CHAPTER 11.

IN PURSUIT OF INDUSTRY KNOWLEDGE: ALWAYS LEARNING BY OFTEN FAILING

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I am a PhD of just a few years, with a faculty position teaching writing in a business school. I've nurtured company relationships that bring internships to my students. I've stepped into an Advisory Head of Communications role at a tech start-up, which keeps me relevant and involved in industry. I wouldn't say I've "made it," as my career is still quite new, but it is finally heading in the direction I wanted it to go. Just a few years prior, life was disrupted by financial instability: Having left the security of my graduate stipend to pursue industry work, I finished my dissertation with nickels and dimes in my bank account, months of job rejections, and much pessimism about my professional future.

Now that my career is coming back together, it would be easy to package my failures in clichés. *Failure is an essential ingredient to success; I overcame and persevered against all odds; The hard times built character that made me who I am today.* These trite expressions do ring true, but they also ring hollow because they premise failure's value on its relationship to success. When I was mid-failure, when I feared getting lost in the gaps on my resumé, I realized the precariousness of failure's value. I never heard it said, but I did find it loudly implied that people value failure when it is coupled to success in a "happily ever after" narrative. The fairytale ending told in a failure-to-success paradigm is a popular refrain, one in which Failure is cast as the villain that needs to be overcome so that Success can win the day. Yet, failure itself is a valuable life process and an invaluable way of learning. Failure has brought me insight and knowledge that success could not, making it the true heroine of my story—one I will tell in reverse.

Fall 2020-Fall 2022. I am in my third year as a Clinical Assistant Professor teaching business communication, a course that represents the meeting ground between academia and industry that I long pursued. I enjoy the teaching emphasis my role as clinical gives. I find my teacherly ethos taking distinct shape and motivating my scholarship. While I have by no means arrived at the pinnacle of my career, I see that my efforts are bearing fruit for students and for myself. In

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my first two years, I developed partnerships with start-up companies to create an internship pathway in my course; I have become Advisory Head of Communications at a start-up company to stay engaged in industry; I have developed meaningful relationships with students and colleagues, which have initiated new projects and fostered an excitement for my work life. My career is becoming what I dreamed of—a blend of intellectual rigor and industry impact.

Spring 2020. Now, let's go backward. As an adjunct and doctoral candidate on the job market, my first campus visit approached while I had about $300 in my bank account. I needed to buy a suit, but I also needed to keep enough money for groceries. The JC Penney sales rack produced something passable, and I accessorized it with the bluff that life was not falling down around me, though indeed, it seemed to be. When I went into the job talk for my current position, I had an agonizing 20 months behind me: lots of work, little pay, utter failure. The day of the interview felt surreal as if it was happening around me but not to me. I moved through it on a cloud, performing well enough to get the first offer. It was my top pick, so I signed the contract and withdrew my name from other interviews, which included some for tenure-track positions. I wanted the clinical role because of its location in a business school, where I could activate the ideals of the humanities in a context where those ideals are very much needed. I believed then, as I do now, that the humanities matter across disciplinary contexts, so I set out to do cross-disciplinary work.

Fall 2019. At the beginning of this academic year, I took an adjunct position along with tutoring hours, writing work, and a local coordinator role at an academic exchange program for high schoolers. I was also hitting the job market, which, as everyone knows, is "itself a full-time job," and I was in the thick of dissertation writing. My head was spinning with the clutter of daily to-do lists, and despite the exhaustion of working hard and working always, the financial payoff consistently fell well below my monthly expenses. I am no outlier in feeling the pinch of working for the privilege of working, of taking on side jobs so that I could advance my long-term career dreams. The strain of output, the discouragement of no measurable or guaranteed return, posed a haunting question, "What if my failure does not lead to success; is it still valuable?" While I had reached the threshold of financially viable academic employment, I hadn't yet crossed over it. I had the wearied feeling of free climbing up a steep rock face, nearing the top, with intense awareness of how far I could fall back down.

Spring and Summer 2019. Prior to my adjunct role, I worked a part-time, remote customer service position. Every second of my shift was monitored, recorded, and ranked. The intensity of big corporate, low-level jobs like this one filled me with new respect for the hourly employees carrying companies on their backs like so many ants burdened by a load well over their body weight.

As a customer service associate, I observed company communication from the ground floor, and I realized how much companies run on writing, an insight that fed my hunger to bring academia and industry meaningfully together in my own career. At this time, I was also taking contract projects for start-ups, even when the pay was meager. I found the rate of exchange worthwhile because I was still gaining experience, and more than anything, I wanted to take my industry experience another step forward. I was in a season of choosing between gas and grocery money, physically and emotionally spent, but still pursuing experience over income with the belief that a larger payoff would come in time.

Fall 2018-Spring 2019. From August to April, I was desperately applying to jobs (any and all jobs), meanwhile maxing out my credit cards. Networking with start-ups got me a $600 project—the only income I made during these months. Still, the work was fascinating, and I was excited to find it required a process that my academic training had prepared me for. I was contracted to research provisional patent applications and help draft one, a process much like writing an academic argument. Patents parallel academic research closely. They require writers to: (1) research existing and like inventions; (2) put prior patents into comparison, a kind of patent lit review; (3) place the company invention into a milieu of prior patents yet also show how it is distinct. These kinds of genre-parallels were common in my freelancing and kept me wanting to learn more.

Summer 2018. I have now arrived at the catalyst of my failure, the first domino to fall and set off a chain reaction of failures: I received a job offer from a start-up tech company, one I had connected with through an internship program. I jumped at this opportunity to take my skills into the workforce, with the long-term goal of ultimately bringing the experience back into my academic research. I was set to begin in data enhancement and then move into technical writing, documenting the standard operating procedures for the company's data entry process as an entry point into higher-level work. In my graduate program, I met with my dissertation committee to plan the process of finishing my PhD remotely so that I could begin my new position. I withdrew from comparable and promising job applications. I forfeited my instructorship. I moved states. And the job vanished. We had drawn up the contract, and the board approved my salary when a hiccup with a partnering company dissolved the income for my position and the need for it altogether.

In the months leading up to the job's appearance and disappearance, I had been researching "alt-ac" or alternative academic pathways for humanities degrees as part of my work as a research assistant.[1] I was also looking into the rel-

1 Though Bethany Nowviskie coined "alt-ac" on Twitter in 2009 (Rogers, 2013), the concept of alt-ac and the application of work in humanities to other industries has been around much longer. A notable mismatch in PhD production and available academic positions arose in 1969: "At

evance of humanities degrees in other industries, in contexts completely outside of academia. The research greatly interested me, as I soon found that this area was ripe for work. I noted many bold claims about the relevance of the humanities, like Stephen R. Yarbrough's (2001) statement that "Few industries in the contemporary world could not benefit from the kind of cultural expertise a doctorate in English represents. The fact that those industries are often unaware of those benefits simply illustrates how thoroughly we have hidden our light under a bushel" (106). Such arguments seemed to abound yet stayed largely in the preliminary. They emphasized the potential marketability of PhDs in the humanities, but they maximized on ambiguity. For instance, Christine Kelly (2016) writes: "[T]here are so many options outside academe where you can be your own boss and create a job that fits what you want" (para. 9). This sounded great to me. But what did having "so many options" mean—both in terms of career preparation and in terms of actual career choices?

Kelly Anne Brown (2017) points out that we still know very little of what becomes of those who pursue intellectual work outside of academia or who pursue non-professorial academic work (para. 1). I wanted to search these unknowns out; I wanted to get to the other side of these speculations and find a navigable pathway from rhetoric and composition into industry writing, one that other enterprising graduate students like myself could follow. I suppose I envisioned a kind of "how to" article emerging from the experience, one guiding students and programs into successful connections in industry (I'm chuckling at my own naivete, even as I proofread this essay).

Toward A Healthier Ever After. I tell my story in reverse because professional narratives take this structure. Our resumés and CVs move from present to prior experience. Our LinkedIn pages do the same. Where you are right now is a priority for most professional audiences, which is a scary reality when you aren't anywhere significant. Somewhat dangerously, the question, "Who are you?" has become conflated with, "What do you do?" For two years, I did nothing of measurable significance or of immediate monetary value. As a result, I felt like I had no measurable significance.

I steadily worked on projects that brought me to a promising starting point, finally finding the synthesis of industry and academia that I initially set out for. What I do right now is exhilarating and rewarding to me. What I didn't do for so long permanently changed my perception of failure and my perception of myself. I didn't find a straightforward path into industry, one that others could neatly follow. I found that the process is much more complex and highly

the 1969 convention, this system was overwhelmed by the large and still growing wave of PhDs and doctoral PhD candidates who arrived in Denver to compete for what had suddenly become a contracting number of professorial positions" (Laurence, 2017, para. 3).

individualized. I also didn't find my value or happiness when I started succeeding, but rather, the pressures of failure produced the profound insight that I have inherent value, and so does failure. I realized that I shouldn't tether my value or my identity to success, but I should embrace failure as always bringing knowledge and, therefore, always enhancing the value I can add to the next classroom lecture or company project.

Interestingly enough, I am now immersed in entrepreneurship, which celebrates failure. In start-up world, failure needs to happen quickly so that learning can happen quickly, and as a result, I have learned to link failure to learning, which has shifted my valuation of it. I need to learn, so I need to fail. Meanwhile, my failures also lead to very interesting opportunities and experiences. In my current role as Advisory Head of Comms, I develop internal and external company communications. I have written SOPs, go-to-market strategies, technical summaries, web copy, investor pitches—the list is endless and ever-growing, so I'll stop there. I am now in an environment where I can be learning and practicing my learning continually. Of course, my learning always comes with a series of missteps and setbacks, all of which increase my knowledge even more and enhance my performance on the next iteration. To always be learning means to often be failing.

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