

*Our business in life is
not to succeed,
but to fail in good spirits*

— Robert Louis Stevenson

depending on where you are sitting, the statement above sounds either absurdly defeatist or full of hard-won wisdom. The mind (the American mind, especially) protests: not to succeed?! — but is forced then to ask what, exactly, it means to succeed... or to fail. If there is a thread running through the articles that follow, it is that asking that question is perhaps the essential use of failure. For success is not failure's opposite but its twin, its mirror image, its partner in a three-legged race.

Failure lurks in the gaps: between expectation and reality, between our goals and our abilities, between the time required and the time allotted. If you have spent any time in a ceramics studio, you know all about the gaps, and a good deal of your education has probably taken place because of them. The insights and lessons are vital, but easier to think about in retrospect. The moments of failure, the ones that get our attention, are a stew of self-recrimination, regret, and futile longing. With time and attention, failure may yield its teachings, but you have to traipse through the low points first — and you have to keep moving. The essays here report from many different points on the unending oscillation between success and failure. They chart the ups and downs, and what happened next. To those brave contributors who wrote honestly from the depths, we are especially grateful. We've all been there.

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