

— SOMETIMES YOU —
WIN
— SOMETIMES YOU —
LEARN

LIFE'S GREATEST LESSONS ARE
GAINED FROM OUR LOSSES

JOHN C. MAXWELL



CENTER
STREET

NEW YORK BOSTON NASHVILLE

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When You're Losing, Everything Hurts

My friend Robert Schuller once asked, “What would you attempt to do if you knew you wouldn’t fail?” That’s a great question, an inspiring question. When most people hear it, they start dreaming again. They are motivated to reach for their goals and to risk more.

I have a question that I think is just as important: what do you learn when you fail?

While people are usually ready to talk about their dreams, they are not well prepared to answer a question about their shortcomings. Most people don’t like to talk about their mistakes and failures. They don’t want to confront their losses. They are embarrassed by them. And when they do find themselves falling short, they may find themselves saying something trite, such as “Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.” The message is, “Hope to win, expect to lose, and live with the results either way.”

What’s wrong with that? It’s not how winners think!

Successful people approach losing differently. They don’t try to brush failure under the rug. They don’t run away from their losses.

Their attitude is never *Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose*. Instead they think, *Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn*. They understand that life's greatest lessons are gained from our losses—if we approach them the right way.

This One Really Hurt

I've experienced many wins in life, but I've also had more than my share of losses. Some losses came through no fault of my own. However, many were of my own making, coming from bad choices and dumb mistakes. On March 12, 2009, I made the mother of all stupid mistakes. I tried to go through security at a major airport with a forgotten handgun in my briefcase. That is a federal offense! It was by far the dumbest thing I've ever done. Here's how it came about.

The previous Saturday, I was in Birmingham, Alabama, speaking at the Church of the Highlands. It's a wonderful church with a marvelous leader named Chris Hodges. He is a good friend who serves on the board of EQUIP, the not-for-profit organization I founded to teach leadership internationally. Chris's people are fantastic, and I had a terrific time with them that weekend.

Many times when I have a speaking engagement, I fly commercially. But whenever the engagement isn't far away from home and it means that I would be able to come home and sleep in my own bed, I try to fly on a private airplane. That was the case following my time with Chris in Birmingham.

As I was about to get on the plane at the general aviation airport to fly home, a friend of Chris's who had ridden with us wanted to give me a gift: a Beretta pistol.

"This is for Margaret," he said, "so she can feel safe when you're traveling."

I have friends who know a lot about guns. Some do a lot of hunting. And I've gone hunting with friends several times. I've shot rifles and shotguns, but I don't really know a lot about guns. And to be honest, they don't have great interest to me. I'm not really pro- or antigun. I just don't think a lot about them. And I'm not a technical person. But I knew this pistol had been given as a gift from the heart, so I accepted it and put it in my briefcase.

After we landed, the pilot remarked on what a nice gun it was. And he asked me, "Do you know how to load it?"

"I have no idea," I answered.

"Let me do it for you," he said.

He loaded the gun, made sure it was secure, and gave it back to me. I put it back in my briefcase and went home.

And then I forgot all about it.

The next several days were very busy for me. I had a commitment to speak to a large group in Dallas, and I was entirely focused on getting ready for it. There was one brief moment while I was working on my lesson when I thought to myself, *Oh, I need to remember to get that gun out of my bag.* But I was in the middle of writing, and I didn't want to stop because I was on a roll. So I thought, *I'll do it later.*

Time passed. Life was busy. I kept working. And before I knew it, Thursday morning rolled around and off I went to the airport.

If you're my age, you may remember a cartoon character named Mr. Magoo. He was a man who seemed to wander from danger to danger without ever getting hurt. Some of my friends used to call me Mr. Magoo. (If you're not old enough to know Mr. Magoo, maybe you remember Forrest Gump. Friends have called me that, too.)

On that Thursday, in my worst Mr. Magoo moment, I strolled right up to security and dropped my briefcase on the conveyer belt. Just as I was about to walk through the metal detector, I remembered the gun.

In a panic I blurted out, “There’s a gun in there! There’s a gun in there!”

Truly, it is one of the stupidest things I have ever done. I felt like an idiot. And to make matters worse, many of the people who were at the security checkpoint knew me, including the man who operated the screening device. He said, “Mr. Maxwell, I am sorry but I will have to report this.” Trust me, that came as no surprise. They stopped everything, shut down the conveyor belt, handcuffed me, and took me away.

It turned out that the head of the sheriff’s division who filled out the police report knew me too. He was all business for about an hour. But then after we had completed the procedure, he turned to me, smiled, and said, “I love your books. If I had known we would meet up like this, I would have brought them here for you to sign.”

“If you could get me out of this mess, I’d give you signed books for the rest of your life,” I replied.

The man who took my mug shot knew me. When they brought me into the room where he worked, he said, “Mr. Maxwell, what are you doing here?”

He took the handcuffs off of me and told the officer that I didn’t need them.

Needless to say, when he took my picture, I didn’t smile.

Assessing the Loss

Immediately after being released on bail, I met my attorney, who said, “Our main goal is to keep this quiet.”

“That’s impossible,” I responded, telling him of all the people I encountered who knew me during the entire ordeal. Sure enough, the news broke that evening. In order to let people know what happened

and to minimize publicity damage, before the news broke I tweeted the following message: *Definition of Stupid: Receive a gun as a gift; Forget it's in carry-on and go to the airport. Security not happy!*

Too often in my life I have not been careful enough. I knew better than to put a gun in my briefcase. Immediately after security found the gun, I began silently lecturing myself about my

**"When I have listened
to my mistakes, I have
grown."**

—Hugh Prather

carelessness. The words of Hugh Prather fit me perfectly: "I sometimes react to making a mistake as if I have betrayed myself. My fear of making a mistake seems to be based on the hidden assumption that I am potentially perfect, and that if I can just be very careful I will not fall from heaven. But a mistake is a declaration of the way I am, a jolt to the way I intend, a reminder that I am not dealing with facts. When I have listened to my mistakes, I have grown."

The words *be careful* have been my takeaway from this experience. Mistakes are acceptable as long as the damage isn't too great. Or as they say in Texas, "It doesn't matter how much milk you spill as long as you don't lose your cow!"

I am convinced that we are all one step away from stupid. I could have "lost my cow" because of this incident. None of us does life so well that we are far away from doing something dumb. And what it has taken a lifetime to build has the potential to be lost in a moment. My hope was that a lifetime of striving to live with integrity would outweigh an act of stupidity.

Fortunately, as soon as the story became public, my friends started to rally around me and support me. Because I knew that people would begin asking questions about it, I immediately wrote about it on my blog, JohnMaxwellonLeadership.com, in a post called "Stupid Is as

Stupid Does.” The supportive response from people was overwhelming. Their words of encouragement and prayers certainly lifted my spirit.

Other friends took a more humorous approach to me. When I went to speak at the Crystal Cathedral, Gretchen Schuller said, “John, security wants to pat you down before you speak.” Bill Hybels wrote me a note that said, “No sex? No money scandal? Boring...” Angela Williams e-mailed my assistant, Linda Eggers, with these words: “Tell John he’s my hero. His estimation has risen in my eyes. I come from a long line of ‘Bubbas.’ Lots of pistol-packing men and women. Art’s mom was arrested in the Atlanta airport in the ’80s for having a Clint Eastwood-type pistol in her large purse...she too forgot about it.” And Jessamyn West pointed out, “It is very easy to forgive others their mistakes; it takes more grit and gumption to forgive them for having witnessed your own.”

Then I started to receive people’s suggestions for the title of my next book, including:

- Developing the Gangsta within You
- 21 Irrefutable Laws of Airport Security
- The 21 Indisputable, Irrefutable Reasons Why Not to Forget Your Gun in Your Briefcase When Going to the Airport
- Leading from the Middle of the Gang
- Have Gun, Will Travel

Today, I feel very fortunate because the incident was dismissed by the court and it has been expunged from my record. I can laugh about the whole thing. In fact, not long after the ordeal, I created a reminder for myself of the fact that in life sometimes you win, sometimes you learn. I often carry it in my briefcase (instead of a gun). It’s a lami-

nated card. On one side is the April 2009 cover of *Success Magazine*. I was featured on that cover, and I look great! Million-dollar smile. Blue suit. A posture of success and confidence. Half a million people bought that magazine, saw my picture, and read my words about success.

On the other side is my mug shot. It was taken only two weeks after the magazine came out! No million-dollar smile. No blue suit, just sweats. Poor posture and a look of complete discouragement. It just goes to show you that there's not much distance between the penthouse and the outhouse.

Why Losses Hurt So Much

In life, sometimes you win. In my younger years I played basketball and was very competitive. I liked to win, and I hated losing. When I was in my early twenties, I went to a class reunion, where I played in a game against other former players. We were all eager to prove we could still play at the same level, and it turned out to be a very physical game. Of course, I wanted to win, so I was very aggressive. After I knocked one opponent to the floor, he shouted in frustration, "Back off, it's only a game!"

My reply: "Then let me win."

I'm not exactly proud of that, but I think it illustrates how much most of us like to win. When we win, nothing hurts; when we lose, everything hurts. And the only time you hear someone use the phrase "It's only a game" is when that person is losing.

Think of some of the losses in your life and how they made you feel. Not good. And it's not just the pain of the moment that affects us. Our losses also cause us other difficulties. Here are a few:

1. Losses Cause Us to Be Emotionally Stuck

Author and speaker Les Brown says, “The good times we put in our pocket. The bad times we put in our heart.” I have found that to be true in my life. In my heart I still carry some of the bad times. I bet you do too. The negative experiences affect us more deeply than positive ones, and if you’re like me, you may get emotionally stuck.

“The good times we put in our pocket. The bad times we put in our heart.”

—Les Brown

Recently I experienced being emotionally stuck after I made a foolish mistake. Ron Puryear, a wonderful friend, invited me to stay a few days at his beautiful river house in Idaho so that I could get away and begin writing this book. The setting is inspiring and perfect for thinking and writing. The view overlooks a beautiful body of water with tree-covered hills in the background. It’s spectacular. Since I had speaking gigs in Spokane, Edmonton, and Los Angeles, all western cities, I decided to take him up on his offer.

My son-in-law Steve and our friend Mark were with me because they would be going with me to Edmonton, Canada. As we got into the car in Spokane, Washington, to head for the airport, Steve asked, “Do we all have our passports?” My heart sank! I had forgotten mine!

Now, this was no simple matter of turning around and going back to get it. I was out west and my passport was in Florida, more than two thousand miles away. In six hours, I was supposed to be speaking in Edmonton. I started to feel sick. What was I going to do?

How could an experienced, international traveler like me make such a foolish error? I felt like an idiot.

Steve, Mark, my assistant Linda, and I tried to solve my problem over the next two hours. Each passing minute revealed that I had a big

problem. I knew I would not be allowed to board a plane to Canada without my passport. (Trust me. I asked!) We also discovered that we could not get the passport in time via air express. Nor would a family member in Florida be able to get on a commercial flight and bring it to me in time. I would not be able to fulfill my speaking commitment that night. The situation felt impossible to solve.

Finally after a lot of work and creative thinking we found a solution. Our host in Edmonton agreed to move my evening speaking engagement from that night to the following evening. Meanwhile, we hired a private jet to fly from Florida to Spokane with my passport. In my mind was a ridiculous picture of someone placing the passport in one of the seats, as if it were a passenger. Boy, did I feel stupid.

At midnight when the plane arrived, we got on board and continued on to Edmonton. We arrived the next morning, and I was there for the next day's meeting and the evening speaking engagement. We had made it.

The good news was that we had solved the problem. The bad news was that the price of fixing my mistake was \$20,000!

The rest of that day, I was emotionally stuck. I continually asked myself:

How could a veteran traveler like me make such a rookie mistake?

How much inconvenience did I cause the people who had to move the meeting from one night to the next?

Why didn't I think about the passport twenty-four hours earlier so it would have cost me hundreds of dollars, instead of thousands?

What would I have done if we had not found a solution?

All these thoughts and questions exhausted me emotionally. To try to bounce back, I drank a milk shake (comfort food), went swimming, and tried to rest. But no matter what I did, I still continually kicked myself for being so dumb. I felt like a slave to my own moods and feelings.

I usually process through mistakes and failures pretty quickly, but I didn't feel free to do that this time. I was having a very tough time breaking out of my self-imposed prison of what-ifs. I can laugh about it today, but even now I still feel foolish for forgetting something so basic.

It's been said that if an ocean liner could think and feel, it would never leave its dock. It would be afraid of the thousands of huge waves it would have to encounter during its travels. Anxiety and fear are debilitating emotions for the human heart. So are losses. They can weaken, imprison, paralyze, dishearten, and sicken us. To be successful, we need to find ways to get unstuck emotionally.

2. Losses Cause Us to Be Mentally Defeated

Life is a succession of losses, beginning with the loss of the warmth and comfort of the womb that nurtured us for the first nine months of our existence. In childhood we lose the luxury of total dependence on our mothers. We lose our favorite toys. We lose days dedicated to play and exploration. We lose the privilege of pursuing the irresponsible pleasures of youth. We separate from the protection of our families as we leave the nest and take on adult responsibilities. Over the course of our adult lives, we lose jobs and positions. Our self-esteem may take a beating. We lose money. We miss opportunities. Friends and family die. And I don't even want to talk about some of the physical losses we experience with advancing age! We lose all these things and more, until we finally face the final loss—that of life itself. It cannot be denied that our lives are filled with loss. Some losses are great; some are small. And the losses we face affect our mental health. Some people handle it well, while others don't.

The quality that distinguishes a successful person from an unsuccessful one who is otherwise like him is the capacity to manage disappointment and loss. This is a challenge because losses can often defeat us mentally. I know I've had to fight that battle.

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When that happens, our thinking becomes like that of Harry Neale, the coach of the Vancouver Canucks in the 1980s. He said, "Last year we couldn't win on the road and this year we can't win at home. I don't know where else to play!"

Too often losing goes to our heads. It defeats us, and we have trouble coming up with solutions to our challenges. As the losses build up, they become more of a burden. We regret the losses of yesterday. We fear the losses of tomorrow. Regret saps our energy. We can't build on regret. Fear for the future distracts us and fills us with apprehension.

We want success, but we should instead train for losses. Author J. Wallace Hamilton echoed this when he wrote in *Leadership* magazine, "The increase of suicides, alcoholics, and even some forms of nervous breakdowns is evidence that many people are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is far more common than success; poverty is more prevalent than wealth; and disappointment more normal than arrival."

We need to expect mistakes, failures, and losses in life, since each of us will face many of them. But we need to take them as they come, not allow them to build up. As printer William A. Ward said, "Man, like a bridge, was designed to carry the load for a moment, not the combined weight of a year all at once."

3. Losses Create a Gap between I Should and I Did

Winning creates a positive cycle in our lives. When we win, we gain confidence. The more confidence we have, the more likely we are to take action when it's needed. That inclination to move from knowing to acting often brings success.

However, losing can also create a cycle in our lives—a negative one. Losses, especially when they pile up, can lead to insecurity. When we are insecure, we doubt ourselves. It causes us to hesitate when making decisions. Even if we know what we should do, we are reluctant to do it. When such a gap is created and isn't overcome, success becomes nearly impossible.

As I reflect on my losses and think about how they have affected me, I see that there have been times that they made me get stuck. I find that often occurs to others as well. Here are eleven traps that people tend to fall into:

- **The Mistake Trap:** “I’m afraid of doing something wrong.” Losses hold us back!
- **The Fatigue Trap:** “I’m tired today.” Losses wear us out.
- **The Comparison Trap:** “Someone else is better qualified than I am.” Losses cause us to feel inferior to others.
- **The Timing Trap:** “This isn’t the right time.” Losses make us hesitate.
- **The Inspiration Trap:** “I don’t feel like doing it right now.” Losses demotivate us.
- **The Rationalization Trap:** “Maybe it’s really not that important.” Losses allow us to lose perspective.
- **The Perfection Trap:** “There’s a best way to do it and I have to find it before I start.” Losses cause us to question ourselves.

- **The Expectation Trap:** “I thought it would be easy, but it isn’t.” Losses highlight the difficulties.
- **The Fairness Trap:** “I shouldn’t have to be the one to do this.” Losses cause us to ask, “Why me?”
- **The Public Opinion Trap:** “If I fail, what will others think?” Losses paralyze us.
- **The Self-Image Trap:** “If I fail at this, it means I am a failure.” Losses negatively affect how we see ourselves.

All of these traps are caused by losses, and all of them create the gap between knowing and doing. If we want to be successful, we need to bridge that gap.

4. The First Loss Often Isn’t the Biggest Loss

When we experience a loss, we have a choice. If we immediately respond to it the right way, the loss becomes smaller to us. However if we respond the wrong way, or we fail to respond at all, that loss becomes greater. And it often leads to other losses. As the subsequent losses come at us, they seem to be bigger and bigger, crashing over us like waves in a violent storm. As the number of losses goes up, our self-confidence goes down.

We make matters worse when we compare ourselves to others, because we rarely do so on a level playing field. We either compare our best, including our good intentions, to someone else’s worst, or we compare our worst to someone else’s best. That can lead to a negative cycle of self-talk. But there’s something you need to know:

The most important person you ever talk to is yourself, so be careful what you say.

The most important person that you will evaluate is yourself, so be careful what you think.

The most important person you will love is yourself, so be careful what you do.

The most important person you ever talk to is yourself, so be careful what you say.

Yoga teacher and writer Kripalvanda said, “My beloved child, break your heart no longer. Each time you judge yourself, you break your own heart.” I believe that in times of loss, it’s easy to get caught up in thinking about how we could have or should have done things differently. Our self-talk can become very negative. The more negative it becomes, the larger our losses appear to be to us. If our self-talk is angry, destructive, or guilt producing, we become even less capable of breaking free of the negative cycle.

If we can overcome an early loss and not let it become magnified, that can help us move forward. That’s not always easy to do, but even someone who has faced a very great loss can learn to do it. I once read that General Robert E. Lee visited the beautiful home of a wealthy Kentucky widow after the Civil War. During their visit, she showed him what was left of a magnificent old tree that had been badly damaged by Union artillery fire. The woman told Lee about the impact of its loss to her, expecting him to sympathize. Instead, after a long pause he advised, “Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it.”¹ He advised her to move on. We also need to learn how to do that in a positive way.

5. Losses Never Leave Us the Same

Coaches of sports teams live in a world of wins and losses. Legendary football coach Knute Rockne quipped, “One loss is good for the

soul. Too many losses are not good for the coach.” And longtime major league manager Paul Richards said, “If you can say the morale of your club is good after losing ten out of twelve games, then your intelligence is a little low.”

**“If you can say the morale
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—Paul Richards

But you don't have to be a coach or play on a sports team to feel the impact of a loss.

I vividly remember a counseling session I had years ago with a man who was alienated from his brother. They hadn't talked to one another in years. As I listened to my client and watched him, I could feel the anger mounting in him as he recalled the details of their conflict. It finally came to a crescendo with these words, “Look what he's done to me. Look what he's done to me!”

In silence, I waited until he calmed down and was ready to listen. I calmly said, “Look what you're doing to yourself!”

Had he been wronged? Yes! But he was taking a bad experience and making the loss much worse.

The number or severity of your losses isn't as important as how you experience those losses. Yes, all losses hurt. And they make an impact on us, an impact that is rarely positive. Losses change us. But we must not allow them to control us. We can't let the fear of looking silly or incompetent paralyze us. We can't let the fear of negative consequences keep us from taking risks. Allowing negative experiences of the past to warp your future is like living in a coffin. It puts a lid on you and can end your life.

An ancient Greek legend tells of an athlete who ran well, but placed only second in his most important race. The crowd celebrated the winner and eventually erected a statue in his honor. Meanwhile, the man who had placed second came to think of himself as a loser. Envy ate away at

him. He could think of nothing else but his defeat and his hatred for the winner who had bested him. Every day that he saw the statue, it reminded him of his lost opportunity for glory. So he decided to destroy it.

Late one night he went to the statue and chiseled at its base to weaken it. He returned in subsequent nights, working on it little by little. Still the statue remained standing. With each day, he became more annoyed. Then one night as he swung the hammer angrily, he went too far. The heavy marble statue finally broke loose. It crashed down upon him with all its weight, killing him instantly. He had turned his minor loss into a fatal one.

How does one minimize the negative damage of debilitating losses? First, by letting them go emotionally. In 1995 when Jerry Stackhouse was a rookie with the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers, he was asked about his take on life now that he was playing professional basketball. His answer: "Win and forget. Lose and forget." If we want to overcome adversity and keep from being defeated by our losses, we need to get past them. And then we need to learn from them!

Turning a Loss into a Gain

If you're going to lose—and you are because everyone does—then why not turn it into a gain? How do you do that? By learning from it. A loss isn't totally a loss if you learn something as a result of it. Your losses can come to define you if you let them. If you stay where a loss leaves you, then eventually you can get stuck there. But know this: your choices will begin to declare you. You can choose to change, grow, and learn from your losses.

That, of course, is not necessarily easy. In a favorite *Peanuts* comic strip Charlie Brown walks away from Lucy after a baseball game, head down, totally dejected.

“Another ball game lost! Good grief!” Charlie moans. “I get tired of losing. Everything I do, I lose!”

“Look at it this way, Charlie Brown,” Lucy replies. “We learn more from losing than we do from winning.”

“That makes me the smartest person in the world!” replies Charlie.

It’s a good thought, but not everyone learns from his losses. A loss doesn’t turn into a lesson unless we work hard to make it so. Losing gives us an opportunity to learn, but many people do not seize it. And when they don’t, losing *really* hurts.

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Learning is not easy during down times because it requires us to do things that are not natural. It is hard to smile when we are not happy. It is difficult to positively respond when numb with defeat. It takes discipline to do the right thing when everything is wrong. How can we be emotionally strong when we are emotionally exhausted? How will we face others when we are humiliated? How do we get back up when we are continually knocked down?

I wrote this book to answer these and others questions about learning from losses, because I believe it can help you. My primary goal in life is adding value to people. I hope this book will add value to you, teaching you how to learn from your losses. Most of us need someone to help us figure out how to do that. If that is your desire—to become a learner from losses—you need to change the way you look at losses, cultivate qualities that help you respond to them, and develop the ability to learn from them. I believe you can do that using this road map:

Humility: The Spirit of Learning

Reality: The Foundation of Learning

Responsibility: The First Step of Learning

Improvement: The Focus of Learning

Hope: The Motivation of Learning

Teachability: The Pathway of Learning

Adversity: The Catalyst for Learning

Problems: Opportunities for Learning

Bad Experiences: The Perspective for Learning

Change: The Price of Learning

Maturity: The Value of Learning

Saint Ignatius Loyola, one of the world's greatest educators, once said that we learn only when we are ready to learn. As I have traveled and met leaders around the world, I have observed two things. First, most people are currently experiencing difficult times. The idea for this book actually came to me while on a speaking tour through Asia. I could sense that people were having trouble, and I wanted to find a way to help them navigate through difficult waters. Second, I've never experienced a time like the present, when so many people are open not only to learning but also to reexamining their values and priorities. If you see things the right way, losses are opportunities to change and improve.

It is probable that you are at a place in your life where you have suffered some losses and are now ready to learn. Emmet Fox said that difficulties come to you at the right time to help you grow and move forward by overcoming them. "The only real misfortune," he observed, "the only real tragedy, comes when we suffer without learning the lesson."

Let's try to learn some of these lessons together so we can say, "Sometimes You Win, Sometimes You Learn."