

# ON FAILURE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

By Matthais Campbell

What does failure mean to you? Is it a loss on the tennis court, the sigh as your surefire homerun is robbed at the fence, or the cold and gloomy embrace of the lake after a wrong move in a canoe tilt? We are all familiar with these feelings. Some of us more so than others. For most of my life, failure meant giving up.

If you look on the internet for more than thirty seconds, you'll see thousands of quotes from the great figures of history telling you to "just keep pushing," or "never give up." These have become common parts of our greater culture. From the millionaire motivational speakers to the most well-meaning but expressive guy at the gym, everyone says the same thing: Never give up. Failure is not an option.

For most of my life, failure was an essential part of my being – ingrained, inherent, unchanging, ever present. There is a photo in my family that has achieved legendary status in annals of Campbell lore. I do not exaggerate when I say that it will be fossilized in some ember and displayed on a mantel piece for generations to come, much to my ire. It is a photo of me from my Kindergarten graduation at the age of six. I am brandishing the diploma in one hand and appear to be doing some sort of half celebratory spin, ala Maria in *The Sound of Music*. I have what I can only describe as the brilliant smile of a boy who is not aware of the depth of his own unfathomable ignorance. I was under the impression that I was done with school forever and that the rest of my life would consist of playing with building blocks and recreating the battle of Helms Deep with my older brothers in our playroom. It came as a great shock to my untried mind when my mother started buying school supplies for me later that summer.

As you might imagine, school was a challenge for me. This reared its ugly head in the sixth grade, the winter before my first summer on the hillside. From the beginning, it was clear that I was slower than the other kids in my class. I would watch with envy as my classmates easily made sense of equations that were baffling to me. Quotients, problems, circumference,

$y=mx+b$  to me were at best mildly tangible and at worst a strange mixture of hieroglyphics or a poorly designed dinner menu. I would look down at a worksheet with simple problems and be racked with horrible anxiety. Several times my teacher called on me to complete a problem for me to horribly mess it up. Hearing the frustrated groans and laughs of my classmates only made it more humiliating.

In high school I tried to distance myself from the problem by wearing a hood to class, hiding in the back and goofing off, and laughing with my friends as the failing tests and quizzes piled up. I had given up on myself and my future. I had decided that I was set to be a failure my whole life, that I was an idiot. This fatalistic attitude was reflected by my being held back in science and math class, twice. While others went on to physics and to trigonometry, I floundered in biology and algebra 1, falling behind again and again.

I was called into a meeting with my teachers and school psychologist to discuss the problem. After much deliberation, I sat in the room saying nothing and was told that I struggled with executive function. For those who don't know, executive function is a set of mental skills that help you get things done. These skills are controlled by the frontal lobe:

- managing time,
- paying attention,
- switching focus,
- planning and organizing,
- remembering details,
- doing things based on your experience,
- and multitasking.

When executive function isn't working as it should, your behavior is less controlled. This can affect your ability to:

- work or go to school,
- do things independently,
- and maintain relationships.

One of my teachers, noting my troubling performance in her social studies class, gave the tactful proposal that perhaps I was just “Special.” The room went silent after that for me. If any correction was made, if any words were said, I did not hear them. Special was not a term of endearment at my high school. It was a word used for kids who had to sit in smaller classrooms. I heard whispers between friends of certain “Special” kids who sat at the lunch table with teachers. It was, in my mind, a confirmation of what I already knew. I was an idiot and a loser. I was inattentive. I went home that evening and cried for hours. I tore my homework, sat on my bed, and did not eat for the next day and a half. I began to distance myself from friends, skipped classes, and got detention and then skipped the detention that was given to me.

I would, at any possible turn, avoid doing homework and would often lie to get out of the responsibility. I would look my parents in the eyes and be dishonest, assuring them my teachers had to be wrong or that I had done the work. Eventually, they lost total faith in my word, often having to call the school to see if their son had done his fair duty. So, I drifted, shaken, but I attempted to hide it under a guise of ironic detachment, as many often do. I began making mean-spirited jokes and being a class clown. That got me in with some of popular crowd. But, their respect was ephemeral. They would laugh at my jokes but ignore my phone calls or texts asking to hangout after school. This came to a head when one of my peers remarked, “I don’t hang out with retards.”

I would have stayed that way, passive, angry at the world, uncaring, depressed, and resigned myself to my fate if not for the undying faith and care of those around me. Every night as my father got home from another long shift at the hospital, he would find time to sit with me and work through math problems and lab reports. He would very patiently explain and walk through work with me, sometimes until midnight, and then we would wake up the next morning at 5AM and do it all again. My mother did the same, making it her personal project to get me to be an organized student. This carried over to camp as well. My 14-year-old summer, Townley patiently helped me shore up my understanding of basic algebra, and I can recall many occasions when campers much younger than me would take a break from their games of chess or wallball and help me with a problem or two. They never judged me, only supported me. My

dad gave me a piece of advice that is commemorated on my dorm room door at Bennington College that I still reference to this day: “There are those who write things down and those who forget,” for which, admittedly, I didn’t write a reminder to post the quote, so I forgot, until two weeks later when I wrote it down and then promptly put it up. These people gave me faith in myself to succeed – the faith I needed to take the leap and trust myself.

My growth as a student was gradual; there were many hours of time alone, going through flash cards, making my binders color coordinated, working with tutors who were all paragons of patience and kindness. I forced myself to confront the issues that plagued me. Eventually, my grades began to climb, and I graduated from high school on time. Now I attend my dream school, studying acting – the joy of my life.

I tell you this story not just to inspire you. I tell you this story because your relationship with failure will define your life. Failure and how one responds to it is an essential tenet of one’s character. At camp there are many opportunities to thrive and prosper but with these come failure: you will lose, you will catch a crab, and you will miss a line. You may also be disciplined for a misdeed, or you may overlook a detail that will cost your dorm points in inspection. This does not make you bad. It does mean you cannot be helped. It makes you human. During his Chapel Talk this summer, Mr. Vinnie astutely said that we need to approach this summer with a growth mindset. You must not let the views of others or your own fear of failing distract you from achieving the bottomless potential that stirs in all of us, just yearning to be released. Utilize failure, understand it, acknowledge it, and learn to grow from mistakes of the past.

I’d like to leave you with a quote from Dr. Jordan Peterson, “Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.”

As the summer comes to a close in the next two weeks, allow yourself the chance to fail. Allow yourself the struggle and pain. Allow yourself the opportunity to do better. You can only grow stronger.