I Hate Learning

On Making Mistakes

Zoe

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Dear Reader,

As we covered a couple of weeks ago: I hate learning.

I acknowledge off the bat that is a sweeping statement. This time around, we will focus on one aspect of it: I have a singular issue with making mistakes.

As I write this, I can feel the thick lump grow in my throat and the hollow feeling grow in my gut. This reaction is just to the idea of making a mistake. When I actually make a mistake, or a faux-pas, or a goddamn stumble, that shit gets exponentially bigger. It sticks around, too, but it changes shape. The initial sensation of disappointment and guilt shift into a longer lasting identity marker if you let it — speaking from experience.

artwork by @hessah.\_.art on instagram

Before I go any further — lets do the housekeeping.

First, if you are not already a subscriber and you resonate with any of the following descriptors, consider joining the cooperative: (1) Early-career professional; (2) Feminist; (3) Do-gooder; (4) Former Gifted Kid; (5) Overachiever; or (6) Capitalism-hater.

Second, if you like what I am saying and it makes you think of someone in your family/office/friend group, send it their way.

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Third, I say some personal and vulnerable shit every week. Say some vulnerable shit back. It’s called a community.

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Okay — back to it.

Making mistakes brings up an important dichotomy that I want to articulate as we move into this conversation: the relationship between shame and guilt.

“I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it’s holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.

I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”

Written by Brené Brown on January 15, 2013

With that established, it is important now for me to clarify that for me, making a mistake is far more shame-inducing than guilt-inducing.

Looking back, I can see tons of examples of where I made mistakes. I could spend this full newsletter detailing the time that I sent a financial document to our Indonesian partners with a typo in it over two years ago. I remember it like it was yesterday. I know where I was when it was brought to my attention. That lingering memory comes from a place of shame. It is locked into my self-narrative.

However, as I look further back to before I started working, I don’t see a girl that was so afraid of making mistakes that it kept her from asking questions or from trying. In college, my strength was being the person who wasn’t afraid to look like an idiot in class if that meant that I could better learn the content. I love the feeling of asking the question and then seeing my classmates pick up their pens as the professor delivered a response that was beneficial to the whole class.

My first boss out of college explicitly told me not to ask her questions. She didn’t have time for it. At the same time, she was terrified that a mistake that I might make would make her team look weak. It’s not a great duality: refusing support and training while also having no room for error.

When she told me to stop asking her questions, I recoiled thinking that she was being reasonable and that I should know this already, that it was my own fault if I was making mistakes. She was telling me that asking her (or other superiors) questions was a waste of their limited time. I responded with shame and agreed not to bother her any more. I remember where I was for that conversation too. At 22, I was learning to shut up and sit down. As I did my exit interview for that job with the director of HR, she was aghast that this had happened. Clearly my boss had been unprepared to bring on talent without experience — I received this feedback with shame too. I heard “you were a liability from the moment you started” rather than the intended “she should have been prepared to help you grow”.

I left that first job without having another one set up—one of the things you are urged to avoid at all costs. Luckily, I had a mentor who had left the organization just before I did and who saw how staying was impacting my wellbeing. She urged me to leave, despite the inevitable challenge that would bring. Ultimately, I was one of 4-5 people who left that organization without anything else lined up that year. Despite all of that, this feels like a mistake as well, though two things come into play here. (1) I feel less shame about this mistake because I knew the risk of staying. (2) I find it easier to make mistakes that burden myself than to make mistakes that burden others. For all of these reasons, the mistake of leaving a job without a plan spurs a feeling of guilt in me rather than shame.

After six months of job hunting (another soul-breaking and shame-inducing activity), I landed a new job. One thing that you learn after a job change or two is that it takes about six-months to a year to get comfortable in your role. In these six months, you are expected to be slow and to make mistakes—especially in non-startup environments.

At my new job, I was met by a manager who was more afraid of making mistakes than I was (which is telling at this point). Her fear amplified my own every time she freaked out over a mistake that I had made or scapegoated me to avoid her own accountability. As I look back at that time it stuns me how little allowance was made for my adjustment to this role. I was looking for new jobs by the time I hit month four. I eventually made it nine months in that role. As humans, we must make allowances for each other’s humanity. I did so for this manager—I continue to do so—but she failed to do the same for me.

By the time I landed my current job, that college kid who was often the first person to ask a dumb question had been shoved so far into the corner that she became one with the shadows and the cobwebs. I have spent the last year coaxing her back out and fighting back the fear of the shame of making mistakes. Last week however, she got spooked right back into the corner. This time though, I saw her retreat and I watched with sadness and anger, knowing what that fear can do to you.

Making mistakes is inevitable and being afraid of that is normal. [A note that I make more for myself than for any of you.]

Beating that fear back allows you to flourish and create healthy community around you. I spend a lot of time with a pit in my stomach, imagining that I could end up like those managers who were so afraid. The starting point is there. I am terrified of making mistakes. The thing is that I am braver than they are. I can face my fears and not cower to them.

I hate learning, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t do it. Not only can I learn from my own mistakes, but I can learn from those made by the people around me—even by the people in charge of me.

Best,

Zoe