



JIM HARSHAW JR.

Revealing Failure as the Path to Success

Success Through Failure Podcast

Action Plan Episode #254

Shawn Coyne

Shawn Coyne is an editor, publisher, literary agent, and writer. He's the co-founder of Black Irish Books, along with Steven Pressfield. He's the author of "The Story Grid" which is a blueprint for how to write a compelling story. We talk about the value of telling your story, both for your own personal benefit and for the benefit of the world. He shares the powerful insights that you gain from the process of writing and other storytelling formats. Whether you're looking to write a book or not, the insights gained here will help you communicate better with your audience- be it your children, your friend, your boss, or your community.

Quotes

"I think the better attuned we can be to our environment and the better we can adapt to it, the better we can get over things that are seemingly impossible."

"Don't think writing will have an end-result that will raise your status."

"Writing is a process by which we open up our minds."

About Origins of Storytelling 12:00 - 14:20

"I actually believe that storytelling and the ability to understand story and to be emotionally moved by story is the psycho-technology that separates us from every other species. I'll go all the way back to 200,000 years ago. When we see those cave drawings and artwork that came online, it actually occurred right after a big, catastrophic event, a sort of big, apocalyptic event. Anthropologists talk about it as this explosion of a massive volcano. At the time, it whittled down humanity to less than 10,000 people. Shortly after this event is when this psycho-technology of storytelling came online. So when you go back and look at the artifacts, all of these stories were all about survival. So people were telling each other where the food was, where the water was, where the best hunting grounds were, how to build

shelter, how to know the fertility rights of a specific time and place, all those sorts of things that enabled us to survive. I think over the years, that sense of people capable of understanding a story and to think about their lives abstractly as things that have a beginning, a middle, and an end, has been extraordinarily helpful in our ability to survive and thrive on the planet. So if you sort of accept that initial proposition that storytelling is this critical thing that in our minds, enables us to survive and thrive better than other species, then you can kind of take the next step and say to yourself, 'What happens when I imagine a story? What happens to my brain? How do I move through the world in the way that I can when I think of stories?' Essentially, what it does is it helps us examine the choices that we make and it makes us frame our life on a continuum."

About the Structure of Storytelling 22:48 - 25:18

"The Structure of storytelling in my estimation is the means by which we actually react and think to unexpected events. The structure of a well-told story mirrors and mimics actual insight moments in our lives. Mark and I talk about this in the book. What usually happens is an unexpected thing drops into our lives. On my way to make a cup of coffee, I might not see the skateboard that my daughter left in the pathway. So I'm not expecting to see a skateboard as I am going to make my coffee. But that's an inciting incident. If I step on that skateboard and I fall, that's a progressive complication. That complicates my goal of being able to make a cup of coffee. Now, it could be an irreversible progressive complication that turns the value of that moment from unsatisfied to injured., so injured that I might have to go to the hospital and I don't get any coffee. The value at that moment, in that scene, it changes. There's a turning point and the value shifts at that moment. And then a crisis arises. Should I scream out and ask for help, or should I crawl to the phone? Which one of those should I do? Or should I just shake it off and go make my coffee? That moment of decision, of crisis, is the climax of the scene. That motor action that I choose in that crisis moment is what moves the scene forward. And then it resolves. I either get the coffee or I go to the hospital. That's the simple structure of a well-told story, and you can really pull that out of a great advertisement, a great lecture in school, a great story in a bar. That simple five-stage structure is the substance of storytelling and it's all the means by which our brains actually engage us for motor action. It's remarkable."

About The Structure of the Hero Story 28:08 - 30:57

"So the simple structure of the hero's journey is that at the beginning, something unexpected happens. The hero, he or she doesn't even notice it until that

unexpected event gets larger. It's like a radioactive force. The more the protagonist doesn't deal with it, the larger and larger it gets. It gets progressively larger until it reaches a moment when the protagonist has to come to a crisis decision. That sort of moment there is the call to adventure. At this moment, the character has to decide, 'Well, should I leave this physical world that I am at right now?' It can be a metaphysical world too. 'Can I leave my familiar surroundings and go on a mission so that I can help other people or myself?' That's the heroic journey. Usually, what happens in these stories is that the protagonist really avoids having to do this mission until such time as their cowardness starts to affect other people. A hero at the first stages is okay being a wimp. 'You know what? I'm a wimp. I like being a wimp. I like the way my world view is. I'm not hurting anybody. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to do anything.' And then, what happens is that their inaction creates agency deprivation for other people, meaning that other people get hurt. So the hero at this point recognizes their inaction is hurting other people. It hits this moral, ethical wall. The hero has to say, 'Ah geez, I guess I'm going to have to do something about this or these other people are going to get hurt.' This is the beginning hook of the heroic journey. Then they go into an extraordinary world, a place they have never been to before. They have to use all of their skills to be able to navigate this world but they don't know what's going on. It's sort of like when you leave your hometown and you go to college. So I'm sure that on the first day of college, everybody who's ever experienced it was like, 'Oh my gosh, I don't have any friends here. What am I going to do? What am I going to eat?' But they know they have to keep pressing on. So they have to adapt to this environment. So the rest of the hero's journey is about that hero figuring out how to attain their specific goal."

About Stories We Tell Ourselves 44:50 - 46:19

"There's a lot of malware. There's a lot of stories we tell ourselves that are not true. They're not accurate, they're not attuned to reality. The problem that we have is we can't identify them, unless you imagine. When you did your hypnotherapy process, basically that's a process by which you're opening up your cognitive framing. You're allowing your mind to actually create that space where you did get to talk to your father, your grandfather, your great-grandfather. That's a story you created in your mind that's as valuable, if not the most valuable tool of storytelling. You don't have to sit down and write a story of someone like Jim who went to a hypnotherapist and had this experience, because you already experienced it. So when we look at stories as a commodity or a chore, like, 'Oh, I've got to write this thing because it's supposed to make me self-examine,' that's not the point. The point is that storytelling is about opening up your mind and considering, 'I wonder what it would

be like to be in a room with the spirits of my ancestors. I wonder what they would say.”

Action Item

“Mark McLaughlin is a super-duper high-end neurosurgeon. When we started to work together, we were working on this book and I never felt like we were nailing. I never felt like there was soul and all that stuff that we want in a great story. It dawned on me that Mark never told me the thing that haunts him. He never told me the thing that he just carries around with him in his mind that really sort of torments him. It's the thing that you talk about, like that failure moment. Eventually, I said to Mark, 'You need to tell me a story that you don't tell everybody. Something that kind of you look at it as before the experience and after the experience. There's a before-and-after quality to it. I need to know what is or we're not going to find the thread to create the change necessary in your book. We need you to start on one side and end up at a completely different one at the end. I need a central story.'

So the first thing I think you should do is to say to yourself, 'If I can find one moment in my life -,' maybe this is a failure moment but it could be a success moment, it doesn't really matter. But look at it and find what's the before and what's the after. That thing will become the North Star of your story. What you're going to want to do is say, 'Okay, I've got this thing where I have a before and an after. So let me tell you what happened to get me to the moment where it changed. And then let me tell the fallout of what happened after it changed.' That simple idea will start percolating ideas and notions to you that will give you an arching narrative that will help you frame and understand your own story. What's going to be remarkable if you take up the advice, is that the more times and the more you work on it, the processes by which you think about that will start to open up your ability to see it in a new light. That great failure like my failed publishing house, I now see it as this golden light.”

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