

## **I'm trying to write fiction. If I fail, negative thinking can help me do it gracefully.**

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Road signs whose posts break away upon impact save lives, reduce injuries, and curb property damage when cars or trucks crash into them. Required by the Federal Highway Administration, the safety feature reflects the power of planning for the worst. BY OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

When we have some distance, I reckon the year 2020 will have taught us lessons we never expected and probably never wanted. So much has gone wrong that we might have anticipated, but even more seems to be happening that no one could imagine.

Unexpected accidents requiring emergency surgeries, brain bleeds, sudden appendectomies, possible and actual COVID infections, some that hit healthy young adults and then drag on too long. Car battery failures, appliance breakdowns, floods, power outages.

Every week seems to bring more events that, in a normal year would be hard enough, but this year just seems to pile on. I'm sure you've heard that by now, "2020" is a curse word.

But perhaps all of this will lead to a new way of thinking and planning where failure plays a bigger role.

A recent Financial Times article by "Undercover Economist" columnist Tim Harford, "The power of negative thinking," explains this idea. When we plan for failure, we may be able to avoid it.

Harford's first example is the design of poles that "support street furniture." Because of their design, if a car should plow into them, the car doesn't wrap around the pole but rather the pole gives way, bouncing away from the car, and thus protecting its occupants a bit. Someone

anticipated that cars might go off track and hit poles and furniture; the design prevents even more serious accidents.

Harford says that not just acknowledging but proactively thinking about the risk of failure has at least three advantages.

First, you anticipate and plan for possible problems, saving time later on repair.

Second, just thinking that way also encourages fast learning and adapting when things do go wrong. If you assume that there could be failure, you are already thinking about how to change and move forward. Additionally, you are less devastated (“I knew something could go wrong there”), and thus a setback is not as big an issue. As he says, “We design projects to make learning and adapting part of the process.”

Finally, Harford says that by being unafraid of failure, we are willing and able in our thinking to take on — or avoid — projects that may have the chance of not succeeding. If the chance for failure is 90%, you may choose to pass on a project.

It boils down to being able to “fail gracefully,” and learn from it.

In a small way, I brought that thinking into my “COVID project.” After eons of writing nonfiction (reports, journal articles, books about business), I’m trying to learn how to write fiction. Telling myself and anyone who’s interested that I’m writing the “world’s worst novel” allows for a sense of failing gracefully, if I bomb. No downside pressure. But if it works, won’t that be a kick?

What’s your next project where you build in failure as a possibility?