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THE FREEDOM
TO FAIL

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*There are goals valued higher than
worldly success.*

The freedom to fail

By Mariana Alessandri



Walk through any home-goods store today and you will see cutesy vintage-looking signs to hang in your house with optimistic messages like *Someday I Will Change the World* and *Believe in Yourself*. Even the children's section of my library displays an Olympic-themed "Go for the Gold" sign, complete with multi-coloured papier mâché rings, just in case any kid forgets the importance of success.

Failure never stood a chance in the US. In 1936 Dale Carnegie published *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which focused on positivity, self-confidence, and enthusiasm. This book continues to be read today, and is still the basis for the Dale Carnegie training workshops all over the world. In the 1950s Norman Vincent Peale sold us *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which is still widely endorsed despite its unscientific basis.

The widely-accepted equation is not so different today. The current push in education is to teach children what psychology professor Carol Dweck calls the "growth mindset" over the "fixed mindset". Dweck argues that belief about one's intelligence is everything: children who consider minds flexible and capable of growth have more success than children who think intelligence is fixed, unchangeable once and for all. She thinks we should teach children that their intelligence is not set in stone and that their beliefs about their own abilities matter (although she does not believe that optimistic beliefs are sufficient for success). Similarly, education researcher Paul Tough believes that character matters more than IQ; grit more than grades. His research is partly based on the work of Camille Farrington, who concluded that children who hold the optimistic belief "I can

succeed at this" are more successful than those who don't.

And the trend continues outside of academia: Malcolm Gladwell's popular 2011 book *Outliers* shows how paragons of success didn't have particularly notable raw talent or intellect; they had help from others and many hours of hard work. In this book he cites the now-famous (and now also much criticised) study conducted by Anders Ericsson which concluded that it takes 10,000 hours of "deliberate" practice to become really good at something (provided that you had a modicum of talent to begin with and, hopefully, interest). These contemporary books tell us that in order to succeed, we must at some level *think we can*, and that we are less likely to succeed if we think we can't. What changes from book to book is how to become successful; what doesn't is that success is an unqualified good.

A success-driven mentality prioritises results over process, outcome over input. We value hard work, when it 'pays off', and we applaud the winner's efforts, not the loser's. Through almost every medium we hear the same message: the road to take is the one that leads to success. Even when we say, "it's the journey not the destination", it is only a banal platitude in a culture like ours. The journey is only valuable when it leads to somewhere good. We don't say things like that to people in jail.

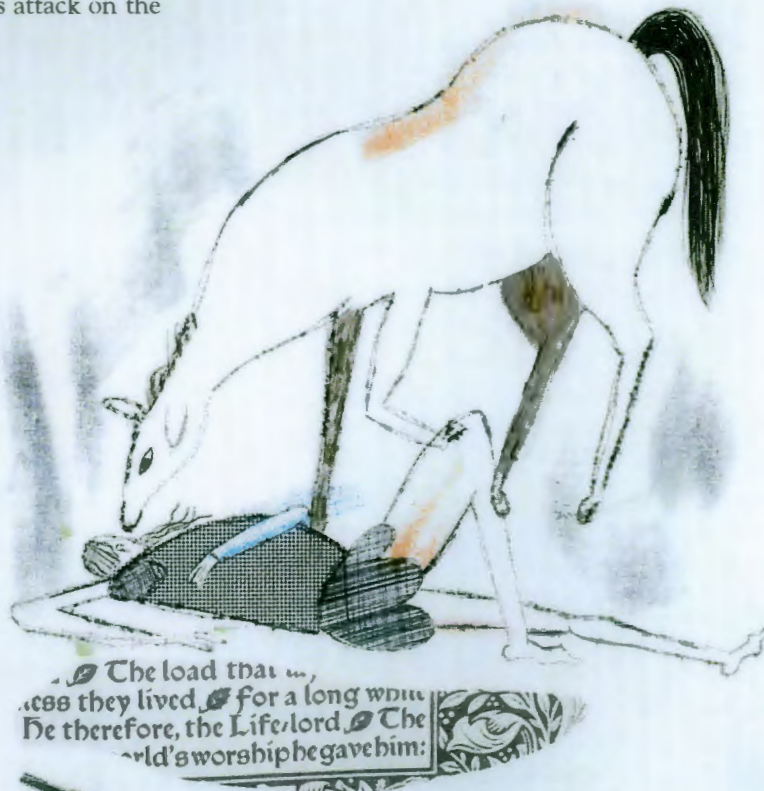
Instead of trying to convince people to believe that they can succeed, given the right conditions, I want to suggest that both optimists and pessimists stop thinking about how to succeed. What if, instead of spending our time psyching ourselves and the next generation into an optimistic, growth mindset that projects success, we take a lesson from the pessimists and anticipate, even appreciate, failure? Could we still find a reason to try anything? Most people, from researchers to the general public, would call this a terrible idea, one that would likely persuade us to abandon our projects. But perhaps the root cause of quitting is the knowledge that we will be judged not by our character or our efforts but by whether we succeeded or failed. What if we just skipped to the end and banked on failing?

In the 17th century, Miguel de Cervantes gave us Don Quixote, a madman who charged at windmills. In the 20th century, Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno revived Quixote and celebrated his attack on the

windmills, since it revealed Quixote's wholesale rejection of the failure/success mentality. Quixote didn't charge at windmills (he called them giants), because he thought he could beat them; in fact he had to ignore the voice telling him to calculate whether he would succeed or fail before deciding to act. Quixote's madness lies in using a non-success-oriented metric to decide who and what to fight for. In other words, the likelihood of failure did not stop Quixote from acting, as it would for both optimists and pessimists in our society. Contrary to popular belief, Quixote was no little engine that could. Instead, he unhinged himself from considerations about success and failure, leaving him free to fail. And fail he did.

Political philosopher Joshua Deinstag's interpretation of this quixotic pessimism is marked by refusal: refusal to let the odds of my success determine the value of my endeavour. Pessimism thus grounds Quixote's courage: by refusing to base his decision to act on the likelihood of his success, Quixote also refused to insulate his life from negative consequences, and as such he was free to contemplate how things could

A SUCCESS-DRIVEN
MENTALITY PRIORITISES
RESULTS OVER PROCESS.



be, how they should be, and how he wanted them to be, even if the world would not cooperate. By anticipating instead of fearing failure, Quixote could freely become who he wanted to be. Deinstag found that adopting a pessimistic ethic - expecting failure instead of success - amounts to not being intimidated by the size of the giant. But neither does it involve deluding myself into thinking I will beat it. Fighting the good fight did not change Quixote's world - he did not beat the giant - but it changed Quixote; in fact it made Quixote.

Whether we are talking about consumer-driven sweatshops that provide clothes on the cheap, animal cruelty that results from large-scale factory farming, or the slow but steady push for higher education to be conducted exclusively online, our success-driven society says that there is no way we can succeed in repairing our broken world, so we needn't bother.

At best, we might hear optimistic sentiments like: "Maybe my recycling alone won't make a difference, but if we all do it then we can really gain traction!" This may be true, but it is not the concern of the pessimist. Not once did Quixote try to convince anyone else to become a knight-errant. If we wait for a critical mass to fight a giant, we will sit on the bench forever. And it means we continue to be fixated on succeeding, winning, beating the giant. Is there something inherently right about things like recycling that could tempt us to do them anyway even if it won't make a bit of difference?

If I resist buying clothing made in sweatshops or eating factory-farmed meats, I am not doing it because I think it will 'work'. I don't actually believe it will make a dent. Likewise, my refusing to teach on-



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line will probably not change the fact that one day it will take over my beloved face-to-face classroom.

I am consciously fighting losing battles, ineffectually fighting for a lost time. And in order to do this I must abandon the success-driven mentality, which would accurately predict my failure and pragmatically advise me to 'pick my battles'. I must likewise ignore the criticism of my saner colleagues and friends who would agree that I am wasting my time and should just give in to online teaching. Fighting giants requires that I adopt a kind of quixotic lunacy, but doing so will make me who I am; it will mark me as someone who fights, who stands for what

she believes in, and who refuses to forfeit in the face of certain failure. These are goals that I value more highly than worldly success.

Imagine if society's message changed from: "you are valuable if and when society says you succeed" to "you are valuable if you commit to taking on difficult and worthy causes, even if society says you fail". By abandoning our desire for success and choosing failure instead, we become free to take on all sorts of difficult and scary projects, and for different reasons. If I don't have to succeed, then I am open to acting for a host of other reasons. Choosing my actions without trying to succeed seems to me a better ideal than following the latest research that shows me how I, too, against all odds, can "go for the gold".

A handful of contemporary authors like Elizabeth Gilbert and Brené Brown also suggest we get off the success treadmill. They promote a version of a very pessimistic sounding: "Don't plan for success; plan for failure". Gilbert in particular tries to steer us away from putting any stock in success. Whereas an optimist might ask: "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" Gilbert poses her own more pessimistic question: "What would you do even if you knew that you might very well fail?" Brown would go one pessimistic step further and ask: "What would still be worth doing even if you knew you were going to fail?" In order to act freely we must accept what Gilbert would say is the likelihood, and Brown, the certainty, of failure. "The outcome cannot matter," Gilbert writes, and she cautions fellow writers to refrain from judging their art by whether they receive worldly success, suggesting that doing so will lead to discontentment. Getting comfortable with failure can free us to pursue difficult and worthwhile activities.