

# CREATIVITY: HUSTLERS, FAKERS, AND THIEVES

## Episode Transcription on Failure

MDD: Merridawn Duckler

AM: Ali Meghdadi

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GR: Creativity, hustlers, fakers, and thieves. Creativity is not the province of just a chosen few. Those who fear they have nothing to say or that it's all been said before can also grab the fire. But our ideas about practice, quality or failure shape our work. New artists, working artists, strugglers, those who've been at it all their lives grapple with these same concepts. This is the heart of our endeavor, finding the different and similar ways that artists work to be creative on creativity, hustlers, fakers, and thieves.

GR: Welcome to our podcast. I am Gary Rogowski. And welcome to Ali Meghdadi. Thank you, Ali.

AM: Hello, Gary. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to discuss failure, which we have all succeeded at so much to get to where we are, to be able to talk about failure.

GR: Ah yes, failure, a favorite topic of mine. Ali, do you have any thoughts on this issue that you'd like to share before my interview with Merridawn?

AM: I've never failed at anything, so I don't really know what you're talking about.

GR: Well, thanks very much for playing along. Let's move on.

AM: Yes, failure. The only true failure is not trying, is my closing and opening thoughts on the notion of failure. I think that we've come back to this concept of effort and bothering as the first step in creativity, the willingness to try and certainty of failure in becoming good at anything. I have tremendous experience with this and watching. Something I've learned from you is how to turn one failure into the opportunity for an alternative success that you weren't able to foresee or imagine until you got into that place where you had to open your mind to alternative possibilities from moving away from what you had initially imagined being the goal.

GR: The key, I think, is to learn from our failures, not to celebrate them or think about, oh, what a great opportunity, but to learn from them. Well, let's get Merridawn's take on this fascinating topic.

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GR: Greetings, I am thrilled and honored to have Merridawn Duckler with me today. Hello, Merridawn.

MDD: Hello, Gary.

GR: I am going to try to describe you and your work. You are a poet, dramatist, teacher, thinker. How would you describe yourself?

MDD: Well, I'm trying to decide if I am a hustler and a thief. What was that third option? Faker? A faker. I don't think I'm a faker, but I may easily be the other two.

GR: Okay.

MDD: Yeah, I work cross genre. That's usually how I describe myself on all kinds of platforms, visual, literary. I'm a word person. And I am lucky to teach gifted students like you.

GR: Ah, yes, because this is my teacher. This is show and tell. And Merridawn was my writing teacher, and a very important one to me, very important. We'll get to that. This podcast is about ideas, really, concepts. And today's topic is just such an important one, I think, for people who have been at it or people who are starting, people who are thinking about starting, the idea of failure. And for me, let me just briefly give you some ideas that float around in my head. It really comes down to not living up to my own expectations, which is so dangerous because I'm a perfectionist. And coming from my Catholic upbringing, perfect was it. That's it. And that's just the worst as far as setting yourself up for disappointment. And yet, I try to work to those high standards.

GR: Failure is just a part of the game in my world, but it can be such an indictment of oneself. I have a couple of examples. You cut your finger on a saw or something. That's a big deal. That feels like a real failure to take care of oneself. That happened to me recently. And I was doing three things at once and thinking about all sorts of stuff and didn't pay attention. And that's a tough one. But then you know there are failures in design that are opportunities, really. How does failure sit for you? Is it a burden, a blessing? What is it?

MDD: Am I all about there's no success like failure and failure is no success at all?

GR: Yeah.

MDD: And I'm a little bit like that. I mean, I think it's a very complicated question when you talk about perfectionism. I know that we spoke of, as I often speak to my favorite students, about how you kind of have to get over yourself and how common it is for writing students to say to me, but what I really wanted to say. And I'm always, yeah, how about saying that thing that you really wanted to say? I do believe people are already perfect in a sense, but they have to get there.

GR: Writing is so personal and numbing and exhilarating sometimes. And when I have to go back and reedit a piece, I just feel like, okay, well, I'm just warming up. I'm doing my exercises. I'm doing my stretches. It doesn't seem like a hard thing. I don't find myself thinking about failure too much in my writing, do you?

MDD: I do. I do quite frequently, actually. But now that we're talking, oh yeah, I'm realizing that it must be more difficult with an object that you've made because, in other words, how do you revise an object? I guess you can go back and so called fix it, but I wonder if that's sort of a different situation than text on the page. So easy to erase, right? Just get rid of those words. It seems a lot easier to erase a text than it is to erase a design problem.

GR: Oh, absolutely. There's no question about it. But see, one of the things about a design failure, 3D design failure, is that you know I'll look at a piece and I'll walk around and go, oh, that doesn't work.

That's great information. I won't do that again. There's one piece in particular I was thinking of. I had so much Elm. And so I made the piece and I used up as much of it as I could. And the proportions were all wrong. And every time I looked at it, I went, "Yeah, that was wrong." But it gave me information so that I could think about those kinds of decisions more carefully next time. Completely different with a story that comes from your pen or keyboard in one fashion and meets the brain of a reader in a completely different one.

MDD: I wonder if one analogy, though, isn't having switched from writing on paper to on a computer, you don't see exactly what you erase. I mean, I do keep copies of everything, but crossing out a word, for example, as we used to do way back in the day versus just, you know, hitting a button and having it go away. You are sometimes missing what you walked away from, which I do think is an important matter to consider. And I guess that's why I recommend keeping drafts and that when you're stuck and you really are hating it and it just seems like it's crumbling to look at those earlier drafts because again, this idea, what I really meant to say is sometimes living in them, still alive in them.

GR: I keep most of my drafts and my process is to go in and comb the hair of my little darlings. Each time I got to you know get out the knots, check the language. And that can be good. And also, in some respects, I think it slows me down. What is interesting for me, since I build furniture and do a lot of writing, is how similar I am in both processes. Although they're very different, I am very, very much the same. My personality shows in both. So there's a lot of unfinished projects in both is one aspect of that. And lots of attempts.

MDD: I do believe, and I don't know if this is true in the furniture making, but definitely in the writing. I do believe in the purge. In other words, get rid of it all. And I mean, it's a little bit complicated because you sort of want to hold on to things, refer to things. You also want kind of a clean slate. Sometimes I think about visual artists I know who made a painting on a canvas that was not great or good at all, whited out that canvas and made another one. And even very famous painters, you know, they'll xray them and they'll see the canvas underneath it. I love that idea. I love that that stuff is still kind of shining through in a way, even though it's only the maker's eye sees it.

GR: Right. And you know perhaps an important part of the process.

MDD: Mmhmm. Oh, I think so. To have made that first attempt and go, oh, that's clearly not right. Oh, it's, I mean, that's the thing about failure, right? Is that's where we learn. We learn so much more from failure than we ever do from success. Success seems just some random gift, which it's not. And failure seems like the harsh lesson that we needed all along. Why do we celebrate success so much then?

MDD: Yeah, I was thinking about that because there's a whole narrative about embracing failure that I do think that's a little bit fake. You want to quickly skip over that part. Oh, yeah, I was rejected here and there, but here's all the acceptances. There's something about it. I don't know. People kind of don't want to hear it.

GR: You know, if you go back historically and look at who we consider to be successes: Van Gogh, Melville. I mean, geez, you're look in at in their lifetimes, some abject failure. I mean, or some real struggles to get back to the painting or the page. And yeah, it's, oh man, it's tough. And I think what's tough is for new artists is understanding, number one, you just hopped on the poverty train if you're going to live a creative life. And number two, and you hope to stay there because if you become super

successful, then the public will only expect what you did before, which is why artists that go off and do something completely different each time out are so brave, and yeah.

MDD: I think that you're wondering, especially when you're beginning, you're starting out, you're like, is this a message from the universe that I suck? And the answer is no. But you know it's hard not to read it that way. But it is a message to look at what you're doing, not even necessarily change it all the time.

GR: How do I want to phrase this? When you send your work out, you want an audience for it in one sense. Is that not true?

MDD: It's very true. I'm a little bit shocked sometimes by writers who either don't care about that or say they don't care about that. You know, otherwise you could get away from all that rejection just by keeping a diary or a journal, you know, be a lot more pleasant. So yes, I'm always looking for an audience and thinking about that audience, even if I'm not pandering to that audience.

GR: Let's talk about conceptual art, slightly different genre and more rife with failure, less?

MDD: Oh, that's such a great question. 'Cause I was going to say one thing about, so you know let's say you want to avoid the market. You don't want anything to do with that capitalist stuff. So you go to experimental and conceptual work, which I definitely do both of those things. Much harder than it seems, actually. I think that the failures are greater in a sense. At least that's the way it works for me, also more exhilarating. Because it seems like, how could you fail with the concept? Turns out you can. And it's very difficult to get it to work. So that's what attracts me to conceptual work. And I read it. I used to see it when I was a reviewer for the newspaper. I participate as much as I can. I see the stuff that does fail and the stuff that does succeed. And I'm very fascinated by what are those qualities that makes the conceptual piece succeed? And, you know, versus the ones where it's a dud.

GR: Right. And?

MDD: It's just an ongoing conversation. I sometimes go back to this idea of authenticity, that there's something that the artist is not trying to sort of pull the wool over your eyes, take an easy path, or just be lazy, which are three problems when it's a dud, but has an authentic desire to create something conceptual. And I feel as if you can feel that. Hard thing to pin down, but it's, you know, when you see it, just like pornography.

GR: Perfect. Well, I remember a conceptual piece I saw oh, many years ago, and I walked into this room that had lumber tags nailed to the floor. She had released 20 or 30 yellow canaries in the room and in the back was a eaten or half eaten carcass, I think it's a turkey carcass in a glass case and some beetles were eating it. And I walked out of that going, ugh, what a waste of time. And I have never forgotten that show.

MDD: Wow.

GR: I've never forgotten that show. It made such an impact on me. One could interpret the meaning of that piece many ways. But for me, it failed on one level and really worked on another because I have never forgotten it.

MDD: Oh, that's so interesting.

GR: Yeah, really.

MDD: I mean, I love that.

GR: Yeah. So it failed. It failed and succeeded at the same time. Isn't that interesting?

MDD: It seems like it failed in situ and succeeded in memory.

GR: Yeah. So this conceptual artistry that you've been working on, does success measure differently than failure?

MDD: I think so because allegedly, allegedly, there are fewer standards. You know, in other words, against which to measure it, which sometimes is an issue in poetry, especially modern poetry, right? You're like, why is this good? Why would people consider this good? And it's almost incomprehensible to me. But for sure, I've personally had an experience of seeing successful conceptual art and unsuccessful conceptual art. But one thing this is making me think of, this is kind of hilarious, is I had a piece in a magazine, and the piece I wrote for this magazine was called Ceremony to Obliterate Failure. 'Cause I'd literally written a ceremony that was how to get rid of your failures, which was a physical ceremony. We can put it up on the website that detailed everything you're supposed to do.

GR: Yeah.

MDD: It was very detailed, and then your failures will be gone.

GR: Nice. Sign me up.

MDD: Exactly.

GR: Yeah, I want some of that.

MDD: Although, really, Gary, when you think about it, like, do you?

GR: No, what I need to do is let go of that need to be perfect. 'Cause that engenders the type of failure that just drives me nuts. And when I'm on top of my game, it doesn't affect me at all. I can walk out the door, go for a little walk, clear my head, come back in, and the problem has shrunk. You know, you referred to this earlier, but if you make a mistake on a 3D piece, you can fix it. Usually, replace the part. It's really not that hard. What's hard is forgiving yourself for having made a blunder and not a design blunder, but more of a technical blunder. Yeah, I can't imagine getting upset with myself for, gosh darn it, you keep putting commas in the wrong spot.

MDD: Well, it's often, you know, in writing, it can equally be a design flaw without a doubt. And then those are hard to correct because you're now, oh, no, I've built this whole stool, and it's a major problem. And to fix that problem, I may have to take the whole idea of the stool apart. It's funny, though. It sounds like one of your, when you talk about taking a walk and thinking that one of your pushbacks against perfectionism, which I think is obviously deeply related to failure, is that you come back with a sense of

perspective. Does that sound right?

GR: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Absolutely. When the failure occurs, it is an indictment. It's not a mistake. Mistakes, you know, mistakes happen all the time, but it's an indictment. And I take it so personally, if I'm able to get away, then I can clear my head and come back in and go, "Oh, this monster has shrunk back to its normal size, which is fixable because I know how. I've just done those steps. Just didn't work out the way I wanted it to, and I'll do better." So that kind of failure is just, "Oh, I'll do better next time." But it's when it's an indictment of oneself. And yet . . . it occurs.

MDD: No, no, I think you really hit on it. That's absolutely true.

GR: It occurs and occurs for a lot of people, and it stops them dead in their tracks.

MDD: Totally agree that that's different. Yeah.

GR: And one of the hopes I have is to get people to know, especially people just starting out, or who are afraid to start out, like I was with my writing. Everyone goes through this stuff and failure is just part of it. And you learn how to deal with it.

MDD: Yeah, I think that sense of indictment is much more important than making a different failure. In other words, we're getting to it. It's a little bit different than just a mistake.

GR: Yeah.

MDD: And I will sometimes sit down to the computer, especially for a project that's looming, and I'll be like, oh crap, I don't know how to write a play. I've never written a play before. You know that's the feeling, like I have no idea how I'm going to do this, which I think could be very intimidating. And also, it doesn't help if you think you're the only person who's ever involved that.

GR: Right, right. It's really important. You're not the only person who's been intimidated by whatever you're trying to undertake. There is nothing new under the sun. That being said, I forget which dramatist said this, nobody knows how to write a play. It's all a mystery. What works sometimes doesn't work the next time.

MDD: Yeah, I mean, I agree. To me, the answer is, well just do the work. You don't know how to write a play? Well, just write one.

GR: Yeah.

MDD: That's the leap, because 100%, you're never going to fix that problem by walking away from it, that particular kind. So this indictment that you're talking about, really, the only thing I've ever done that's worked against it was just, "Okay, great. You don't know how. Just do it anyway."

GR: Right. The worst thing someone can do is to not give it a shot, to not try. Trying and failing, yeah, okay. I keep my Paris Review rejection slips. And what the heck? I just sent them another piece. You never know. First of all, you're doing the work for yourself. Then there's the audience. But first, you're doing it for yourself because you need to, because you want to express yourself, Because you want to

say, I am here. I exist. And I'm going to leave my mark. And here it is. And there are certain things that were for and against a writer and for and against an artist who you know and where you went to school and all these things and luck sometimes. But I think trying is the first and most important step. After that, if you can get an audience, that's terrific.

MDD: I completely agree. And I do think that for artists, one thing that keeps them going is they take great pleasure in the process.

GR: Yeah, I tell my students, you know you're building furniture here, and at the end, you have a piece of furniture, but that's really the gravy. What you've been feasting on is the process. That's why you're there. Well, you taught me early on when I started coming to your class and then seeing you one on one you said, "Do you want to be published?" And I hemmed and hawed and I was like, "Oh, well, you know, you didn't quite slap me over the head." You allowed that to flower, allowed that idea to flower.

MDD: Oh, it's so important. And whether you knew this or not, Gary, I was watching for this moment 'cause really important moment between myself and a writer who wants to work. And, you know, I mean, I liked many things about you, but I'm like, "What is he going to say to that?" Because it's so important to say yes if that's the truth. Because then you have the courage, a very important quality in a writer, and I could see you have the courage. So let's go.

GR: It does take a certain amount of faith in oneself, but if you keep at it, that becomes natural. Yes, I can do this.

MDD: You have to remember how many times you've encountered the words of someone or overheard or specifically listened to something or seen something, what a profound effect it's had on you and how you never told the maker of that.

GR: Right.

MDD: Right? And that happens to us all the time. And it's great when we tell the maker, but we have to really have faith and trust in those moments because we've experienced them ourselves.

GR: Yeah. Thank you so much for joining me, Merridawn.

MDD: Thank you, Gary. That was absolutely incredible. I loved every minute.

GR: Please check out the full interview with Merridawn on [creativity-hft.com](http://creativity-hft.com). The full and fascinating interview with her, we cover a lot of topics. Please check that out.

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GR: Ali, your thoughts on our conversation?

AM: I have lots of thoughts, a lot of things that have been coming up in my own explorations of the world in the last few weeks that relate to concepts of failure and notions of perfection that you guys discussed. And very much the distinctions between made objects and ideas, you know, written on paper or musical ideas. And I think that that's an interesting conversation. I don't know how far we can get into.

GR: Yeah, that sounds great. But let's get into that more on our Creative Conversation, March 10th, a livestream. Check out our website, [creativity-hft.com](http://creativity-hft.com) for more info or on our YouTube channel. Well, let me ask you this. Are you better now at dealing with failure?

AM: I think I have more techniques and tools in my, literal tools, as well as conceptual and ideological tools that are available to me to deal with the challenges that arrive in so-called failures or when things don't turn out.

GR: And that's all we can really hope for is gaining some experience with these challenges and how to overcome them and not get beaten by them. Well, so much to discuss on this topic, we could go on. But for now, I want to say thank you for joining us. Thank you, Ali, and my thanks to Merridawn. Please join us again on Creativity: Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves.

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