk, it takes an initial, very unsteady step. Then it tries another step – and usually falls. Before the child masters the important skill of walking, it falls many times. And even in parenting, we sometimes fail despite our best intentions. But if we learn from our mistakes, moments of failure are worthwhile.

The same principle was true when we initially tried to ride a bicycle. Until we learned how to balance properly, we fell on our bikes. We might even have crashed. But we kept trying until finally we could remain upright and almost instantly discovered a new, faster way of traveling.

Failure is an excellent instructor for every area of life, ranging from learning to drive a car to making a sales presentation to preparing to give a first public speech. The issue is to not focus on the possibility of failing, but rather to make an initial attempt and, if it does not turn out as well as we hoped, start over.

Every leader and manager, if he or she is honest, will admit to making mistakes – and failing – during the course of learning how to do their jobs well. And the wise leader gives subordinates the freedom to fail, recognizing some of the greatest successes of mankind have been achieved through failure. As the adage reminds us, "If at first you do not succeed, try, try again."

The Bible's New Testament makes this reality clear: *"For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man"* (James 3:2). Earlier in the same book we find the surprising command to *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers,*

whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). Facing trials, difficulties and adversity with joy? The next two verses tell why: “because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:3-4).

When we encounter failure, we must persevere and not quit. That will make success, when we achieve it, that much more rewarding.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of the statement, “Your biggest liability is your need to succeed”? Do you have an intense need to succeed, or know of someone that does? How can this be both an advantage – and a disadvantage?
2. The statement is made, “Failure can be an excellent instructor.” Do you agree with this? If so, why do you think this can be true in many areas of life?
3. Why is it, however, that we do not always learn from failure?
4. In your mind, what is the relationship between failure and perseverance?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 12:1, 13:8, 115:10; Luke 14:28-29; Romans 5:3-5; Philippians 3:12-14