



The best loser's prize

by Chris Ellis

I was watching the end of the Comrades Marathon on the television the other day. It was cut off time and that man of stone was standing there at the finish line with his back to the runners, when around the corner into the arena staggered the last runner. He was a clapped-out apparition that never quite got there despite the screams of the crowd. I often replay this scene in a daydream or more precisely, a nightmare. Perhaps it would be better if the official actually loaded up with live ammunition and just walked up to the prostrate twitching body and said "Sorry, mate, you

failed," and finished him off. They say that nothing hurts when you win. Well, this way it wouldn't, if you failed either!

I have been having a good look at failure lately. It hasn't been getting it's fair share of applause in recent times. If one looks back at the course of evolution, one sees a strange thing. The successes were so busy being successful, looking good, that all big leaps, the most profound steps, had to be taken by failures¹. In those days there was a future for a failure with flair. Under today's microscope it has declined in popular appeal. Mind you, I'm not saying it is an activity

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one should admit to. Dear me, No. That would be vulgar. Failure should be a lonely, silent introverted act of self-flagellation with a bit of guilt thrown in for completeness. One must get full value for money.

The playwright, J M Barrie, had the right idea when he said "We are all failures; at least, the best of us are". Now, that's the right attitude. Even when on the rare occasions we no-hopers succeed, it doesn't seem quite right. I myself have never quite believed in my small successes. In my heart I have known them to be illusions or contricks. They can't have been worth much if it came that easily. You see, seen from within, every life is a succession of failures. That at least was what George Orwell had to say on the matter. Perhaps authors feel it more keenly. But I think doctors do as well. All those easy cases pass quickly out of mind and one dwells on the ones that went the other way. Fearing failure, I have worked out a preemptive strike — I give up. I have developed fading into an art form of martyrdom size proportions. I started as a novice fader in Medical School. One summer holiday I mentioned to my father (in a carefully underplayed manner) that I thought I would give up medicine. My father, a country doctor with a canny insight into his son's psyche, replied with equally underplayed indifference. "My boy, you don't give up medicine, medicine gives you up." That stinger had exactly the right effect he knew it would. Perhaps that is why I now enjoy my more derelict patients so much. They have not been allowed to fail either. Pushed on by society, my collection of dull cheating slobs, roués, and washed-up cynics have to continue keeping up appearances. Hearing how they have somehow managed to mess up their lives even more than I have mine, is one of the most satisfying and depraved passions I indulge in.

I feed, in a wicked self-congratulatory way, on stories of catastrophes. Points are awarded for failed marriages, unrecognised work and rejections, family and social disasters and bankruptcies. I add my own and we indulge in an inverse competition telling each other lies about monetary setbacks and imagined sleights. To fail, you have to have a goal. To loose or

win, there has to be a race. In a world becoming daily more competitive, the fall-out in our patients to depression and aggression is spreading like a fire on the winter's veld. Those without the much vaunted killer instinct, are the most at risk. It is important therefore "to recognise that although winning is the object of the game, it is not the object of playing the game."³ Reorientating patients to goals that are suitable to themselves rather than those demanded of them by society, parents or family, and to enjoy just playing the game, is one of the ways we are now called on to heal twentieth century man. It is our increasing role as modern society's moral and philosophical counsellor for which we are often ill equipped and inexperienced.

The Dodo on the other hand took it all in his stride. Maybe that's why he became extinct. He suggested that Alice,² the lory, the eaglet, a passing duck and the mouse have a race on a circular track and that they began where and when they liked and they stopped when they liked. After about half an hour he suddenly said the race was over. The participants all crowded, panting round him and asked "But who has won?"

The Dodo, after a great deal of thought, at last said "Everybody has won and all must have prizes". I was reminded of this story while looking up a patient's nose last week. He is an Englishman with the Englishman's sneaking admiration for a failure with a bit of dash. He had a deformed nasal septum.

"How had he got it?", I asked.

"Well, Doc, it was when I was in the army. We had an all day regimental boxing tournament. I was knocked out in the third round. I was unconscious for about two hours, and had two black eyes and a broken nose. I had hardly put a mark on him," he replied and then his whole demeanor changed, he puffed up and with poorly concealed pride he added "Actually, I got the best loser's prize."

References.

1. The Success of Failure. Lyall Watson.
2. Alice in Wonderland. Lewis Carroll.
3. Winning. Stuart Walker.