

Educational Success

You want to make your future bright and successful, however, you say, “I have a learning disability. I’ll never be successful. Everything I do turns out to be a failure. I’ve tried to get good grades in school, but I couldn’t grasp the material. I tried to get on the track team, but I wasn’t fast enough. I tried to join the football team, but wasn’t accepted. Everything I do ends up in failure.”

You could go on and on looking for excuses for why you’re a failure. Benjamin Franklin said, “He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else.” Abraham Lincoln said, “My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure.” I’d like to ask you, “What leads to success or failure?”

What Leads to Success or Failure?

Pick from the list those having the potential for success or failure:

1. Born a slave; mother kidnapped; didn’t walk until three years of age; was sickly and stuttered when he spoke; graduated from high school at the age of 21; was rejected from college because he was African American.

George Washington Carver became a world famous scientist. He created over 300 products from the peanut alone.

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2. He came from a family of 17 children, and at the age of ten his father pulled him out of school to learn his trade.

Benjamin Franklin became a writer, businessman, inventor, scientist, and ambassador. He helped Thomas Jefferson write the Declaration of Independence.

3. At the age of one she became sick with scarlet fever leaving her blind and deaf. As a child she became furious; she pinched, hit, and kicked to get whatever she wanted.

Helen Keller went to Radcliffe College, the best university for women in the United States. She learned through Braille to read and write French, Greek, German, and Latin. She wrote 12 books and traveled around the world speaking to promote the needs of the physically challenged.

4. Born in a tiny one-room log cabin, mother died when he was nine years old, lost eight elections, failed twice in business, and suffered a nervous breakdown.

Abraham Lincoln became the 16th president of the United States and in 1863 signed the Emancipation Proclamation making all slaves free.

Steven Schulman, a clinical psychologist, in *Psychology Today*, “Facing the Invisible Handicap,” reports:

Learning disabilities don’t automatically lead to low achievement in life. Many accomplished scholars, politicians, artists, entertainers, entrepreneurs, athletes and professionals have had to struggle with learning

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disabilities. Serious weaknesses in one area seem to spur some people on to develop exceptional strengths in other areas. The extra energy of hyperactive individuals, for example, can come in handy once it is put under control.

Albert Einstein would probably be diagnosed as learning disabled if he were growing up today. He showed no signs of genius in his early years; his parents and teachers feared he was less than normal intellectually. It has been reported that he did not learn to talk until he was 4 years old nor read until he was 9, and he failed his entrance exam the first time he applied to the Federal Institute of Technology. In his own words, “As a pupil I was neither particularly good nor bad. My principal weakness was a poor memory and especially a poor memory for words and texts.”

One of his problems—and, ironically, his later claim to fame—was that he either could not or would not solve scientific and mathematical problems in the usual ways. Instead he invented his own unique, creative ways of conceptualizing problems.

Today the young Thomas Edison probably would be recognized as dyslexic, but during his childhood he was simply thought of as stupid. “I remember I used to never be able to get along at school. I was always at the foot of my class...my father thought I was stupid, and I almost decided that I was a dunce.” Eventually he was withdrawn from formal schools and tutored at home by his mother. He never did learn to spell or write grammatically; at the age of 19, he wrote to his

mother:

“Started the Store several weeks. I have grown considerably I dont look much like a Boy now—Hows all the folk did you receive a Box of Books from Memphis that he promised to send them—languages. Your son Al.” [Edison’s nickname.]

Sculptor Auguste Rodin had difficulty learning to read and write. His father said, “I have an idiot for a son,” and his uncle agreed, “He is ineducable.” President Woodrow Wilson didn’t learn his letters until he was 9 years old or learn to read until he was 11. General George Patton never learned to read well and is said to have gotten through West Point by memorizing whole lectures. Other historical notables now thought to have learning disabled include Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, Leonardo da Vinci and Hans Christian Andersen.¹

One of the reasons people suffer so much from failure is because of their pride. They want everyone to see them as the picture of success. Living your life with the constant aim to impress others can lead to a frustrating life. Learn to accept yourself. Your goal in life should be to do your best, not to be concerned what other people think is doing your best.

If you want encouragement in your failure, go to a nursery where children are learning to walk. You’ll see them fall again and again. What do they do? They get up and try again. They don’t give up in spite of their repeated failures. You need to do the same. Okay, you failed—you messed up—but don’t lie in a

pit of despair and groan the rest of your life. Get up, brush the dust off your clothes, and evaluate what you can do to become successful. Because of discouragements, some spineless teens take the foolish path and think of committing suicide. Wake up! Face your problems! Stop worrying about what others think! Take steps to become successful.

Using Failures as Stepping Stones to Success

You'll find many great men and women encountered failure, but they used their failures as stepping stones to success. Remember, the only ones who never fail are those who never attempt to do anything. There's a story told about two frogs that fell into a pitcher of cream. One frog said, "What's the use?" So he gave up and croaked. The other frog kept kicking and kicking until the cream turned into butter, and then jumped out.

The story is told about how people began to eat young chickens or broilers. In 1923 Mrs. Wilbur Steele ordered 50 baby chicks from a mail order house, but by mistake they sent her 500. She realized that if she let these chicks grow to full maturity, she'd have so many eggs she wouldn't know what to do with them. She got the bright idea to sell those birds while they were still young and tender. From that the broiler industry was born.²

Joseph Boyett and Jimmie Boyett in "*The Guru Guide*," wrote a book on "The Best Ideas of the Top Management Thinkers." This is what they had to say about failure:

One experience you absolutely must have to

become a leader, say our gurus, is failure. Failures seem to be the spark that ignites early leadership lessons and burns them into your consciousness. Warren Bennis cites the executives he knows well who felt that they learned the most when they hit bottom and really screwed up. Problems, he says, shape leaders like weather shapes mountains; “difficult bosses, lack of vision and virtue in the executive suite, circumstances beyond their control, and their own mistakes [are] the leader’s basic curriculum.” Bennis quotes Margaret Thatcher: “It’s at that moment when the iron entered my soul that gave me the steel I needed to have the resilience to become a really first-rate leader.”³

Take a good look at your failure, and then say with gritty determination, “You’re not going to keep me down! I may be defeated, but I’m not giving up!”

Gritty Determination

Early one bitterly cold morning two brothers went to school to build a fire in the pot-bellied coal stove to heat the room before their teacher and classmates arrived. One of the boys was thirteen and the other was eight. By accident, the boys used gasoline. There was an explosion. The schoolhouse was filled with flames. They dragged the unconscious eight-year-old out of the flaming building. His older brother died from his wounds.

In the hospital the doctor told the mother that her eight-year-old son would surely die too. He tried to comfort her by

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telling her it would be best since the fire had destroyed the lower part of his body. But this young boy wanted to live. The doctors got together to decide what was best for the boy. His knees and shin bones had no flesh, all the toes on his left foot were gone, and the arch was practically destroyed. The doctors called the parents in and informed them since the legs were so severely damaged the best thing to do was to amputate the boy's legs.

When the boy heard this, he pleaded, "No, no! Please, no! Please don't cut off my legs!"

Upon hearing the pleas of their boy, the parents decided not to go along with the doctor's advice to amputate the legs. The mother kept massaging the boy's legs and encouraged him to work hard so he could stand. At this point the boy's life was spent either in bed or in a wheelchair.

One day as he sat in his wheelchair, he got off the wheelchair and pulled himself through the grass to a picket fence. With determined effort he pulled himself up and began dragging himself along the fence stake by stake. Every day he did this, until he made a smooth path around the fence. He was determined to walk. His determination paid off. Slowly he began to stand up, then haltingly walk, and then run.

He began walking to school, and then decided to run to school. In college he joined the track team. This young man, Glenn Cunningham, who was thought to be a hopeless cripple, ran the world's fastest mile. In 1933 he won the prestigious Sullivan Award as the nation's top amateur athlete. In 1974 he was inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame.

John C. Maxwell, in *Developing the Leader Within You*,

stated:

A study of three hundred highly successful people, people like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, and Albert Einstein, reveals that one-fourth had handicaps, such as blindness, deafness, or crippled limbs. Three-fourths had either been born in poverty, came from broken homes, or at least came from exceedingly tense or disturbed situations.

Why did the achievers overcome problems while thousands are overwhelmed by theirs? They refused to hold on to the common excuses for failure. They turned their stumbling blocks into stepping stones. They realized they could not determine every circumstance in life but they could determine their choice of attitude toward every circumstance.⁴

Lazy Students

I was on my way home after speaking to parents at our open house when I met a furious student in the hall. He was yelling at his aunt who was taking care of him. He had received a failing grade from one of the teachers.

I asked him about his problem. He told me what happened. I asked to see his report card. I examined his report card and said judging from the report card, you're a goof off and not doing the work and studying. He readily admitted this.

Then I said, "What you should do is look at yourself and try to change." Then I challenged him, "Do what you're supposed

to do.”

What was I doing? I was advising him to take intelligent action for his failures. He listened. It was one of those beautiful moments when I witnessed a raging student being transformed by listening to instruction. I used straight talk to help him see his problem wasn't the teacher, but his lackadaisical attitude toward learning.

In the dean's office a 19-year-old student was reported for being disruptive in his English class. These are some of the reports on his record: threw a chisel in his woodworking class, used abusive language, was repeatedly late to school and classes, was defiant, refused to identify himself, defaced an English textbook, cursed a substitute teacher, and raised his fist at a teacher. He had many other negative comments on his record.

As the dean, I discussed the son's defiant and rude behavior with his mother. But she defended him by saying he was having these problems because he was black. I told her we had many black students in school, and they were never in the dean's office.

This same student happened to be in my automotive class. He really enjoyed this class, and out of all the students in the class, only one other student received a 100 on a test. Some of his grades for the first marking period were: chemistry 40, speech 65, English 60, and automotive 93.

I told his mother about the grades, and she called him stupid. As a dean we can be very frank with parents. I disagreed with the mother and told her that her son wasn't stupid, but lazy, for only her son and another boy in my class received a 100 on a

test.

On the last day of school a student came and asked if I would change his failing grade of 60 to a passing grade of 65. I went over his record and showed how he failed the tests and didn't do most of his homework. I had warned him, but he never listened. Now that he failed, he was concerned. I told him that to get ahead he must be able to read, study, and apply himself. Then I said, "I purposely gave you a 60 to show you that you nearly passed. One day you'll thank me more for the 60 than if I gave you a 65. I hope this will wake you up to apply yourself." He smiled.

Why did I do this? It wasn't to punish him, but to help him realize that to become successful in life he had to work, study, and apply himself.

Excuses for Low Achievement

I've taught teens for years, and to investigate the schools for the book I was writing, I became a substitute teacher in 27 different schools in all the boroughs of New York City. This included lower East Side, South Bronx, Bedford Stuyvesant, and Harlem. Some schools were good, but many were truly "blackboard jungles."

I am a strong believer that all people are equal, and because of that belief I treat all races the same. If students don't do the required class work, whether black, brown, or white, I fail them. It really riles me when students claim I'm racially biased. One day a black student complained that the white race prevents the blacks from learning. I said, "Look around."

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I had put notes on the board to help students pass the midterm test. There were at least four failing black students who didn't bother to write down the notes. Besides, the one who did the complaining had failed my course last term.

When I have issues like this, I often confront the one complaining. I looked this student straight in the eye and slowly walked towards him while speaking to the class. I said that many of them wouldn't get a good job because they were too dumb. It didn't matter what the color of the boss was. At the end of the class this complaining student came to me and said I was a good teacher because I try to teach.

What's so sad is this complaining student had high self-esteem, but he was lazy. His excuse for ignorance wasn't his laziness, but the white race was trying to keep him down. Is there racial prejudice? Certainly. There will always be those who are racially biased. This is true for all races.

Look around. There are many people from different races who have succeeded in today's marketplace. I'll tell you why they succeeded. They didn't go around being lazy and blaming others for not being successful. They made the best of the situation they were in. They studied and applied themselves, and today many are high paid employees, entrepreneurs, presidents of large corporations, and in Congress.

One of the most destructive attitudes is to always blame others for your failures instead of looking at yourself and examining what you can do. It's like the time I went to the employment agencies in downtown Manhattan trying to find employment in a machine shop. No one would hire me. I couldn't use the race excuse, because the ones rejecting me

were the same race as I was. I wasn't rejected for my race; it was for my ignorance of the machining trade. What did I do? I went to night school and took machine shop classes.

Another destructive attitude is when you fail to do something to label yourself as a failure. If you put a walleyed pike into a fish tank with minnows, soon there'll be no minnows. The pike will eat all of them. Take this same fish tank and put a glass pane in it that separates the pike from the minnows. The pike seeing a minnow will launch an attack. He will hit the invisible glass and fail to get the minnow. He'll keep trying and finally learn the futility of his efforts to catch a minnow.

An interesting thing happens when the glass is pulled from the tank. The minnows can swim around the hungry pike, but he'll never again make any attempt to eat one. He has experienced so much failure, that he's convinced it's senseless to try again. He'll literally starve himself to death with minnows swimming all around him.

Elephants are the same. Elephants are powerful and can easily uproot large trees. However, when an elephant is a baby, the owners will tie one leg to a tree. The young elephant will keep trying to get free so it may roam. Finally the elephant realizes it's hopeless and gives up. It has permanently learned its lesson.

When the baby elephant is fully grown, it can be tied to a small tree which it could easily uproot, but it will make no attempt to do so. This powerful creature has limited its present capabilities because of its past failures. Many people are just

like the pike and the elephant. They encounter one failure after another. Now they're convinced they can never succeed. They will never try again. They have stamped on their minds, "I am a permanent failure."

Bitterness

There's another extremely destructive attitude that leads to failure. It's having a bitter attitude towards another race. I've taught in many diverse schools, and I've met many pleasant students of all races. Unfortunately, I've met many bitter ones who take great offense at proper authority. Some are so bitter that they're ready to fight with teachers or students over the slightest issue.

I was the substitute teacher in a minority junior high school in Brooklyn. I mispronounced a black girl's name while taking attendance. The girl became highly insulted and scolded me. I rebuked her for being so touchy.

In some schools, if a student of another race accidentally bumps into one of them, they're quick to fight. These bullies are filled with rage and dare anyone to challenge them as they strut around. In many schools they get away with this attitude because of the permissiveness in the schools.

Let me warn you. I'll be saying some very blunt and strong words in order for you to become successful. You can take it or leave it. For this book I reread many of my experiences when I was a substitute teacher in 27 different schools throughout New York City. I met *many* bitter and defiant students. I know when these defiant students enter the workforce, they'll have a rude awakening. The world of work is nothing like their

permissive school environment.

Let me introduce you to the real world of work. I'm going to speak to you as a business owner. I couldn't care less about the racial makeup of my workforce. For years I've hired people of different races. My primary interest is having intelligent employees who are hardworking and teachable. But bitter, defiant employees who carry a chip on their shoulder are people I don't want working for me. I don't care what race they are. If I detect that attitude when I interview them, you can rest assured they won't be hired by me or by thousands of other employers.

You may call us racists, and in your rage try to justify yourself and say we're holding you back because of your race. Nonsense! We're not racists trying to hold you back. We don't want bitter defiant employees like you working for us. That's not how you build successful companies. George Washington Carver said it well, "Ninety-nine percent of failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses."