

THE BEAUTY OF STUMBLING

As much as we prefer to forget those moments when we mess up, reflecting on them can be very good for us and insightful. Journalist Caroline Buijs looks at the benefits of stumbling.

'IMAGINE IF YOU LIVED ON A DESERT ISLAND WITH NO PEOPLE: WOULD YOU FEEL EMBARRASSED IF YOU STUMBLED THERE?'

As a child, when I looked down at my legs, more often than not I would be greeted by the sight of two scraped knees—maybe with an adhesive bandage or two. Playing outdoors or running to school, I used to fall all the time; tripping was as much a part of my childhood as the blackbird's song is part of spring. It was only later that my stumbling became embarrassing: In high school, for example, when I tripped on my long scarf right in front of the boy I had a crush on. Or, worse still, when as a newly arrived student in Amsterdam, my bicycle tire got stuck in a tram rail and I fell down in the middle of a busy shopping street.

STOP FOR A MOMENT

Stumbling and falling are not only part of childhood—they are part of adulthood, too, though not always in the literal sense. Stumbling also means not passing your exam, having your heart broken or discovering that a new project you've taken on just isn't working out. It's choosing a university major but finding out it doesn't suit you after you've started, or enrolling in an art class but not going back after the first two lessons because the teacher intimidates you. Stumbling can be speaking to a large audience and watching people's attention drift, or snapping at your children in the morning just before they leave for school and then feeling

bad about it all day. Stumbling is simply part of daily life, and with a bit of luck you learn something from it, you learn what is the wrong way to do something.

Stumbling forces us to stand still for a moment and think about why something didn't go well. It's too bad, really, that we generally avoid that moment of reflection, preferring instead to move on from our stumbles as quickly as possible. We don't take the time; we have other things to do. Or, and this might be the case more often than we realize, because we are embarrassed. We'd rather crawl under the blankets with a bar of chocolate without talking about our stumble with anyone. Sometimes we lash out at the people closest to us. As Dutch psychologist Arjan van Dam explains, when we are children we don't feel any embarrassment about tripping, because we don't have any insecurities about what the world thinks about us yet. It's only as we get older that we realize other people are watching us and judging us—that's when feelings of embarrassment start to surface. Imagine, says Van Dam, that you're living on a desert island with no people: Would you feel embarrassed if you stumbled there?

As American professor, author and speaker Brené Brown writes in her book, *Rising Strong*, a lot of people have this reaction when things don't

go well: It's fight or flight, an age-old evolutionary impulse of our brain. Flight would be huddling under the blankets with chocolate, and fight is lashing out at the people around you. But Brown's research also shows that the most resilient people have a different approach: They are not afraid of uncomfortable feelings, so instead of fighting or fleeing, they stand still. They acknowledge they are feeling something and display curiosity about what's going on and in which ways their feelings are connected to their thoughts and behavior.

THAT OLD STORY AGAIN

In her book, Brown writes that when we stumble or fall, we tell ourselves stories to make sense of the hurt it creates—the anger, frustration or pain. '...our minds go to work trying to make sense of what's happening,' she writes. 'The story is driven by emotion and the immediate need to self-protect, which means it's most likely not accurate, well thought out, or even civil.'

That is wholly understandable. As American neurologist and novelist Robert Burton explains, our brain rewards us with dopamine when we recognize and complete a pattern. Stories are patterns, with a beginning, a middle and an end. "Because we feel compelled to think of stories," Burton says, "we are often forced to

accept an incomplete story and make it work somehow." Brown herself is someone who, when she stumbles, fights and gets angry. The story she tells herself every time she gets hurt is the 'I am not good enough' one. She then hides the fear of not being good enough by getting angry.

We all have some story or another at the ready that we've developed in the course of our lifetimes and have come to believe in. I myself often resort to the 'they probably think I am stupid' story. And I run from my fear of being seen as stupid by fleeing. I had a pretty bad stumble in my life once, when after graduation I started work as a teacher. It took me just one week to find out that actually teaching *really* didn't suit me at all. I was embarrassed, because the simple truth was I didn't know how to manage a classroom full of kids. My response was to stick my head in the sand: I quit my job a mere four weeks in, and told everyone that it was a bad school, that I wasn't given any guidance and that the teaching materials were of poor quality. Instead of thinking it over and reflecting on any lessons I could have learned from this experience, I took a job at a travel agency straight away. It wasn't the job of my dreams, but at least I knew for sure I could do it well, and I wouldn't have to worry about stumbling again.

EMBRACING OUR STUMBLES

When we fall, we should try to embrace it, and see it as an opportunity to learn. Van Dam believes it's actually kind of silly for us to think that it's okay for little kids to make mistakes but not adults. "I find it very suffocating to think that we should be able to do everything faultlessly all the time," he says. "Maybe it's fed by social media, where people only show what fun they're having and how well they're doing. A person's value nowadays sometimes seems determined by what they have achieved."

Van Dam says it can be helpful to let go of the idea that we're 'sorted', that we have arrived. It's better to think we are 'becoming' and therefore, like a child, we need space to develop. "It's more important than ever now," >

A POSITIVE TAKE ON MISTAKES

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'Heather Hanbury, the former headmistress of Wimbledon High School in southwest London [UK] created an annual event for her students called 'failure week'. [...] For one week she created workshops and assemblies where failure was celebrated. She asked parents and tutors and other role models to talk about how they had failed, and what they had learned. She showed YouTube clips of famous people practicing: i.e. learning from their own mistakes.'
From: 'Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth About Success', by Matthew Syed
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**'WE DON'T MAKE
MISTAKES. JUST HAPPY
LITTLE ACCIDENTS'**

Bob Ross (1942-1995), American painter, art
instructor and host on *The Joy of Painting*



‘ALMOST EVERY NOVEL OR MOVIE HAS A MAIN CHARACTER WHO NEEDS TO OVERCOME SETBACKS, AND THAT’S COMFORTING’

Van Dam says. “The world is changing so fast, and it’s hard to adapt if you don’t keep developing yourself.”

What also helps, he says, is to understand how irrational it is to never allow for some stumbling. “I think your life will be more fun if your basic outlook is that mistakes help you learn,” he says. “Or that stumbling helps you learn. A friend of mine would often joke, ‘You get to make *one* mistake in life’. I used that line for a while; for example, if a girl working the cash register in the store made a little mistake. Sometimes the person I said it to would actually turn pale, as if it was true, but once the cheesemonger at the market started laughing right away and replied, ‘No way man, then you’d never learn a thing, would you’. So try that: Tell yourself you get to make only one mistake in life, so you can just feel how illogical it is, that it just doesn’t make sense to live that way.”

FAILURE IS PROGRESS

What really helped me after my teaching debacle was to read a lot and watch lots of movies, because almost every novel or movie has a main character who needs to overcome setbacks. That is comforting, because you get to see someone succeed—or not, and then you get an idea of how to go about things. That’s the reason why *The Group* by American novelist Mary

McCarthy is one of my favorite books. It’s about nine young female graduates making their way in New York City in the 1930s, and describes their successes and their failures. And then there’s the book *De piloot van goed en kwaad* (The pilot of good and bad) by Dutch visual artist and adventurer Joost Conijn, who constructed an airplane around his chair (that’s right, first the chair, then the airplane) and flew it across Africa. When he returned home, he wrote a breathtaking account of all of his adventures, describing one stumble after another. His plane was often grounded by technical failures, but he always found a way to fix it.

In his book *Black Box Thinking*, British author Matthew Syed explains why some people learn from their

mistakes and others don’t. The difference depends on how we view our mistakes, he says. People who are of the opinion that they can become smarter from dedication and perseverance by definition view mistakes differently than people who tend to believe that their basic characteristics, such as intelligence or talents, are largely fixed. ‘Because they believe that progress is driven, in large part, by practice,’ Syed writes, ‘they naturally regard failure as an inevitable aspect of learning. [...] Those who think that success emerges from talent and innate intelligence, on the other hand, are far more likely to be threatened by their mistakes. They will regard failures as evidence that they don’t have what it takes, and >

STUMBLING STONES

A quite literal interpretation of stumbling as a good thing, in that it makes you stand still and think about what has happened, are the so-called ‘Stolpersteine’ (‘stolpern’ is German for stumbling). These stumbling stones are cubes of concrete with a brass plate on top that is inscribed with the name and life dates of victims of persecution, mainly from the Holocaust of WWII. The stones commemorating the latter, for example, are being placed in the sidewalk in front of houses or places of work from which Jewish people were forcibly removed and deported by the Nazis. A walk through a normal street is suddenly transformed into a journey through history. So far, tens of thousands of these stones have been laid in approximately 22 European countries.

‘ACTION ALMOST NEVER LEADS TO REGRET IN THE LONG TERM’

never will; after all, you can’t change what you were born with. They are going to be far more intimidated by situations in which they will be judged. Failure is dissonant.’

NOT YET

American psychology professor Carol Dweck discusses the power of the words ‘not yet’ in her TED Talk from 2014. At a school in Chicago, US, instead of students’ exams being graded a ‘fail’, they were marked with the result ‘not yet’. As Dweck explains, this helped to make the students aware of the fact that they are in a learning process, as opposed to a fail grade that made many students feel they didn’t amount to anything. Dweck says you can encourage the intention of ‘not yet’ by, for example, no longer praising intelligence or talent, but focusing more on attitude and effort. This working method has already supported great improvements in the results of badly performing schools in, among other places, New York City, in the US.

The idea that stumbling is a bad thing is a dangerous one because you might then live your life very cautiously to ensure you never trip up. You just stay put wherever you are. Or you keep working, as I did, at a travel agency because it’s nice and safe, while deep down you know that you want to do something else. What

may help is to know that maybe you’ll regret doing something more than not doing it in the short term, but in the long term it works the other way around. In his book *Op naar geluk* (On happiness), Dutch psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis explains that we are sometimes afraid to make decisions that lead to insecure situations. He writes that because we’re sometimes faced with regret after making a choice to do something, we think, often subconsciously, that we’d best act cautiously by delaying or canceling plans. Yet when it comes to the really important big decisions—and therefore the risk of real, big and long-term regret—it is precisely this lack of action that fails us. According to Dijksterhuis, action almost never leads to regret in the long term.

Dijksterhuis also writes about researchers who interviewed a large group of elderly people on what they regretted most when looking back on their lives. Four times as many people mentioned something they didn’t do and now felt they should have done—inaction—than the number of people who regretted doing something that maybe they shouldn’t have. In other words, sometimes you’ve got to be brave. And simply accept the risk that’s involved if you stumble. As Conijn writes in his book: When you know too much in advance, there are countless reasons not to.

EMPATHY AS AN ANTIDOTE

That still leaves the question: What can we do with that sense of embarrassment when we stumble? In one of her TED Talks, Brown says that embarrassment needs three things to grow extreme: secrecy, silence and judgment. Luckily there is also an antidote to embarrassment, and that’s empathy. Ask for help when you fall. Be kind to yourself. Think, as Brown herself does, every morning when you wake up: It doesn’t matter what I manage and what I don’t—I am good enough. And instead of getting mad at yourself or feeling like a loser, just say the words, ‘not yet’. ●

READ MORE

- * *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution,* Brené Brown
- * *Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth About Success,* Matthew Syed