

On Failure

Contents

Introduction	7
Part I: Real-world Failure	13
i. The Many Types of Failure	15
ii. Should I Kill Myself?	37
iii. How to Deal with the Meanness of the World	53
iv. How to Deal with the Meanness of the Media	61
v. How to Live with Your Hamartia	69
vi. How to Deal with the Pity of Friends	71
vii. How to Deal with the Success of Friends	75
viii. A Life Devoid of Narcissism	79
ix. Living with Permanent Infamy	83
x. What Love Really Is and Why It Matters	91
xi. Let Him Who Is without Sin Cast the First Stone	97
xii. Bourgeois Respectability	101
xiii. Practical Measures	109
xiv. Confession	133
xv. Finding Perspective	141
xvi. The Downfall of Oscar Wilde	149
xvii. A New Attitude	157
xviii. A Utopian Commune	165
xix. Losers as Winners	169
xx. Time	173

Part II: The Fear of Failure

175

i. Failure Imagined	177
ii. Fear and Soothing	181
iii. Fear and Self-hatred	187
iv. Trauma and Fearfulness	191
v. Fear and Money	197
vi. Fear and Fame	201
vii. Impostor Syndrome	205
viii. The Benefits of a Breakdown	209
ix. Fear and Paranoia	213
x. On Not Thinking Straight	217
xi. Self-compassion	221
xii. A Less Pressured Life	225
xiii. Thinking of the Worst	233
Picture Credits	239

i.

The Many Types of Failure

One of the many cruel aspects of failure is that when it strikes, it can feel like the most unusual and particular event. ‘Why did it happen to me?’ we wonder, ‘Why have I been singled out?’ Our failure looks to us like a monstrous exception in an area of life dominated by success – a quite spectacularly strange and rare affliction. We’ve not only failed, we are – it appears – almost completely alone in having done so. Everyone else’s marriage is stable, even terrific; all around us, there are lovers going out on dates and wedding anniversaries being celebrated. Most people’s jobs are continuing without trouble; it’s hardly ‘normal’ to be at a loose end at what should be the height of our career. There’s no evidence that the others around us have lost command of their reason. The name of no one else we went to school with produces search results that render ordinary social life impossible. How have other people managed not to mess up as

badly as we have? We might be indoors, crying and hitting the walls or biting our hands, but outside, children are going to playgrounds, birds are singing, suited figures are attending purposeful meetings, families are laughing, youngsters are planning fifty years of success, shopkeepers are wishing their customers a good day and there will be parties to attend at the weekend. We feel like freakish, pitiable outcasts in a world of triumph, friendship, ease and contentment.

It is this extremely painful impression that deserves to be corrected at once. Failure may seem like the exception when it is being experienced – when we are in a profound crisis – but let there be no misunderstanding: messing up is what humans do and have been doing since the start of our adventure on the planet. Our own, personal failures stand in a prestigious and quasi-essential lineage. We are not alone; we may even be in the majority.

We don't live through our failures all at once, which is where some of the misapprehension and loneliness comes from, and we don't necessarily do it visibly, which is another reason why we're fooled that everyone else is fine, but taken together, humans are both the masters and forced subjects of failure. There is no family in the land without a serious disaster in their midst. Look at a classroom of twenty sweet 5-year-olds; within half a century, a good third of them will have been scarred by a very sharp knife indeed. It would be possible to tell the story of humanity not – as we usually do – as one of progress and gradual mastery, but as one of repeated distress, unshakeable madness and eternal regret. Almost no life goes to plan and few of us come through unscathed – and it's certainly questionable whether all our beautiful machines and complicated

accomplishments have made us one jot less troubled than our animal-skin-clad foraging ancestors.

It's this sombre reality that can make us feel such a sense of relief when we see a painting such as Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* (see overleaf). Here is a skeleton army marching over a forlorn landscape, butchering everyone in sight. No one gets away. Kings are breathing their last, lovers are being murdered and funeral pyres are burning in the distance. Corpses are swinging from scaffolds, a horse is dragging a cartload of bodies and massed ranks of soldiers of the armies of death are waiting to join the scene of butchery. This is not a representation of any one particular war zone or scene of horror, but it feels familiar because it is existentially correct, true to some basic facts of our own lives and of all peoples: life is endemically connected with cruelty, ruin and disaster.

This may be a horrific fact to take on board, but it is even more horrific to mistakenly believe that the agony might be ours alone – or that we have been promised anything else. What we are going through only looks rare. Our pain only seems exceptional and aberrant because we are looking at false, wilfully edited – and hence cruelly sentimental – pictures of reality.

Let us consider some of the leading categories of failure that compulsively visit the human animal.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562–1563

Romantic failure

Astonishingly, we are still inclined to trust that relationships might somehow be the fun, sweet, exciting and endearing bit of life. Let's be clear: there is no faster route to destroying ourselves than through love and sex. There is no more effective way of turning otherwise sensible and balanced lives into tragedies than through engagement with our romantic and sexual drives.

No wonder people are nervous on first dates – they should be a lot more so (especially if the date goes 'well'). The chances of getting through our sex lives unscathed are negligible. No one properly informs us of the risks. There are no warning signs, extensive training programmes, hazard lights and alarms. We don't employ masked figures to wail and intone when adolescence begins. It's like the mouth of an active volcano left without guard rails. There is nothing like the requisite solemnity or fear. Yet so much predisposes us to fail.

For one, we have a hopelessly fragile understanding of our own minds and needs. We can't grasp what we're after and what we should resist. Sex is in permanent conflict with emotional priorities. It's impossible for us to recognise the ways in which our underlying disturbances affect who we can desire – and what unfortunate and reckless choices we continually make due to the imprint of our childhood psyches. It can take a decade to work out that we have landed on a person exquisitely designed to provoke our worst responses. For a while, we may get away with it. No one gets seriously hurt – there aren't any children, there's no money involved, no one else cares. But our luck

will only hold out for so long. Gradually, we assemble the ingredients for our own disaster: a slightly compromised marriage, a somewhat damaged psyche, a handful of children, a sprig of boredom, an ounce of jealousy, maybe an affair, some financial wranglings, a divorce, a judgemental society ... In the end, we don't need to do very much wrong in the romantic field to end up involved in horror.

Workplace failure

For the first two highly influential decades of our lives, we are required to work a lot without ever really needing to ask ourselves any of the bigger questions about what this work means: whether the work is right for us or helps us to make a contribution we welcome or can identify with. We just put our heads down and make our way through the educational obstacle course as best we can. But once we graduate, we are thrown off guard. Without warning, the options become more perilous – even as the silence about how to choose from them grows. We want, naturally, to make a comfortable living, but most of us will feel we have failed if our work doesn't at the same time provide us with a feeling of deep satisfaction and meaning. Too often, we confront a choice: between head and heart, between what we ideally want to do and what it would be sensible to settle for. Immediately, the ingredients for failure start to brew. There are those who overestimate their talents, and end up in middle age, broke and disappointed, envious and angry. There are those who underestimate the pull of authentic ambition, and end up materially comfortable, but dissatisfied, ashamed of their cowardice and longing to make changes they cannot afford. We are strung between the pull of safety on the one hand and of fulfilment on the other, each one with a viable claim on us, neither providing us with enough on its own, and with the world rarely willing to offer us both. We need to be very fortunate not to regret having been either excessively weak-willed or excessively foolhardy.

It doesn't help that we are called upon to make the most important choices without the relevant experience needed and without properly

understanding ourselves or the conditions of the job market. With little awareness of the seriousness of what we are doing, we accept a position ‘for a year or two’, only to find two decades later that this shunted us onto a track that we have never been able to escape. We don’t sense doors closing; we don’t even know where the doors are. There seem to be few people with the relevant experience and patience to talk to. Instead, we wind up sitting at home on Sunday evenings, quietly panicked about the years passing, sensing that something large is not right about our direction but without the courage or resources to know what to do next.

Even if we have had the good fortune to know what our ideal destiny would be, we need to be very lucky indeed for the economy not to trample on our hopes. In almost every field we might consider, there are far more candidates than there are positions. The world is not waiting for yet another author or psychotherapist, furniture designer or anthropologist. Success requires a rare combination of talent and stubborn grit and relentlessness. We may fail not because we lack vision or talent, but because our hearts are too tender.

There is something structural to our misfortune, too: the capitalist marketplace requires that a good portion of its participants fall by the wayside every year. Weaker companies and participants must be eradicated; obstacles to lower prices and efficiency must be removed. Progress demands culls. Customers can only be satisfied if the weaker producers are identified, exposed and winnowed out. The anxiety of our age isn’t simply an unfortunate aberration: it is the leading emotion that should logically accompany us into the office.

Further risks abound in the dynamics between workers. There are bullying managers, uncooperative colleagues, undermining subordinates. There is jealousy, backbiting, gossip and persecution. The very quality that we need in our work – ambition – may be what alienates us from other, more lackadaisical workers who won’t lose an opportunity to bring us down when they can. The workforce pyramid has very steep sides and the tumbles are brutal and terminal. We will need an implausible degree of luck not to be stabbed in the back, or at least roughed up in the corridors of power.