



PINGRY

EXCELLENCE & HONOR

HUNTER STIRES '15 – “WITH NO LOSS OF ENTHUSIASM”

ROBERT H. LEBOW '58 MEMORIAL ORATORICAL COMPETITION

FEBRUARY 22, 2013

If there's one word that can sum up every Pingry student's worst nightmare, it would be “failure.”

That mental vision of the sight of the letter F on a sheet of paper surely strikes dread into the heart of every student in this room. We're a hardworking bunch. We aspire to really great things, from top schools to entrepreneurship to public service and everything in between. At such a young age, we take our education very seriously.

And our pursuit of excellence comes at a cost. We make do with very little sleep or free time so we can dispatch our never-ending mountains of work from school and the extracurricular activities we opt into. It's no wonder that the very notion of failure gives us a gut feeling of complete doom. It is the worst form of dishonor and shame, and thus we have justifiably branded failure as the enemy. In our academic lives, especially considering the highly charged competitive environment both at Pingry and in the world of college admissions, “failure is not an option.”

And actually, that's too bad.

I'm not saying that I wish failure for any of us. Quite the contrary. To its credit, our fear of failure is deeply motivating. But in the long run, an intolerance of failure can have a negative effect on our prospects for victory, however we define it.

For something so essential to success, failure is grossly underappreciated. Like it or not, we gain valuable insights during our moments of greatest defeat. Quite frankly, “good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.” We cannot achieve anything great without some degree of difficulty that must be overcome. Easy victories are never as celebrated as those when the issue was in doubt and breakthrough only came with sheer force of will and perseverance in the face of really long odds.

We don't have to look far to find someone we hold up on a pedestal for their remarkable accomplishments but who actually failed in the extreme before they pulled it off. Take our first president: After all, today's his birthday. George Washington is, without a doubt, one of the most revered figures in our country's history. He even made this year's Buttondowns video. And he screwed up over and over throughout his life. Just think about it, at the ripe old age of 22, this guy started a world war. Maybe you've heard of the Seven Years' War, or the French and Indian War, but that was George. Not something a lot of people would want to claim.

But Washington learned from his mistakes. He got smarter and he became a much better leader. And during the American Revolution, Washington still lost a heck of a lot. In 1776, he thought he could defend New York from the British. Washington was very wrong about that. In just three months, he and his troops had lost on Long Island, they had been chased out of Manhattan, and then they were drummed out of New Jersey in just a few weeks. It was humiliating. But remarkably, Washington didn't quit, and we can only imagine just how much he wanted to. When Thomas Paine wrote “These are the times that try men's souls,” he was talking about this point of the war. But even with the Continental Army disintegrating before his very eyes, Washington never gave up, and he marshaled the mental and military strength to launch the Christmas counterattack across the Delaware that saved the American cause.

It's easy to look at what he achieved and simply dismiss it as a forgone conclusion. We know how it ends. He didn't. All he could do was stick with it. Washington's story is a shining example that failure is only a final endpoint if you quit. During the Revolution, Washington realized that he didn't have to win the war, but he just had to not lose it. When he lost a battle, he didn't surrender, but simply beat a hasty retreat so he could fight another day. And each time he lost, Washington acquired a wisdom

that could only be his through failure. And with that wisdom, he went on to win the war and his country's independence from the greatest empire on Earth.

And Washington was far from alone in this kind of story. We hear it from Thomas Edison reframing failure by embracing the multitude of ways he found how not to make a light bulb. Edison believed that failure is but a moment on a journey to success, as he explained, "I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward." This vital perspective on the role of failure created a "culture of invention" that "jumpstarted the modern world." In our own era, we hear it in the advice of entrepreneurs like Starbucks founder Howard Schultz, who emphatically declares that "Success is not an entitlement, it has to be earned." To earn success, we must accept that setbacks are likely, and failure is possible. Perhaps Winston Churchill put it best when he said, "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

SOURCES FOR QUOTES

"The American Crisis," accessed from Wikiquote

Lost Moon, by James Lovell

The Papers of George Washington, Digital Edition, for dates pertaining to the New York and New Jersey Campaign

NASDAQ: "Inspiration" 2002 advertisement

Quotations Page: Winston Churchill, "Success is the ability..."

Buck Up, Suck Up, and Come Back When You Foul Up: 12 Winning Secrets from the War Room by James Carville and Paul Begalla

Barnes and Noble Email promo for *The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America* by Ernest Freeberg