

Learning in the School of Hard Knocks

By Dr Bil I Webster

Did you ever read the book which suggested that everything the author found out about life was learned in kindergarten?

The Mennonites have another saying, that we are “too soon old and too late smart.” I would have to say that this latter insight has been closer to my experience. I have often wished that I could have the chance to go back to kindergarten with all the knowledge I have now, and try again, but even with that, I would probably spend another lifetime learning so much more.

Actually, I hope so, because the moment you stop learning is the moment you stop growing, and when you stop growing, you’re dead.

I have also found that for me, the greatest lessons of life have come not from moments of high success or triumph, but from some of the more difficult and challenging experiences of life. Yet while this is true, I have to confess to feelings of annoyance towards those breezy souls who in the midst of difficult struggles blithely tell us that “This is a growth opportunity.” Maybe so, but growth hurts, and we need to be sympathetic to those who are going through these painful lessons. The fact that the outcome may result in learning or growth does not mean the experience itself is good. That is something many of us have to learn.

Learning sometimes involves an enrolment in the school of hard knocks. Some of the best known people in history have risen to greatness from the ashes of disaster.

In December of 1914 a fire totally destroyed the laboratory of 67 year old Thomas Edison. The damage exceeded two million dollars which was a huge fortune in those days. However the buildings were only insured for \$200,000 because they were made of concrete and thought at the time to be fireproof. Much of Edison’s work went up in flames that night. His son, Charles, later told of finding his father, with his white hair blowing in the wind watching everything going up in flames.

But the very next morning, Edison stood with his family at the ruins and said “There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew.” A mere **three weeks** after that disastrous fire, Thomas Edison produced the first phonograph.

Winston Churchill failed the 6th grade in school. He was also refused admittance

to both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. After a lifetime of defeats, setbacks and public ridicule, he became Prime Minister at age 62 and the rest is history. In fact, Churchill's greatest contributions to the world came when he was a senior citizen!

James Whistler, one of America's greatest painters, was expelled from WestPoint for failing chemistry. (Whistler's mother, I understand, was not amused.)


Michael Jordan, who would rise to become one of the greatest superstars of basketball, tried out to play high school basketball, but was unceremoniously cut from the team. He later said, "Failure always made me try harder the next time."

In 1905 Albert Einstein's doctoral dissertation was turned down by the University of Berne as being irrelevant and fanciful. Einstein was undoubtedly disappointed but refused to be defeated. Yet he is now recognized as one of the greatest minds of the 20th Century. Einstein once said "In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity".

Most successes are built on failures. But sadly, that doesn't always happen. I have learned in my life that the pivotal thing is not failure itself; it is that we **quit trying after we fail**. But the good news is that failure doesn't have to be final.

Aldous Huxley once said, "Experience is not what happens to a man, it is what a man **does** with what happens." The Bible records Jeremiah watching a potter working at the wheel shaping a vessel from the clay. But something goes wrong and the vessel is marred. So what does the potter do? Does he throw it out because it is spoiled or imperfect? Not at all. He begins to re-work the clay and before long that pot takes on a new form and becomes a useful and beautiful vessel. Even when the pot was flawed, the original Hebrew word says that it was "NOT BEYOND REPAIR"

Maybe you know someone who feels like their life has been marred or spoiled. They think that all they are is a useless cracked pot. Yes, life can be difficult. We all have to face some struggles at some time or another. The issue is not how many or how few problems we have, or even WHY all this happens to me. The real issue is "What am I going to do now that it has happened?" We may not be able to choose what happens to us, but we always have a choice in how we respond to whatever happens. We need to learn that events are less important than our responses to them. No matter what our losses, struggles or failures, there is not a life that is beyond repair. If we can learn that, we have all we need.



Sometimes it is adversity that introduces a person to themselves. I like the spirit of the person who said, “Don’t be afraid to go out on a limb, because that’s where the fruit is.”