

What Running Taught Me: How to Fail and How to Grow Old

In early 2020, I took up running seriously. I used to be a martial arts enthusiast (I was a member of the Berkeley Taekwondo and Wushu club) and gym rat, but that changed after my first child came along. I simply had no time to do these things anymore. Instead, I hit the road.

When the pandemic emerged, I traded my long commuting time for running. I typically run 4 to 5 days a week, each time going about 10-15 kilometers (around 6 to 9 miles). I am not fast and my form is ugly. Yet, I run because I don't care. Running calms my troubled mind. While physical by nature, running is also deeply mental, meditative, and contemplative. Using running as a form of meditation, I have learned how to fail and how to grow old.

In my experience, life as a professional researcher is about dealing with failure. Beginning from graduate school, I don't know how often my papers, fellowship and grant proposals, and job applications were rejected. However, I learned that to be recognized; one must be bold, ambitious, and unafraid to take risks. Inevitably, this will include moments of failure. Yet, this is the only true way to discover and unleash your full potential. Nevertheless, the brutal process is anything but fun.

I decided to start running because I read about its positive effects on mental health. I hoped that running could reduce my work- and parenting-related stress. However, when I started training for running, I viewed it as if it was my work. I set goals, such as speed and distance, and committed myself to reaching them.

Through trial and error, I learned that what matters is finding pleasure. Now when I run, I don't focus on how fast I am or how many miles I can do. Rather, I stay in the moment, focusing on proper breathing, foot landing, and, most importantly, going with the flow. As the sound of my footsteps becomes akin to music, my mind drifts away, along with my worries and anxieties.

What I've learned from running has served me in life. I am applying the wisdom gleaned from running to my work. Yes, I still must set defined goals to measure my progress but when I'm working, I don't think about them. I focus on what and how I learn; finding the flow so I can continue to learn tomorrow, the day after that, and so on (Haruki Murakami the famed Japanese novelist offered the same reflection in his running memoir *What I Talk About Running When I Talk About Running*). In the process, I know setbacks and failures will occur. I will be slower and run fewer miles than I want to. This is fine as long as I hit the road the next day and find joy in it. I run to be happy. I also work to be happy.

The other important lesson I've learned is how to grow old. Aside from not having the time in my schedule, I became less interested in martial arts due to physical challenges. As I aged, I got injured more easily when sparring and I needed more time to recover. Though difficult, I have to be honest with myself: I'm getting old. Instead of resisting the inevitable, I am trying to adapt. Running more seriously and consciously is the start. As long as my legs can carry my body, I intend to run, work, and cherish every moment in my life. I ran my first half marathon in 2021 and signed up for a full marathon race in 2023. Since 2020, I've run almost everywhere I lived, visited, and traveled: the San Francisco Bay Area, the Greater Los Angeles Area, Lake Tahoe, Honolulu, Chicago, Montreal, and several cities in South Korea.

The 2021 San Francisco Marathon