

Failing Is Part of Growth. And Why This Is a Lie.

We hear the phrase so often that most of us no longer question it: failure is part of growth. It is meant to encourage us, particularly when something has not worked out as we hoped, and in that sense it is probably well intentioned, but the more I think about it, the more I wonder whether it is not based on a rather strange misunderstanding of what failure actually is.

Because when we do not reach a goal immediately, when a project takes longer than expected, when we change direction halfway through, or when we discover that what we once wanted is no longer what we want now, have we really failed, or have we simply lived through the part of the journey in which growth was taking place?

Failure, at least in its most practical meaning, is the non-fulfilment of a task, a function, or a clearly defined objective. A machine fails when it no longer performs the function it was designed to perform. A structure fails when it cannot carry the load it was built to withstand. A strategy fails when it does not produce the result that was expected from it, and a business may fail when it can no longer meet its obligations or continue operating.

There is nothing wrong with this definition because it describes what happened, and sometimes things do fail. A plan can be poorly conceived, a decision can be wrong, an opportunity can be missed, and a business can collapse because warnings were ignored, money was mismanaged, or the people responsible were simply not prepared for what they were trying to build.

The problem begins when we stop using failure to describe an outcome and start using it to judge the entire journey, and then, almost without noticing, the person who took it.

Something did not work, so we say that we failed. We did not reach the destination, so we decide that the whole journey was unsuccessful. We took longer than expected, changed course, or abandoned an ambition that once seemed important, and somehow this becomes evidence of weakness, lack of discipline, or an inability to finish what we started.

At some point, “this did not work” becomes “I failed,” and from there it is only a small step towards “I am a failure.”

A result becomes a judgement, and the judgement becomes an identity.

This is where the language stops being merely imprecise and begins to become damaging, because not reaching a goal immediately is not necessarily failure. It may simply mean that the process is unfinished, that the approach needs to change, or that we have learned something during the journey which could not have been known when the goal was first set.

Sometimes the destination itself changes because the person travelling towards it has changed, and although we often describe this as giving up, it may be one of the clearest signs that growth has actually taken place.

We tend to admire perseverance almost without qualification, as though continuing were always courageous and changing direction were evidence that we had somehow lost our nerve, although there are moments when the more courageous decision is precisely to stop, to admit that the destination no longer makes sense, or perhaps never did, and to allow what we have learned along the way to lead us somewhere else.

There is nothing particularly noble about moving with determination towards the wrong place simply because we once announced that we intended to go there.

Sometimes growth takes us closer to the original goal. Sometimes it takes us away from it.

This is difficult for us to accept because society is much better at measuring destinations than journeys. We know how to recognise the promotion, the completed degree, the funding round, the company sale, the award, the title, the finished building, the number of followers, the house, or the public recognition, because these things are visible and easy to compare.

We see the summit, but we rarely see the person who slowly became capable of climbing towards it.

By the time someone achieves something, the years before the achievement are often rewritten as a tidy sequence of necessary steps, as though the result had always been inevitable and as though every uncertain, painful, confusing, or apparently unproductive moment only acquired meaning because success eventually arrived.

But growth does not suddenly appear when the goal is reached. It was either happening throughout the journey, during the wrong decisions, the corrections, the repetition, the doubts, the periods of stagnation, and the moments in which progress was almost impossible to recognise, or it was not happening at all.

This distinction matters, because difficulty alone does not create growth, and experience does not automatically become wisdom simply because enough time has passed. A person can repeat the same mistake for years, blame everyone around them, refuse to examine their own part in what happened, and gradually become more bitter, more defensive, and more convinced that life has treated them unfairly.

There is no growth in that.

Growth begins when we are willing to look honestly at what happened, when we accept what was ours to own, when we stop protecting the version of the story in which we were always right, and when the experience changes something in the way we think, decide, behave, or understand ourselves.

The journey may offer the opportunity to grow, but it does not force us to take it.

This is why I would never argue that every failed attempt should be romanticised, or that every disappointment is secretly a success. Some things genuinely do not work. Some people act irresponsibly, make poor decisions, ignore good advice, or lack the courage required at the moment when courage matters most. Accountability remains necessary, and growth cannot become a comfortable explanation we use to avoid admitting that we got something wrong.

But acknowledging that something failed is very different from declaring that the entire experience was a failure, and even further removed from deciding that the person who lived through it is one.

One is a description. The other is a verdict.

There is, however, another side to this which may be even more uncomfortable, because while we are very quick to call an unfulfilled goal a failure, we are equally quick to call a fulfilled goal a success.

Yet reaching a goal proves only that the goal was reached.

A person may build a company, become wealthy, gain influence, achieve public recognition, or create exactly the life they once imagined, while becoming less honest, less generous, less present, and less capable of recognising the people who supported them along the way. They may arrive at the destination having damaged their family, abandoned their principles, used people as instruments, and gradually reduced every relationship to its usefulness.

The numbers may still look impressive, the headlines may still celebrate them, and the title, the valuation, the house, the photographs, and the people gathering around them may all appear to confirm that they succeeded.

But achievement and success are not the same thing.

Achievement tells us that something was accomplished, but it says very little about the quality of the journey, what had to be sacrificed along the way, what remained intact, what was damaged, and whether the person who finally reached the destination was still someone they could respect.

This is where our usual definitions begin to fall apart, because someone may fail to reach the objective they once set and still become wiser, kinder, more courageous, more disciplined, more honest, and more capable of understanding themselves and others. The visible result may be disappointing, and yet the person may have changed in ways that will shape everything they do afterwards.

The opposite is also possible. Someone may reach every goal they set, collect every visible symbol of success, and still discover that, somewhere during the pursuit, they became someone they never intended to be.

Society struggles with this distinction because external achievement is easy to measure and character is not. Money can be counted, companies can be valued, titles can be printed, awards can be displayed, and influence can be tracked, while integrity, generosity, humility, loyalty, or the ability to remain present for the people who matter do not fit particularly well into a spreadsheet.

There is no public ranking for becoming a more decent human being. Nobody issues a press release because someone learned to apologise without defending themselves, became a more present parent, stopped needing to dominate every room, or finally understood that their worth was not dependent on status.

And yet these may be among the most meaningful forms of progress a person can make.

Perhaps this is why the phrase “failure is part of growth” remains so popular. It sounds generous, but it still allows us to preserve the same narrow measurement system, because failure is only accepted on the condition that it may eventually produce the kind of success we already recognise.

The failed attempt is forgiven because it may later lead to money, status, recognition, victory, or proof that the person was right to continue.

But this leaves the goal itself unquestioned. It does not ask whether the goal was worth reaching, what happened to the person during the pursuit, or whether growth may remain meaningful even when the original outcome never arrives.

We have confused an unfinished journey with a failed one, and a completed objective with a successful life.

The first mistake creates shame where there may still be learning, movement, and transformation. The second allows us to celebrate outcomes that may have come at the cost of almost everything that should have mattered.

So perhaps failing is not part of growth after all.

Perhaps many of the experiences we call failure are simply the parts of a journey that did not produce the outcome we expected, or that revealed that the outcome was never the right measure in the first place. Sometimes the goal is reached later, sometimes it appears in another form, and sometimes it disappears because the person pursuing it has changed.

The growth may still remain, provided we allowed the experience to change us.

And perhaps reaching the goal is not proof of success either. We may fail to arrive where we intended and still become more fully ourselves, just as we may arrive exactly where we intended and realise that, somewhere along the way, we lost the person we wanted to be.

The result tells us whether the goal was reached. The journey tells us what it cost, what it taught us, and who we became along the way.

The lie is not that difficult experiences can make us grow.

The lie is that everything which does not end in the result we wanted should be called failure.