

# Writing and the Creative Life: "In great attempts, it is glorious even to fail"

[Scott Myers](#)

When legendary football coach Vince Lombardi would speak in public, he rarely strayed far from two closely related subjects: success and failure. One quote I've always remembered is this one:

In great attempts,  
it is glorious  
even to fail

It seems to me this embodies a mindset writers would do well to embrace for it re-frames the prospect of failure: Instead of fearing it, why not look at it as a necessary possibility whenever we strive to create something great?

I was reminded of this by a comment in an interview with Joel and Ethan Coen about their movie *Inside Llewyn Davis*. They were discussing their attempts to figure out a song Davis, played by Oscar Isaac, would sing at a critical moment in the story. Here is how Ethan remembered it:

*Oscar was already cast and we still didn't know the song we were going to use. Oscar had some input into it, and he wanted a very bluesy, showy Dave Van Ronk song. And we thought, "No, that's not right for this." But even the wrong thing can be good to hear, because it leads to a conversation. Somebody says the wrong thing, and you get to react to it and decide, "Okay, why is that wrong?" And it helped us to figure out what might be right, and that's how we remembered the song we ended up using, "The Death of Queen Jane."*

Inside Llewyn Davis (2014)

This is precisely what I tell my students. Writing a story involves hundreds, perhaps thousands of choices. Any of those choices has the potential to be right or wrong. All you can do is try this one or that, and see where it takes you. When the choice turns out to be the wrong one, it's easy to look at all the time and effort in pursuing that path as being a waste... in other words, a failure.



I say look at it another way.

First, by going down that wrong path, you have gained this knowledge: You no longer have to worry about if you should go that way. The question is now off the table, freeing you from that concern.

Second, like Ethan Coen suggests, you can look at that choice and ask, "Why is that wrong?" And that can, indeed, lead to a 'conversation,' albeit an internal one, whereby you will learn something important, more than likely steering you toward the right path.

Third, you can even look at the entire exercise of writing a story from a macro perspective: If your story fails, whether aesthetically or commercially, you will have still won.

You have won because you finished what you started.

You have won because you have fought back the voices of cynicism and distraction.

You have won because you tapped into your creative potential.

You have won because you responded to the moment with the courage to write.

And you never know. You might have had to write this 'failure' precisely in order to write the next story which could succeed.

"In great attempts, it is glorious even to fail."

And sometimes... in the long run... nothing succeeds like failure.

You can see an inspirational speech by Vince Lombardi [here](#).

*Writing and the Creative Life is a weekly series in which we explore creativity from the practical to the psychological, the latest in brain science to a spiritual take on the subject. Hopefully the more we understand about our creative self, the better we will become as writers. If you have any good reading material in this vein, please post in comments. If you have a particular observation you think readers will benefit from and you would like to explore in a guest post, email me.*

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