

A closer look at losers

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Expert Forum



I want to talk about a social grouping that we rarely discuss in anything but the most banal terms: losers. I mean losers as opposed to winners. I mean those two terms in all of the manufactured and biased ways in which we define them: by money, power, luck, athletic competition, academic success, social stature, attractiveness, popularity.

And what I'm getting at is that I think "losers" are far more interesting than "winners."

Sure, "winners" are interesting in unexpected ways, partly because winning rarely turns out to be what the winner expects. But, by comparison, "losers" are so much less explored and understood.

A team or a candidate or a contestant wins The Big Prize and we learn all about their long struggle, their inspirational grandmother, their hard personal choices, their daily routine for getting up in the morning and making green tea or oatmeal and doing their Winning Work. Winners want to talk about being winners and reporters want to report about winners and readers and viewers want to know about winners. For a few days or years apiece, anyway.

But losers don't always want to talk about losing, and when they do we don't hear enough about it. And we should, because I think it tells us much more than winners do.

For one thing, one of the hidden truths about winners is that they were losers, sometimes for a very long time, before they were winners. They tried and lost, tried and lost, again and again, while nobody was watching. They were invisible to nearly all of us while they scuffled along, disheveled and disreputable, and for long years they kept doing what they did, in the shadows, for reasons that might excite and even enlighten us if we only knew. That is, before they were suddenly declared "winners" by our anointed judges of attainment and celebrity.

Moreover, losers who never end up winning have a lifetime of that kind of story. Decades of sacrifice and failure and hope and screaming fights in the kitchen and quiet – or unquiet – acceptance. Whether they ever give up or not, their effort itself tells a tale about the meaning and outcomes of desire.

I remember my current town of Baltimore being thrown into deep shock when our Ravens football team missed a chance to go to the 2012 Super Bowl after kicker Billy Cundiff missed a 32-yard field goal with 11 seconds left in the game. For you non-footballers, translate 32 yards as "a kick you can make in your sleep." A news photo showed Cundiff, moments after what is now his infamous miss, slumping toward the sideline, head down, body deflated, the picture of hangdog defeat. News coverage in the following days had him saying all the true and expected things: he couldn't explain it, he had no excuses.

But that photo of Cundiff raised all the other questions for me: What happened when he and his wife put their kids to bed after that awful day and shut the door to their own bedroom and were alone together with those moments? How does he weave that experience of public failure and powerlessness, the worst nightmare of his entire career as an athlete, into the fabric of what is real and understood and meaningful in his life? How does he – how do any of us who are taught to "win" and not "lose" – carry that, release it, use it?

That is a story I want to hear more of. From each of us.