

Find Inspiration in an Epic Fail



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“It’s extremely liberating and honest to admit that we know very little about almost everything. This is not to make us feel small and insignificant, but rather to make us feel excited about how much we still have to learn.”
– John Hunt, *The Art of the Idea*

It’s not often that an epiphany interrupts my racing thoughts and endless loops of must do and might do lists. Recently, however, I experienced a moment of Zen and discovery while digging a hole to prepare for a new planting. What I genuinely love about gardening is *not knowing* how things are going to turn out. As I paused while planting it occurred to me that my many ‘epic fails’ as a gardener have germinated two wonderful outcomes: first, valuable lessons about paying closer attention to the selection *and* placement of new plantings, and next, consistent success in the garden would have eliminated countless hours of enjoyment replanting and reimagining the landscape. Had everything I planted 17 years ago survived, the bare spots and blank canvass left by the things that needed more/less sun, better draining soil, fewer delicious leaves for critters... wouldn’t exist.

Be a Sunriser

In his book, *The Art of the Idea*, John Hunt uses the term ‘sunriser’ to describe “people who go through life open to the idea that the best may still be coming.” For many years now, I’ve felt that *my best* is yet to come.

How can we cultivate an optimistic, forward-facing path for ourselves, our communities, and our organizations? I found the following seeds of inspiration in *The Art of the Idea*.

1. **Find fresh thinking to perennial challenges.** Hunt writes that “Reality is an unpredictable set of leaps and jerks that happen faster and faster. Fresh thinking is the only saddle we have to ride the unknown, so we might as well get used to making it up as we go along. It also helps if we start enjoying the ride.” Is your organization welcoming the dawn of a new day by doubling down on what you’ve always done?
2. **Reassess your point of view.** Hunt explains, “The advantages of embracing diversity are immediate and tangible. Walk into a room with a true mixture of people and you can feel a different kind of energy. The meeting hasn’t even started, yet the differences, whether it’s accents or dress sense, have already had an effect. It’s a more interesting place to be. Minds automatically open as they adjust to absorb new stimuli.” He adds, “Working with people of different backgrounds doesn’t just give the group a different point of view, it makes you reassess your own. This is extremely powerful because we’re all trapped in

what we've previously learnt." What traps, biases and worn routines are holding you back from surmounting your toughest risks and charting a bright future?

3. **Leave your comfortable cul-de-sac to find new building blocks.** Hunt cautions that "...our thinking ends up in a cul-de-sac because of the assumptions we've made along the way. Once someone from a different space tells you these assumptions are necessarily true, it's much easier to reroute yourself to an idea. We need others to take our blinders off, mainly because we don't realize we're wearing any... it's much easier to create something new if your building blocks are different." In what ways has your organization ventured out to explore bold opportunities? A completely different understanding of your clientele or the fundamental problems your mission is trying to solve?
4. **Prepare to be wrong.** Hunt explains that fresh thinking is often stunted when colleagues believe you're not really, truly interested in their bold ideas. Hunt writes: "All over the world, at any given moment, someone is calling a meeting under the guise of a "brainstorm." But what they really want is a fine drizzle." Have you ever invited colleagues to a brainstorm that wound up being a drizzle? If 'yes,' you're not alone! Sometimes the ideas fail to flow because of the signals you send: "I want ideas, but nothing revolutionary." Or perhaps participants previously dismissed or ridiculed for real 'out of the box' thinking have decided it's not worth the personal risk to tell you what they sincerely think. As your nonprofit confronts serious, existential risks, remember that this could be the moment when your mission becomes irrelevant—or newly inspiring. Welcome candid, heartfelt, passionate ideas about *what's wrong* and *what's next* from anyone and everyone sowing the seeds of your mission.

Humility, Not Hubris

It's hubris to believe that human beings—with or without risk management training and study—can accurately forecast the disruptions, detours, and deviations from standard operating procedures that most certainly lie ahead. If you're still using the well-worn, pointless approach of scoring 'likelihood' and 'impact' for each named risk in your 'risk register,' I'd love to learn how you scored the risk of 'pandemic,' or the risk of 'civil unrest.' Better yet, tell me how those scores inspired the hard work necessary to build resilience at your organization. Instead of pretending that we can forecast the future or reduce uncertainty, let's reflect on how we've been surprised, caught off guard, based decisions on faulty assumptions, and continued with practices that weren't working but somehow seemed 'good enough.'

Choose Action Over Regret

Regret is a powerful, destructive emotion. For the most part, we can't undo what we've already done or failed to do. Regret is the relentless reminder of the pain and disappointment we've caused others and a hard reminder of letting fear eclipse courage when we've experienced failure. The only way to reduce tomorrow's regret is to take bold action today. What are you doing to inspire optimism, creativity, and bold choices within your team? When it comes to a simple pleasure such as gardening, I'm determined to stop regretting the countless poor choices I've made over two decades toiling in the soil. I'm choosing to fill the void with optimism about the lessons from my epic fails and wonder and excitement about which perennials will survive their off-season slumber to emerge as showstoppers in my always changing, uncertain landscape.

A Tale of Two Yew

Two identical yews planted in close proximity on the same day. A landscape architect recently told me that they were both ugly and should be removed. The scrawny one on the left makes me smile every time I see it. Despite whatever challenging conditions that have stunted its growth, it's still reaching its branches skyward. So, I'm going to keep my fraternal yew twins for now!



A Modest Hydrangea Surpasses Expectations

The small hydrangea I planted in 2004 as an accent at the end of an extensive landscaping bed. If I had known it would grow this large, I would have never purchased and planted it. I'm grateful for my ignorance; it's one of the most beautiful features in the yard.

