Have no excuses

19 OCTOBER 2015

> *Except in a very few [tennis] matches, usually with world-class performers, there is a point in every match (and in some cases it's right at the beginning) when the loser decides he's going to lose. And after that, everything he does will be aimed at providing an explanation of why he will have lost. He may throw himself at the ball (so he will be able to say he's done his best against a superior opponent). He may dispute calls (so he will be able to say he's been robbed). He may swear at himself and throw his racket (so he can say it was apparent all along he wasn't in top form). His energies go not into winning but into producing an explanation, an excuse, a justification for losing.*
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> — C. Terry Warner, *Bonds That Make Us Free*

Throughout high school and college, I noticed that many of my peers seemed like they were trying hard, but they weren't trying hard to learn content or pass classes — they were trying hard to make sure that they had good excuses and cover stories prepared for when they failed. Seeing this, I resolved that I would never excuse my own failures to myself — not even if I had a very good excuse. If you have an excuse prepared, you will be tempted to fall back on it. An excuse makes failure more acceptable, in some way. It's a license to fail.

If you really need to succeed on a task, then I suggest that you resolve to refuse to excuse your failure, in the event that you do fail. Even if the failure was understandable. Even if you failed for unfair reasons, due to things you couldn't have foreseen. Simply refuse to speak the excuse. *Understand* your errors, and learn from them, but if people demand to know why you failed, say only, "I'm sorry. I wasn't good enough." You may add "and I think I know what I did wrong, and I'll work to fix it, and I'll do better next time," but only if that's true.

Don't add anything else: if you want to play to win, you have to refuse to acknowledge excuses. If you were excused then you were helpless, and you couldn't have done better, and you can't learn to do better next time. Thus, I suggest that you become incapable of believing an excuse, lest you automatically slip into the game of making sure your failure will be explainable, rather than making sure you succeed.

"But sometimes bad luck just happens!" the one protests. We can imagine a person who took a bet that pays out $1,000,000 nine times out of ten and costs $10,000 otherwise. We can imagine them losing. We can imagine them saying "I should have gotten the money!", and feeling upset, and complaining that the dice went against them, and cursing the fates. We can imagine them loudly trying to make sure that everybody present knows that the bet was worth

taking, to make sure that their loss is excusable. And this person will be playing to ensure that their actions were acceptable; rather than playing to win.

I suggest, don't try to excuse bad luck. Don't call foul. Don't say that life was unfair. You're welcome to say "I'm sorry, I made a bet and I lost. I'd make the bet again, though, knowing what I did then." Then you're still *owning the choice.* You're *owning the failure,* which is the important part. Only by owning the failure can you hope to adjust and do better next time: if you feel like you are allowed to curse the dice every time they go against you, and have your gabling excused as terrible luck by your peers ("oh they're such an unlucky person it's not their fault...") then you're never going to learn when to bet and when to abstain.

I suggest cultivating your mental habits such that it feels *bad* to check whether or not your failure will have an excuse. Refuse to have excuses. Refuse to cover your failures. Only then, without expected social protection, do you really start trying to figure out how to win.

"No really, sometimes unforeseen circumstances arise!", the one protests again. We can imagine someone who was totally planning to get their paper done on time, but who got violently ill. It's true: unforeseen circumstances can wreck your plans. But you *know* about the planning fallacy (or if you

didn't, you do now). You've been a human being for a long time. You know the background rates on illnesses, and on unforeseen circumstances in general. Why didn't you work slack into your plans? Why couldn't you see those bullets coming in advance?

If you *did* work a lot of extra slack into your plans, and you still got burned anyway by extraordinary circumstances, then as before, you are welcome to answer "I took a gamble and I lost, and I'd take the same gamble again at the same odds." You're welcome to calculate that the risk is worth the benefit, and then pay the price when your debts are called in.

If you *didn't* work in the necessary leeway, then you're allowed to say "I'm sorry, I messed up." You're allowed to add "and I learned something, and I will do better next time," *if that's true.*

Will you *actually* ever learn to beat the planning fallacy, if you allow yourself to use excuses? Will you *actually* visualize the possible failures, and take an outside view, and learn to see the bullets coming before they hit you? Or will you simply expect extenuating circumstances to arise, and feel relieved when they do, because a plausible excuse has presented itself?

I have found that it's usually in the moment when I refuse to make excuses even if I do fail, that I start really trying to win in advance.

"But people *want* excuses. They're social creatures! They want to know what happened!", the one protests.

Sometimes. Sometimes people really want you to provide them some excuse, or at least some explanation. But even here, be careful: I have noticed that my friends often help me try to excuse *myself*, for one reason or another, and I think that giving in to this pressure can be harmful.

Imagine someone who failed to exit an abusive relationship, despite three years of trauma. After they successfully exit, their friends are likely to be first in line with condolences along the lines of "they were gaslighting you" and "there wasn't anything you could have done" and "how could you have known what to do?"

They are providing excuses, and these are toxic. They rob you of your power. They rob you of your ability to say "actually, I *could* have known, if I had been thinking more clearly. I *could* have acted differently, if I had known better. And that's the *good part*, because it means that I am not a helpless victim, because it means that I can learn how to become stronger. Because it means that I cannot be trapped in that sort of situation again."

Excuses rob you of your agency. Yes, many people will try to get excuses out of you, if they perceive you as putting too much pressure on yourself. *But that pressure is precisely the*

impetus to learn and adapt, and if you can bear it, then I suggest you do.

There are situations where failing to generate excuses will cost you socially, especially if you're in the presence of people who have recently been generating excuses for themselves. If three students give thin excuses for why they didn't finish their project on time, and you say only "I'm sorry, I wasn't good enough, I think I know what I did wrong, I'll do better next time;" then they are liable to glare at you. In refusing to generate an excuse when everyone else is doing so, you violate some unspoken pact of mediocrity.

Sometimes, other people need *you* to make excuses in order to help excuse the fact that *they* are making excuses, and if you violate this norm, they find themselves faced with their own shortcomings. This can lead to some uncomfortable situations, and the best advice I can offer you for those, is that they provide a wonderful opportunity for self-signaling that you will refuse to excuse your actions even under intense social pressures.

Note, too, that in many other situations, refusing to generate excuses *gains* you lots of social status. Yes, there are places where people view refusal to generate an excuse as a violation of the solemn pact of mediocrity, but I have found that the people I can gain most from dealing with, are by and

large people who have a deep appreciation and respect for those who live up to their errors.

Excuses have you looking out to the world to explain your failure, rather than revealing the weak points in yourself. Did the unexpected happen? Then learn how to expect better next time. Were you betrayed? Learn how to build tighter social bonds, and learn how to see betrayals coming sooner next time. Did the dice turn against you? Then own up to your bet and make sure you're only making worthwhile gambles.

For many, the mantra of "find the failure in yourself, rather than in the world" will be harmful and destructive. If you are motivated primarily by guilt or shame, then seriously consider ignoring this post's advice. If you are prone to buckling instead of buckling down, then seriously consider ignoring this post's advice. If you are struggling with your self-image and your sense of self-worth, if you think some people are bad, if you flinch away from seeing the dark world, then seriously consider ignoring this post's advice. Or if "find the failure in yourself" feels bad or destructive at the moment for any other reason, then please ignore this post.

But if you are done with guilt motivation, and comfortable with the fact that we are not yet gods, and capable of detaching the grim-o-meter, then I strongly suggest that you

have no excuses. Find the flaws inside yourself. Don't tolerify them. Accept them, and plan ways to address or route around them. If you can't see what you need to do better next time, then it's going to be tough to do better next time.

This is part of the toolset that I use to replace guilt motivation: *play to win.* Don't play to excuse your loss.

You don't need to win every time — but you do need to *learn* every time.

If you find yourself trying to proclaim circumstance unfair, explaining how you could not possibly have seen this coming, then stop in your tracks. An explanation of how you couldn't possibly have seen this coming is a social device, an attempt to ensure that others still think you are OK, that they think your previous actions were acceptable. It's fine to play that social game; social games occasionally need to be played. But first, *figure out how you could have actually seen that thing coming*, next time. That's the important part.

Excuses are a social artifact, a way to ensure that you don't lose face when you fail.

But we're not here to win a social game.

Despite what all the monkey instincts might tell you, you're not playing Life in a competition against all the other monkeys.

You're playing Life with the universe, and the stakes are the entire future.

In the end, you won't be measured by how good your excuses were for all the things that didn't turn out the way you wanted.

You'll be judged only by what actually happens (as will we all).

"It's not an excuse, it's an *explanation.*"

Explanations are excuses.

Don't get me wrong, it's very important to *understand* your failures. Note, though, that there's a big difference between "understanding" that your stupid knee was acting up and the sun was in your eyes and luck turned against you, and understanding that you didn't train hard enough or anticipate adverse conditions well enough.

When trying to understand your failures, it's important to figure out what *you* could have done better, rather than generating a list of reasons you never could have won. If there were unforeseen circumstances, understand why you couldn't foresee them. If your knee was acting up, learn how

to either address that next time or work it into your expectations.

(And be very wary, when figuring out what you could have done better, for hints of destructiveness and fatalism in your tone. Imagine someone who is betrayed, and shouts "well I guess now I've learned to never trust anyone ever again forever!" For all their guise of having learned, they are harming themselves. It seems to me that this self-harm has something in common with an excuse: it gives a false veneer of locating a problem internally ("I am too kind and trusting") while actually identifying the problem in the world ("the world is bad"). The right lesson to learn is likely never "become completely unable to trust," it is likely more along the lines of "learn how to build tighter friendships" or "learn how to read humans better." It can be often useful to check the advice you just gave yourself to see whether it was obviously destructive, before following it.)

The point of understanding your failure is to learn how to act better next time, and I recommend that you understand your failures whenever possible. But don't explain them away, and don't excuse them.

If you want to succeed, stop generating reasons why you never could have won, and play to win.