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Työn nimi Learning the hard way – How a narrative structure can bring out the positive power of failure		
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Tiivistelmä <p>This Master's thesis studies storytelling and failure to find out if there is a positive side to failure and other negative experiences, and if possible, how it can be found. Can failure become a foundation for personal growth and positive vigor?</p> <p>The production part of the thesis consists of a non-fiction book by the author and Miika Peltola, Kantapään kautta (rough translation: The Hard Way). For the book we interviewed 15 Finnish professionals from different fields, who are well known for their success as well as failure, about their experiences of failure and getting over it. Kantapään kautta was published in Finland by Tammi in January 2012.</p> <p>In the theoretical part of the thesis I dive deeper into how narratives, stories, tie into finding the positive side of failure. Telling a failure story through the role of one archetype, the hero, is the core of this part. The archetype of the hero is applied to the characters of the book, the Finnish interviewees. As a frame of the hero story I use the Monomyth (Hero's Journey) by Joseph Campbell. With the pattern, I treat the experience of failure by fitting it in a larger perspective from which its possible positive outcomes can be perceived.</p>		
Avainsanat failure, narrative structure, book writing, storytelling		

Learning the hard way

How a narrative structure can bring out the positive power of failure

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ABSTRACT (draft)

This Master's thesis studies storytelling and failure to find out if there is a positive side to failure and other negative experiences, and if possible, how it can be found. Can failure become a foundation for personal growth and positive vigor?

The production part of the thesis consists of a non-fiction book by the author and Miika Peltola, *Kantapään kautta* (rough translation: *The Hard Way*). For the book we interviewed 15 Finnish professionals from different fields, who are well known for their success as well as failure, about their experiences of failure and getting over it. *Kantapään kautta* was published in Finland by Tammi in January 2012.

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Keywords: failure, storytelling, book writing, monomyth, hero's journey, narrative structure

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1. Introduction

The most valuable piece of advice I've ever gotten about writing is this: write about your most embarrassing moments, your worst mistakes, about whatever makes you want to hide from everyone. I applied the advice as a young journalist and soon realized it was alchemy. I could take the worst that had happened to me and turn it into gold. Literally – I got paid for it. Not in gold, but real money anyway. It didn't only make me love my mistakes (or the things and events I had thought were mistakes). It made me grow as I write, as I do research and look for subjects to write about. Eventually, it also became a subject to write about, and the end product is the one you're reading now. But there were consequences that made a deeper impact on my life and the lives of others.

The advice made me look at other people differently. I began to see everyone's mistakes as opportunities to grow, to share and to connect. It made me more compassionate and accepting. It certainly made me a better friend to the ones I already knew. To my surprise, I began to connect with new people in an instant. It was like they sensed they had nothing to hide because I would not judge them. That impression of me made strangers turn into friends rather quickly. It has made it easier to get people, all kinds of people, to talk to me. Let the book part of this work serve as a proof. I believe this insight was the main reason I chose to write about mistakes, and also why so many successful people, including the former Prime Minister of Finland, wanted to share their stories with us (and by us I mean me, my co-author Miika and the readers).

I still have a lot to learn about sharing my weaknesses and mistakes. Writing the book was part of the process of finding out how to live with them and treasure them. This also grew on me more and more ever since I started thinking about mistakes differently: we connect with other people (and maybe ourselves, too) through stories (Schank & Abelson, 1995; Mar, 2004).

The stories we create and tell often define how we feel and act. They ultimately affect our health and well-being (Mar, 2004). A coherent narrative about traumatic events, according to researchers, is an essential part of treating post-traumatic stress disorder (Brewin, Dalgleish, & Joseph, 1996; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk & Fessler, 1995).

In my experience, the stories we tell ourselves can be found at the root of almost any anxiety or distress. They're not just thoughts or beliefs: they're both, piled on top of each other, tangled with logic and feelings. Most of us don't even seem to notice them. We often live in a web of stories we're unconscious of and let the narrative web run our reactions, and through them, our lives.

Especially when something we've learned to perceive as bad happens, the web of stories we live by gets tight and pushes us into a corner. Our brain starts to rewrite the causes and effects of the event, explaining it through existing stories and fitting them in the new circumstances like it always does (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Now those stories just don't serve us even though they're creative: there's disbelief and fear, shame and anger mixing

them up. Depending on the existing storylines in our brain, we might create stories like "This always happens to me, I'm a failure," "I knew this would not work out, even mom always said so," "How could John treat me like that?" or "This was not supposed to happen!"

How do we know what should and should not happen? Are we gods?

Not likely, and to me that's a relief. I believe we can make our corner bigger, though, and maybe lighter, by making a window there – putting some light on those unconscious stories and questioning them. If we study our thoughts and beliefs, the stories we have built up, they get air around them and might even change. It's not necessary to give them up. Conscious inquiry often does the trick and they change without effort. With the right questions, it can be done with only a one-sentence summary of the story (Katie, 2008).

After beginning to study the reframing techniques in NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) several years ago, I became interested in using reframing of a negative personal story to make it lighter to bear, and especially in or after an experience of perceived failure. The aim of this work is studying the reframing process of failure not necessarily by NLP techniques, but by simply fitting it into a larger story pattern. It can be done through inquiry with another person, by writing or speaking.

The pattern I use in this work is the Monomyth (Hero's Journey) structure which, according to its creator Joseph Campbell, can be found in most myths in human history. Campbell argues that we recognize these myths as something very ancient and can mirror our lives through them. In the Hero's journey, failure is only a part of the whole story. Often in hero stories failure even looks like death, but only for the reason that the hero might be reborn (Campbell, 1949). It is this finality, the possibility of death, that our brain's ancient operation systems probably most fear in failure (Buonomano, 2011). The hero's journey can teach us that it does not have to be the end – and even if it was, it would be one hell of a story.

Telling a good story is crucial not only to a journalist and writer, but to anyone who wants an idea to spread: an entrepreneur with a new business, a scientist with interesting research, a philanthropist trying to raise money for others. Storytelling requires creativity, my main area of study. Without one there would be no other. They are actually so close you could call them one and the same.

In our book, we tried to paint a picture of the people we interviewed as heroes that can fall, because what makes them a hero is not immunity to mistakes, but the ability to get back up, tell their story and try again with all the wisdom gained from failed attempt. That way they inspire their followers to make better decisions.

Failure needs a goal, a definition of success, to exist (Kantapään kautta, p. 20). It also requires a person or an entity that has the possibility to fail or succeed. Thus, it needs a story of a character, an 'I' or 'me,' an individual who becomes a protagonist in the story.

Zen Buddhists think that the self is by definition empty and the stories we fill it with (of who 'I am') are what become the thing we call our personality (Loori, p. 77). But if personality only existed in our thoughts, who is the one who "fails?"

The Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell has inspired many creative heroes, like George Lucas, in their character and story building processes (Campbell, 1988). As it is based on similar myths from different cultures that revolve around the archetype of the Hero, usually the monomyth has been used to analyze works of fiction. As we used other structures and ways from fiction writing in our book, I find it suitable to work with the monomyth in non-fiction stories.

Note: When I talk about heroes in this work, I use the pronoun 'he' – not because by heroes I mean only men, but because it is shorter than 'he/she' and easier to understand than 'them'. In my world, he and she are equally heroic and in this work they both go by 'he'.

1.1 Questions

There are two separate parts to this thesis and thus two different questions (or sets of questions) that were driving the making of these parts.

First: in the production part, we studied the possibility that a failure or a negative experience is not always an end but can also be a beginning of success, acting as a foundation for positive things like strength, resilience and personal growth. It became a book. The production includes materials that did not end up in the book like recorded interviews and typed out notes from interviews and from research.

The question we set out to answer in the production (the book) was

1. a) Can a negative experience like failure be perceived as positive?

Secondary question:

b) If a failure can be perceived as positive, how can it be done?

We interviewed people who have succeeded, but also failed in their career, to answer these questions. We studied stories of other successful people and literature about the subject. We identified themes that were present in many of the stories and structured the book with them.

One of the themes that rose to the surface but did not become its own chapter was narratives of the failure. Whenever we studied the question *B, how?*, the answer of the literature and interviewees seemed to be tied to talking about the failure, writing about the failure or admitting the mistake and laughing about it (Kantapään kautta, 2012). They all mean building narratives, stories, of the experiences of failure. This is why I wanted to continue studying the storytelling aspect.

Thus the second question that I'm addressing in this part is:

2. a) How is the structure of a story connected to turning a negative experience to positive?

I chose to study a narrative structure that reminded me of the stories in our book, Joseph Campbell's *Monomyth*, because I also found it to be more extensive and widely spread than others while being in understandable form. It draws from mythology from all over the world and combines the similar elements of the myths into a narrative structure. As a public figure and their story sometimes becomes a myth of its own, I find it interesting to set old myths of the world on the same line with fresh stories about public figures and study them through the same mythical pattern.

Combining the two parts, the question of the whole thesis is:

(How) Can one gain positive vigor / strength from failure (through stories)?

2. Methods, concepts and history of failure

If failure means that a goal has not been met, what kind of failure are we talking about? In the book, we were looking for professional failures but ended up finding both. We found that professional failure is not very different from personal failure because of the human emotions they both bring forth. Just as a failure in personal life, it can lead to leaps in growing and self-awareness. Many of the interviewees told us that sharing their story helped in getting over the feelings of failure (Piippo & Peltola, 2012).

Stories are the way we think, connect and remember things, and hearing or reading them stir human emotions because they activate so many different parts of the brain (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Mar, 2004). When we hear a story, we imagine pictures in our minds that have been found to activate different areas of the brain as strongly as the real experience. This is why narratives have an ability and potential to change one's perception of events, people, or feelings quickly.

What is failure, if not a perception of an event and a feeling? "Failure" is never absolute, but needs a goal to be able to happen and exist. If failure means not reaching a certain goal, without a goal there is no failure (Piippo, Peltola 2012).

Failure usually leads to one of two things in stories and myths: either one gets depressed and paralyzed by the feeling, or gets a sudden stroke of energy to turn the situation around. The energy often appears through a mirror - another person telling the hero their perception of the situation and how bad it is - or through an inner insight or awakening. The newly acquired learning then leads the person (hero) to continue on a different path (Campbell, 1949).

It's not easy to talk about the feelings of worthiness and failure, but it is essential in the learning and healing process (Brewin, Dalgleish, & Joseph, 1996; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk & Fessler, 1995; Piippo & Peltola 2012). Of course, when telling a story, the teller gets to decide what to leave out. But the parts should be assessed and included or left out because they take the story forward and help the reader or listener, not because they feel bad. It helps if the storyteller can approach the difficult parts with compassion and humor. The story can otherwise turn dark and awkward. A failure story can be tricky because not all audiences are ready to listen to things that make them feel bad. That's why there should be a relief, a comic one preferably, to let the listener rest in the end (Piippo & Peltola 2012).

2.1 Production: The book

The question we wanted to answer by writing the book: *Can a negative experience like failure be perceived as positive?*

And: *If failure can be perceived as positive, how can it be done?*

So if it is possible to see negative experiences as valuable and strengthening, how could the process of learning be facilitated? The book and this thesis are not by any standards a complete answer to the questions, but rather a beginning for discussion, a conversation opener. I will ask these questions from the literature I go through in this thesis.

Interviews with accomplished professionals for the book form a core of the answers we set out to seek, but only because of the questions we asked the interviewees.

We asked about the situation before the failure, trying to get as concrete a picture of it as possible, about the moment of realization in the middle of the failure, and what happened right after.

We asked about the process of processing the feelings it made them feel, about the steps they took to understand what happened and why, about their own role in it, about what helped most and what didn't. We asked about how other people reacted and how it made them feel. And how they got themselves to continue working.

What was the reason to keep doing what they do? It ultimately leads to this question of why people do what they do, and it's the essence of doing anything.

The interviews became stories. Some of the stories came from the interviewee almost as it is in the book, some of them we made more story-like by structuring it again in the writing phase.

2.2 Thesis

How is the structure of a (failure) story connected to turning a negative experience to positive?

What is the role of (learning from) failure in universal narrative structures/patterns?

The first question has to do with telling any failure story, but also the form of the interviews in the book: we asked the interviewees to tell their story, so they did. We also made efforts to make the text form of their story as readable as possible, which meant emphasizing the narrativity aspect, leaving out general thoughts about the subject and sticking to telling a good story. Another study would have to be done about if and how it affects the reader and their perception of failure.

Our goal was, however, that all the stories would have a happy end, so to say, or that the emotional curve would always rise from the bottom of the failure experience back up to the insights and learnings by the end.

Here I will study narrative structures, especially Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, which is a pattern of a universal hero story. Even though the hero is only one of the many Jungian archetypes, it is perhaps the most familiar one in our time. Part of Campbell's findings is that people through all times in history and in different parts of the world have found similar themes and structures of stories worth telling and listening to.

I have studied the literature by Joseph Campbell, especially his main work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, and other thinkers and scholars who have written about narrative structures. I will introduce the steps on the hero's journey as thoroughly written by Campbell in the book and study how they communicate with the stories in our book. I will also review materials gathered during the making of the book, including full recordings of interviews and notes, to complement the answers.

As a journalist, I have used questions to bring out a story for years. I will use the same method now to make a cheat sheet for anyone who would like to fit their failure story to the hero's journey pattern. By answering the questions, one forms a story that should be understandable and inspiring for other people.

2.3 Concepts

Failure means omission of occurrence or performance, a state of inability to perform a normal function (heart or kidney failure) or a stop of normal functioning (power failure), a lack of success, a failed business, a falling short, or a failed person (Merriam-Webster 2013). In this work, it means a lack of success, a falling short of goals or a business failure. In some instances I also use the word *mistake* which has a slightly different, lighter meaning.

Stories or *narratives* have been shared in all cultures for education, entertainment, cultural preservation and passing on moral values. They can be described as the presentation of "a series of actions and events that unfold over time, according to causal principles." (Mar, 2004)

Storytelling is not an exact concept, but here it means giving an account of events or incidents (Merriam-Webster 2013), often academically written about as *narration*. The monomyth I refer to is a *narrative structure*.

Reframing is the technique of restating problem situations so that they could be seen in new ways (Jackson, 1961) used in psychotherapy.

2.4 Contexts of failure from classical Greece to the internet age

"It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters."
Epictetus, 55-135

"There is no such thing as failure; failure is just life trying to move us in another direction."
Oprah Winfrey, 2013

The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus had reportedly said that no matter what kind of worry anyone brings to him, he would be able to turn it into something positive. The stoics developed a skill of changing one's point of view as if touched by a magic wand. The Finnish psychiatrist Antti S. Mattila has studied the skill in his doctoral dissertation, *Seeing things in a new light* (2001). He calls the skill of the Stoics the magic wand of Hermes, the mythic trickster messenger of the gods.

The symbol of Hermes, a staff with wings and two snakes around it, points to his habit of walking around with an entourage of chicken and turtles. Hermes stole cattle from his own brother and managed to get away with it because of the beautiful sounds of the lyre that he had made from a turtle's shell. Hermes was cunning and managed to flip the story so that the brother actually gave him gifts instead of scolding him (Mattila, 2006).

In Roman mythology, Hermes threw his staff into a pit where two snakes were fighting and they stopped fighting. He was a peacemaker and a mediator.

The abilities of skillful thieves, entrepreneurs, innovators, athletes, artists and hackers are combined in the myth of Hermes. Doctors use the staff symbol in their union logos. The staff symbolizes the ability of Hermes to interpret and communicate holy messages from gods to people and create harmony from chaos (Mattila, 2006). Whoever has the ability of Hermes to change chaotic reality to harmony – or failure to success – has a magic wand in hand. Part of waving the wand is telling the story right, according to the myth of Hermes.

The discourses of Epictetus encourage to distinguish between the things in our power and the things that are not in our power. If we have any delusions about those things, according to the philosopher, it leads to the greatest errors, troubles, misfortunes and the slavery of the soul (Heinrich, Morrison 1846).

2.4.1 Psychology and therapy

Studies show that if we want children to grow resilient and keep trying in spite of mistakes, we should not praise them for their intelligence. According to Columbia University (now Stanford) researcher Carol Dweck, children who are given positive feedback for trying hard tend to have a growth mindset: they believe they can learn, develop their intelligence and personality. Children with a fixed mindset ("You are so smart"), however, feel uncomfortable trying new things and take failure personally. Emphasizing effort gives them a variable they are able to control, says Dweck. They come to see themselves in control of their success. The fixed mindset children, when faced with a puzzle they couldn't pass, started thinking they were not that smart after all (Bronson, 2007). Here may lie a key to why we take failure as personally still as adults.

The Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California first introduced the concept of reframing to the field of psychotherapy in the 1960's. Don D. Jackson used the term *relabeling* to describe the technique of restating the client's problem situations so that they could be seen in new ways (Mattila, 2001). Jackson and his colleagues were involved in the famous Double Bind research group at the time, working with Gregory Bateson studying different aspects of communication. They were especially influenced by the curious techniques used by the psychiatrist Milton H. Erickson, who did not use the term reframing but developed those skills in connection with his experiments with hypnotic techniques. When Erickson was asked how he developed such a skill, he said that most people in the field are too fascinated by Freud and ought to read what others have to say about things. Then one starts looking at what the patient says from every possible direction (Mattila, 2001).

"If a patient points out that he always tries and fails, Erickson will emphasize his determination and his ability to try. If a patient behaves passively, Erickson will point out his ability to endure situations. If a patient is small, he finds himself thinking about how fortunate it is to be small and agile instead of large and lumbering as he talks to Erickson. If a patient is large, his solidity and strength are emphasized." (Haley 1963, 46)

One of Sigmund Freud's closest colleagues, Otto Rank, was the pioneer in seeing therapy as a learning and unlearning experience. His work built on Freud's and brought more interesting angles to psychoanalysis, especially from the point of view of creativity and learning from failure. His view was that therapy allows the patient to *learn more creative ways of thinking, feeling and being in the here-and-now; and unlearn self-destructive ways of thinking, feeling and being in the here-and-now*. This means that whatever trauma or negative experience the patient has, it can be solved in the now instead of digging into childhood and solving it there, as Freud would do. Rank thought that neurosis is a failure of creativity, not sexuality. Neurosis is, in the language of psychoanalysis, partly living in and clinging to the past instead of surrounding to the present moment (Kramer, 1995).

Rank's psychology of creativity has been used in *action learning*, an inquiry-based form of group problem solving, team building, leadership development and organizational learning. The process includes stepping out of a frame, an assumption, out of the field of knowing – as artists do when trying to see the world in ways no one has seen it before and create something new. Action learning can be used for any kind of unlearning or stepping out of the ruling mindset, be it one's own or the culture's. This is similar to learning to see positive sides in a seemingly negative experience.

2.4.2 Management and organizations

Managing creativity and innovation requires a different set of rules and practices than traditional management. According to Stanford professor Robert Sutton, managers should reward failure as they reward success, only punishing employees for inaction. It's a radical suggestion for the standard business world that's used to punishing failures by social shaming and restricting career advancement (Sutton, 2001). Instead, Sutton encourages to promote and hire people who have had *intelligent failures* and tell others in the company that this is the reason they are hired or promoted (Sutton, 2007).

Nokia and its beginning downhill in 2010 was the phenomenon that made us talk about failure in the first place and start asking questions, so it's fitting to use it as a counterexample of uncreative leadership. The younger Finnish growth companies like Supercell have made a public point about their approach which could be described as "Let's go through the process that resulted in failure until we're sure not to make the same mistakes again," (Strauss, 2013; Kodisoja, 2012) as Nokia and other older corporations seem to communicate: "Let's bury the failed product/decision under the rug and no one will notice" (Heikkinen, 2010). I understand that the process of going through a failure can be difficult and there's the problem of whose fault it is. But as long as nobody has to take responsibility for the mistake, it can't be talked about honestly and learned from to prevent the same from happening again.

Supercell has a ritual to celebrate with champagne once a game fails, inviting the whole company to discuss what to take away from it. "We are not celebrating failure," the co-founder Mikko Kodisoja says, "we're celebrating the learning that comes from failure" (Strauss, 2013). This is an important point – many have asked us whether we encourage people and companies to fail more because we write about it. But we encourage people and companies to learn, because mistakes will come and they are a plentiful source of knowledge and wisdom.

There must be autonomy to make mistakes, no excessive guards (managers) to make sure mistakes aren't made, in a creative company. Supercell is organized in cells, or small teams, who work independently and make decisions on changes to games and even killing games. The CEO Ilkka Paananen says his goal has been to become "the world's least powerful CEO" by giving control to these teams. His management philosophy (and strategy) in short is to "get the best people, then get out of the way and let those people do their jobs" (Strauss, 2013).

Nokia's stagnant culture and lack of agility in product decisions, however, has been said to be the result of power concentrating in departments, middle management or bureaucracy and the competition between departments. Supercell has deliberately stayed small, under 100 employees, to prevent bureaucracy and need of extra managers – which is good for the transparency and failure tradition (Kodisoja, 2012). Even though Supercell only has two mobile games (free to play) in the App Store and the company employs less than a hundred people in two countries, they are making millions of dollars per day and at least seem to be always having fun. Perhaps one reason for the persistent good culture is that they decided to give equity to all employees, not only management (Strauss, 2013b).

Harvard Business Review made a whole issue about the importance of failure, looking at the topic from various angles in management and organizations (Harvard Business Review, April 2011). Topics include strategies for learning from failure, avoiding catastrophe, building resilience and the cult of failure in entrepreneurs. Harvard professor Amy C. Edmondson writes:

"Most executives I've talked to believe that failure is bad (of course!). They also believe that learning from it is pretty straightforward: Ask people to reflect on what they did wrong and exhort them to avoid similar mistakes in the future—or, better yet, assign a team to review and write a report on what happened and then distribute it throughout the organization. -- These widely held beliefs are misguided. First, failure is not always bad. In organizational life it is sometimes bad, sometimes inevitable, and sometimes even good. Second, learning from organizational failures is anything but straightforward. The attitudes and activities required to effectively detect and analyze failures are in short supply in most companies, and the need for context-specific learning strategies is underappreciated. Organizations need new and better ways to go beyond lessons that are superficial ("Procedures weren't followed") or self-serving ("The market just wasn't ready for our great new product"). That means jettisoning old cultural beliefs and stereotypical notions of success and embracing failure's lessons."

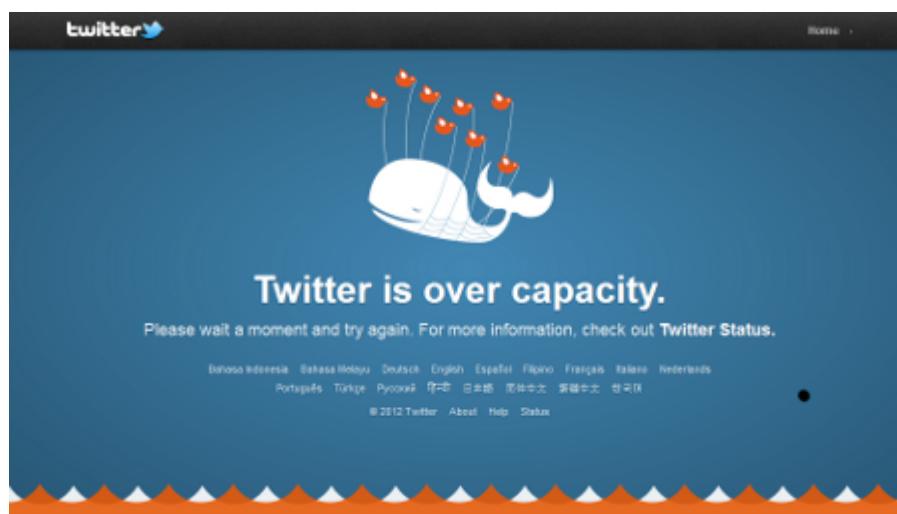


2.4.3 The fail meme

The word *failure* has become popular culture hand in hand with video games and the internet. It has been mostly used in "EPIC FAIL" internet memes where the caption is put onto a picture of an unfortunate event or mistake.

An arcade game called Blazing Star made the word 'fail' a hit with its flashing game over screens with tacky Japanese-English translations: "You fail it! Your skill is not enough! See you next time! Bye bye!" In 2008, the meme grew big with the launch of Failblog (Beam, 2008).

Some web services like Twitter have made their 'fail' into an experience by creating funny and cute error pages. The Fail Whale was designed by Yiying Lu "to give Twitter users something to smile about" (Walker, 2009).



3. Kantapään kautta, the book

I started noticing the idea of failure as a learning experience in Finland in 2010. It came from the emerging startup culture in Aalto University students. Some of them had made trips to Silicon Valley to learn about startups and technology companies and their culture. At the same time, I continuously read about accepting failure in research articles and books on creativity. They all said the same thing: failure should not be punished, it should be shared and learned from together, even celebrated, because it means knowing what doesn't work - more data, in other words. And in a world that keeps changing faster than we know it, knowing what works and what doesn't is very valuable.

All this talk about the positive side of failure was contrary to the atmosphere in Finland in general, though. There was the beginning downfall of the ever-successful Nokia, which seemed hard to talk about in public. Nobody took the blame, something bad had 'just happened,' and leaders seemed to dance around the hard questions of how and why. As a result nobody knew what went wrong and if anything could be done about it. The public has always been more talented in finding someone to blame than taking responsibility.

We started talking about the phenomenon with Miika during a break from classes and ended up thinking about what could be done to change the atmosphere in Finland. "Let's write a book," he said. Because if we got public figures in Finland to talk about their failures and learnings in a positive way, they would set an example and make it easier for others, too. This was our hypothesis. We wrote down all the names we could think of interviewing, everyone from Juhani Tamminen to Steve Jobs who unfortunately passed away before we finished the book).

First we did research on the subject in Finnish and tried to find out if anyone had written about it before. We found some columns and magazine articles, a chapter in a book. There were biographies and novels about personal and professional failures, but nothing on the subject itself. We knew we had to do it then. We started planning a book concept. We asked people, friends and colleagues, whose stories they would like to read. We met professionals who had spoken about failure and learning and picked their brains. We used all the introductions we could get and talked to everyone about our idea. All the feedback we got was astonishingly positive. It encouraged us to go on with the book.

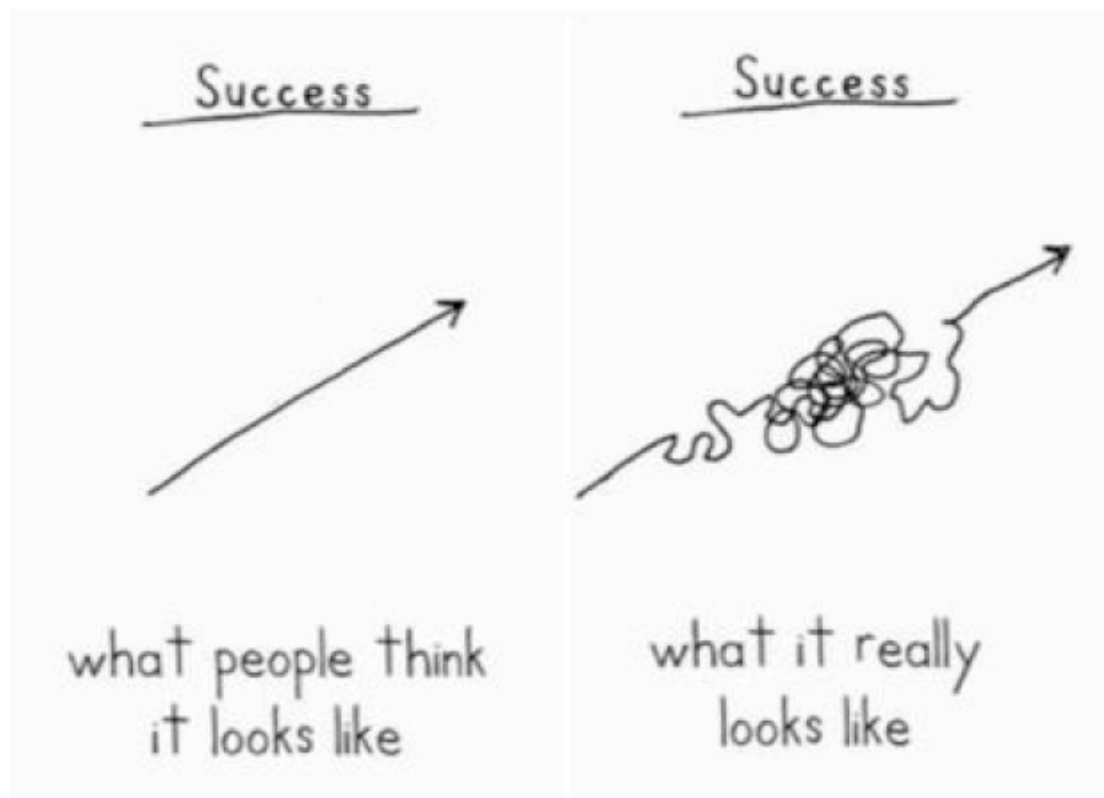
I had become more interested in startup culture and decided to go on a trip to Silicon Valley that was again organized by Aalto Entrepreneurship Society (Aaltoes). I managed to persuade Miika to go with me because there was a whole seminar dedicated to failures in San Francisco, called FailCon. So we went. We talked to people, listened to talks by famous startup founders and investors, listened to pitches and war stories. On the last day of the trip we met Márten Mickos, the former CEO of MySQL, who has talked about his earlier business failures openly in Finland and international publications like Wired. He agreed to be our first interviewee, but made us promise that we would really go through with writing the book. It meant we really had to do it. All in all we contacted 25 potential interviewees of which 15 ended up sharing their story. The ones who declined

said that they were too busy or didn't have a good story. One was seriously ill, three did not respond at all.

4.1 Research

The more we researched, the clearer it became that there were no such books, even in English. We found some non-fiction bestsellers about adapting, being wrong and bouncing back, but they were more academic or focused on one area only, like economics. We wanted the stories of the interviewees to be the main thing in the book because we had a hunch they would be both touching and inspiring. The criteria for the interviewees was that they would be known for their success but also failure (not all were known for the failures, but had them nonetheless), and that the failure would not be criminal – that they had failed while trying to create something new or do something good, not because they harmed others.

We found it surprising that the world is full of (business) literature about success and how to achieve it, but few books exist about the other side of the coin and how to learn from mistakes or use them on the way to success. Despite the internet popularity of this sketch by Demetri Martin (from *This is a Book*, Grand Central Publishing 2011).



We thus realized early on that the value of this work would be in what it's not – a book about achieving success. Like Jean Baudrillard argues, the meaning of a thing is created through difference. We set out to make something different.

We used research methods familiar to us from our work in journalism. We read a lot, googled a lot, searched for articles in journals, flipped through magazines and books,

asked several people for help and finally interviewed the ones we chose to and managed to persuade.

Before asking for an interview, I made a background check of every person to make sure they had a story and if it had been told elsewhere. Before going to interview them, I made another round of research to come up with enlightening and original questions. We had decided to make the stories as concrete as possible, to take the reader into the skin of the person. We tried our best to ask questions like “where did it happen,” “how did it feel,” “can you describe the place and people” and so on. Sometimes it worked like a charm, sometimes the interviewees did not remember the details.

We used the other research materials: books, articles, interviews with experts and talks, to tie the interviews into a larger perspective and theme. We came up with five main themes and named our chapters after them. Then we tried to figure out which story goes where. We made the final decisions during the writing process.

Themes and contents of the book (Peltola & Piippo, 2011):

1. *Relativity of failure (introduction) – does it exist? (art, inventions)*
2. *Evolution and the erring human being (emotions: fear, shame)*
3. *Leadership and change (risks, creativity)*
4. *Transparency and openness (publicity, media, fail fast)*
5. *Forgiveness (learning from others, failures of systems)*

In the beginning we had fear and shame as their own chapters but decided to fit them under a bigger topic as we did more research on the evolutionary roots of our fear of failure. The research continued along the writing until the book was finished, and thus the topics kept shifting, rearranging and changing along the way. Usually the research and writing process turned out to be something like this:

1. Reading a book
2. Making notes of relevant points in book
3. Typing down notes
4. Combining with existing thoughts and notes
5. Writing own text based on the notes
6. Figuring out the right place for it in the book

If Miika did this, I could jump in and continue his work at any stage after or during the 4th. We didn't divide the sections very strictly between writers but rather worked on what interested us the most at the given time. Someone else might have thought the process too chaotic, but it fit us both well enough.

4.2 Working as a team

I was lucky to find a similar enough colleague to write with. We both pushed each other and inspired each other throughout the process. We were different enough to surprise each other with new ideas but similar enough in our values, style and working habits to

be able to work together peacefully. We both had a built-in sense of elegance and the dramatic arc, and we agreed on the practicalities of the stories quickly.

We did not decide the narrative structure beforehand. However, most of the stories were created using Aristoteles' basic 'beginning, middle, end' structure as the foundation to build on (Aristoteles, c. 335 BC). We also agreed that all the stories based on interviews would be written in first person, not third. We were both inspired by *creative non-fiction* and aimed to write at least as well as Malcolm Gladwell, the bestselling author of *Blink*, *The Tipping Point* and *Outliers*. We agreed that when possible, the story must be as honest as possible and have the potential to touch the reader deeply.

From there, we started reading the raw material of an interview and separating parts that felt most relevant. For example, when Miika had written the transcript (as he did in most cases), he would take interesting paragraphs and put them on top. When he was done, I took the story, figured out what the main story was and started editing, sometimes going back to the transcript, sometimes playing with what Miika had decided was interesting. When I was about done, I would ask him to read it and comment. Usually the comment was just 'fantastic'.

We mostly did the interviews together with the exception of one done by email (Mårten Mickos, whom we had talked to about the subject before) and one that I did alone (Ismo Leikola). We recorded all of the interviews made in person and Miika transcribed most of them, giving me more time to focus on figuring out the right questions to ask each interviewee and the story. Most of the interviews were done in early October, 2011. The first ones, three of them we did during the summer. We decided to wait out the summer vacations and do more research before continuing.

After the interviews we started working in the same space in Tampere. Miika was faster to come up with raw text, so our writing process would often begin by him jotting down notes and typing something unpublishable into our Google Docs. We focused on the stories first and when they were done, started polishing the notes about other parts of the book. I would type my own notes in, combine them with Miika's and start writing and editing the material into publishable form.

We haven't counted how much each of us wrote because it must be undistinguishable by now. I crystallized many of his raw thoughts and edited the whole book before sending it out to the publisher's editor. Miika did more in the beginning; I did more in the end. I would say we're surely even.

Having another set of eyes and brains in the process helped tremendously in both good and bad times. It was much more fun to celebrate the small wins with someone than alone. And whenever I had major doubts about the whole project or anything smaller, Miika would bring me back to focus on the potential and motivate me to go on. I don't think I could have finished without the support.

4.3 Publishing

We contacted five Finnish publishers during the spring of 2011 with a book pitch. We chose them based on the types of books they usually publish and with the intention to make the book and its topic a real phenomenon, not just another book published by a small publishing house that nobody will ever hear of. We had a connection to one of the publishers and got an invitation to visit them and talk more about the book. Some of the others wanted us to contact them again when the book was about done, but Tammi was ready to talk based on the topic, the referral and our profiles.

We worked with the publisher to make a two-page plan of the book's contents (Peltola & Piippo, 2011) and agreed that we would get ten interviewees to say yes to an interview before we could sign the deal. It was signed in the summer of 2011. Then we agreed on a deadline and started working on the cover and sales texts.

While we didn't always agree with the publisher about everything, it was an essential experience to work with an old and respected publishing company as a young first-time author. Especially since we had calculated the cost and effort of self-publishing while planning the book concept, we were relieved to have an experienced partner to publish our work. We could focus on making the best possible book we could.

The book finally went to print in late 2011. It was published on the last day of January 2012. We threw a launch party for our friends, mentors and interviewees and gave them a hardcover book that we had covered with our own covers (since we weren't too happy about the cover of the first print). We took photos of each other with a suiting pose and Miika designed a cover with both our faces on it. Some of them had custom names in the back which said: "Tuuti, this book is for you because you have courage." It went well with the secondary title, 'A book about courageous failures.'



At least the covers gave a memorable experience for the people receiving them and got us a few blog posts covering the book.

After the publishing, we got frequent media inquiries and some speaking gigs and gave interviews here and there. The book and its most famous interviewees were covered by *Ilta-lehti*, the largest tabloid in Finland, for example. Two years after writing the book, I am still giving out interviews about it from time to time. What surprised us was how long the life of a printed book can still be. Maybe it's because our book was published again in early 2013 as a paperback business book, in a series of other popular books, and got a new face in the process.

Also: once an author, always an author. Publishing a book certainly seems to change one's status in society permanently, especially if one is young. How people approach me has been different since being published.

Based on the feedback we've gotten from strangers and friends, we succeeded in our quest to inspire and bring relief to the reader, encouraging them to make things despite the fear of failure. Someone said that one of the book's stories made them think differently about one of the public figures we interviewed, and now he's a fan of the person, getting inspired by their writings and programs. For us, it proved the power of a story empirically.



4. Stories, memory and change

"For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. --- This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious."

Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enhancement

Narratology, the study of stories and narrative structures, can be applied in various fields from literary theory to psychology. Pedagogically, for example, narratology is used as a tool of empowerment (Narrative teaching). Its theoretical origins can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Modern narratology started with Russian formalists, namely Vladimir Propp, a Soviet scholar who studied Russian folk tales and found similar elements in all of them. He formed the elements into 31 functions from the hero being an ordinary person who leaves his home (or watches a family member leave the home) to him encountering a villain, experiencing misfortunes, getting guidance, *struggling, getting branded, wounded or scarred*, defeating the villain, finally returning and ascending on a throne (Propp, 1928). Propp influenced many notable thinkers, and parallels to his elements can be found in Joseph Campbell's monomyth.

Many anthropologists, psychologists and literary scholars have been circling around the ideas of the single myth and narrative structure since. Today, Freud and Jung are common knowledge, as are the theory of the collective unconscious and Jung's archetypes. However, Adolf Bastian was the first to write about the 'psychic unity of mankind,' his ideas influencing Carl Jung's work on the archetypes and Joseph Campbell's monomyth (Campbell, 1960).

Another inspiration to Campbell and one of the fathers of anthropology, Sir James George Frazer, proposed in his influential book *The Golden Bough* that old religions were fertility cults that revolved around the worship and periodic sacrifice of a sacred king. Frazer argued that mankind progresses from magic through religious belief to scientific thought. He suggested that the legend of rebirth is central to almost all the world's mythologies. Rebirth is the culmination of the hero's journey as well, and can be seen as analogous to surviving failure and growing from it.

One of the great French anthropologists, Claude Lévi-Strauss, criticized Propp's formalist approach to mythology, arguing against it to express the superiority of the structuralist approach: myth is language. He saw a paradox in the study of myth: that mythical stories are unpredictable and fantastic – anything can happen in them, but on the other hand, the myths in different cultures throughout the world are surprisingly similar. He

proposed that even though each myth seems unique, all mythical thought is governed by universal laws. So he sought to find the fundamental units of myth.

Lévi-Strauss wrote that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution," thus containing elements that oppose each other (success–failure, life–death) and other elements that resolve or mediate those oppositions (Lévi-Strauss, 1983).

The trickster character or archetype acts as a mediator in many Native American mythologies. Lévi-Strauss points out that the trickster almost always has a contradictory or unpredictable personality (like Hermes), and often takes the form of a coyote or a raven, which represent the opposition of life and death. Similarly, success and failure seem like opposing forces, but can be formed into the same thing in the myth of the hero who dances between the forces, visiting death only to be brought back to life again. The trickster power can be used to mediate these forces by either the hero or his helpers. He must embody some of the trickster's mediator qualities to trick death.

Myths seem the most fantastic and unpredictable of all human culture, says Lévi-Strauss. If mythical thought is governed by universal laws, the all human thought must obey universal laws.

Why do we want to hear the same kind of stories over and over again? Why do they resonate in us and what happens in our mind when we hear (or tell) them? Are we human storytelling machines really so predictable that the same structure is all that is needed? Without going too deep into the brain and the psyche, let's meet Roger Schank and Robert Abelson, who have studied how we create stories to apply those mechanisms in creating artificial intelligence. Could a machine think in stories like humans do?

They have also touched on how telling a story of an experience impacts the way we remember the events. *"Characteristically, the notable episodes in our lives consist of events and outcomes occurring over a sequence of interrelated scenes. Whether it be a visit to the dentist, a trip to Paris, or the time when you popped the question, the details of an experience can exist in memory in two ways: as a coherent story linking separate scenes, or as a set of disconnected bits of information stored within general scene memories."*

Schank and Abelson propose that if the person experiencing the event does not tell the story soon after it happens, the separate events and outcomes will become disconnected. Memory access to them will then work through independent memories of particular scenes and the episode will lose its coherence. It may still have influence, especially if the outcome was negative. Then an encounter with a stimulus object linked to that episode may bring up the stressful scene, even though one is unable to recall the original event leading up to the encounter. If the story is told and retold, it will gradually become a stable form and be indexed in many ways to grant access to it. The stable structure has priority over the fractured bits-and-pieces memory. *"Thus a storyteller can suppress memory for raw unpleasant outcomes by embedding them in retold stories, edited to be more benign than the original experience."*

What does this mean for failure stories? Good things. It hints that our hypothesis in making the book was plausible all along. If we tell a story or our mistake/failure, we remember a more coherent picture of the events and our emotions and reactions are not as much unconsciously controlled by the memory of the story. As one of our interviewees told us, writing the story down helps to see that the events did not really unfold as one imagined (Sarasvuo, 2011). One starts to see how they really happened – a more coherent picture. Of course, we do not really see life as it is, even if we write all of it down.

Jerome Bruner writes in *Life as Narrative*: *"There is no such thing psychologically as 'life itself.' At very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat. Philosophically speaking, it is hard to imagine being a naive realist about 'life itself.'"* In other words, it is not possible for us to talk, write or tell stories about life or the world "as it is". They will always be interpretations, narratives, created by us or at least based on our memory. But we can impact and change how we remember things and events. Be the heroes of our own experience, so to say.

Bruner's book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* is one of the most influential works of the 20th century, and it's about his theory of narrative structures. He opened up a whole new agenda for the study of the mind, shifting it from the logical and systematic to embrace the imaginative side – the one that creates and enjoys stories, drama, ritual and myth. That side makes it possible for us to make experiences meaningful.

4.1 The hero

Carl Jung believed that every human being is born with the same understanding of what a hero, mentor, or any other archetype is. Heroes have been the central actor in stories throughout history. In Greek mythology heroes were demigods, children of both an immortal and mortal being.

The concept of the hero that we use in our book's stories has its roots in Aristotle's concept of *agathos*, the ideal man (Wheeler, 1986), and share some of the characteristics of the later objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand's Randian hero portrayed in her novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Both Rand's and Aristotle's ideal men are morally heroic and heroically rational (Kozinsky, 1989; Sciabarra, 2004; Wheeler, 1986). Friedrich Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, also, is free from the failings of Platonism and religion in his rationalism (Newman, 1984, 26: *"the Randian hero is really Nietzsche's superman in the guise of the entrepreneur"*).

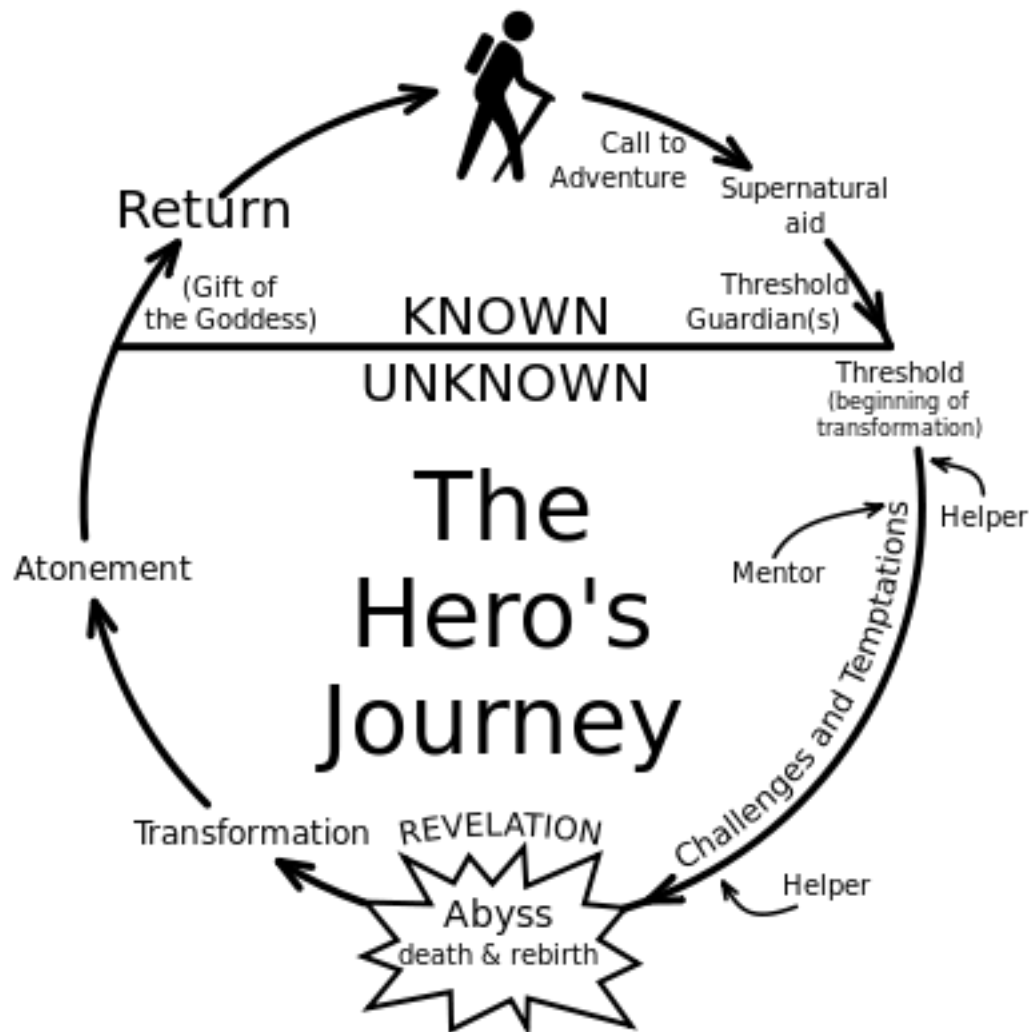
For me, the hero can be an entrepreneur, an Olympic athlete, a painter or a cleaner. It does not matter what he does, but how he does it. The hero grows into his role by what he does with what he has or what happens to him. He does not intend to escape from this world in search of truth, soul or anything else "otherworldly," as Nietzsche puts it, but shapes the inner world to impact the outer. Our hero is rational in that he seeks to turn his misfortunes into positive things as strength, wisdom and motivation. It does not mean he would be immune to emotions.

If the hero's highest moral purpose is happiness, eudaimonia (Wheeler 1986), the way to happiness is to come to terms with its obstacles like fear, shame, guilt and frustration – the feelings often associated with failure. My hero doesn't repress negative or unproductive feelings like Randian heroes do (Branden, 2012), but instead uses emotions as data – and eventually as fuel.

5. The Hero's Journey

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Campbell, 1949



The Hero's journey, also called Monomyth, is a theory of a universal pattern found in stories across cultures and human history. Joseph Campbell draws from his career as a scholar as well as his vast knowledge of literature and mythology. His work has been heavily influenced by the rise of psychotherapists, especially Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. He, on the other hand, has influenced many great storytellers of our time.

According to Campbell, the monomyth is rooted in unconscious psychodynamics. It concerns the hero who has managed to overcome personal and historical limitations to reach a transcendent understanding of the human condition. Heroic narratives serve vital functions of psychic education in their many local guises. The monomyth has a form similar to that of the comedy-melodrama: negative events (trials, terrors, tribulations) are

followed by a positive outcome: enlightenment. From the one central monomyth, according to Campbell, a myriad of variations have been drawn in primitive mythology (Gergen & Gergen 1983).

Campbell calls especially one part of the journey “a favorite phase:” The road of trials, which has produced a world literature of miraculous ordeals and tests (Campbell 1949, 81). As trials and failures are of special interest to this work, I will go briefly through the other phases and focus on the phases that have to do with coping with failure, mistakes, shortcomings or obstacles.

5.1 Departure

The Call to Adventure

The hero is not yet quite heroic on the first stage, but a common man or woman. Destiny or mere blunder has summoned him to the unknown, often in a dark or terrifying form. This is when the familiar and old life horizons have been outgrown and the old concepts, emotional patterns and ideals no longer fit (Campbell 1949, 43). A mystic would call it ‘the awakening of the self’ (Campbell 1949, 42). The region that the hero is drawn to has many different forms from dream states to underground worlds, it represents both treasure and danger, but it always is a place of strange beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight (Campbell 1949, 48). For example, when the dark forces appear to take over the protagonist’s house in *The Hobbit* (*The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, 2012), it’s a classic hero’s call to adventure.

Refusal of the Call

Often in real life and myths as well, the call is left unanswered. It leads to a stagnant life of hard work and dullness – the opposite of adventure. The refused hero might also be victimized. In many myths and folktales it is made clear that this is the refusal to give up what one takes to be one’s own interest. *The Hobbit*’s protagonist refuses to leave behind his obviously precious things and food savings, his tiny hobbit house that has been secure at least until now, even though a familiar wizard comes to lure him with a band of fellow adventurers. In the Bible Lot’s wife refused to answer God’s summon to flee her city, and because she looked back, she was turned into a pillar of salt.

Supernatural Aid

The one who has not refused the call encounters a guardian of some form, usually an old crone or man. In classic myth it is Hermes-Mercury who appears to the hero, representing his unconscious and the protecting power of destiny. The fantasy character carries a promise that guardians will always appear even though the omnipotence seems to be endangered by the threshold passages and awakenings ahead (Campbell 1949, 59). The guardian can also be dangerous, as he is the one who lures the innocent soul into realms of trial (Campbell 1949, 60).

The Crossing of the First Threshold

The next encounter in the hero's adventure comes at the beginning of a zone of magnified power with a threshold guardian. There are risks, dangers on the other side, and a monster guards the hero's present sphere or life horizon. Other people often tell him not to go over to the other side. If he does, he often has to fight a terrible ogre to get there. Like the Future Buddha, who used all his magnificent weapons to fight a huge Sticky-hair ogre, only to get stuck in its hair. The only weapon that worked was the sixth one – the thunderbolt inside him that would tear the insides of the ogre into tatters if it ate him. The thunderbolt is known in Buddhist iconography as the weapon of knowledge, the spiritual power of Buddhahood that shatters the illusions of the world. The ogre was so curious of the prince's fearlessness that he dared not eat him (Campbell 1949, 72).

Belly of the Whale

For Campbell, the belly of the whale is an abstract inward-passing phase for the hero instead of him going outward into the world. The Belly or (World) Womb is assimilated with a temple that a worshiper steps into. Outside the temple gargoyles and other guardians (of the threshold) defend the new "higher silence within". He appears to have died, but is reborn as a hero, a new being ready for adventure. He is, after all, just in the beginning of the journey. (Campbell 1949, 77)

5.2 Initiation

The Road of Trials

Before beginning his transformation, the hero must overcome a series of tests that often occur in threes. Usually he fails one or more of them and may be aided by the advice, amulets or secret agents of the supernatural helper. He discovers that there is a power supporting him. "The hero, whether god or goddess, man or woman, the figure in a myth or the dreamer of a dream, discovers and assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspected self) either by swallowing it or being swallowed. One by one the resistances are broken. He must put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty, and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then he finds that he and his opposite are not of differing species, but one flesh." (Campbell 1949, 89) Jesus is tempted by Satan in the desert three times, and after that, the narrative focuses more on Jesus' divinity.

The Meeting With the Goddess

In the picture language of mythology woman represents the totality of what can be known. The goddess holds in her character both the great good and evil, the "mother destroyer". If the hero is enlightened enough to see past the potential ugliness under which the goddess is often hiding, he will be the king and incarnate god of her created world. "She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his feathers. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation" (Campbell 1949, 97). So the meeting is the ultimate adventure when all the barriers have been overcome, and is often represented as a mystical marriage of the hero's soul to the

“Queen Goddess of the World.” The meeting can happen at the edge of the world, center of the cosmos or temple, or in the darkest deepest chambers of the heart (Campbell 1949, 91).

Woman as Temptress

The woman is life, and the marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life. His consciousness has amplified by the testings and realizations come through them. But still sometimes life becomes unbearable, especially when the hero understands his self-ignorance, that we are not all that noble and pure after all. “- - every failure to cope with a life situation must be laid, in the end, to a restriction of consciousness. Wars and temper tantrums are the makeshifts of ignorance; regrets are illuminations come too late.” (Campbell 1949, 101)

Atonement With the Father

Atonement (at-one-ment) comes naturally after temptation when the hero is in a sense of sin (that was left in place, according to Campbell, by the ogre-like father figure when he was a baby), and he must rid himself of the remains of childhood and become one with the father or whatever character holds power over him, instead of being the son (or daughter). Sometimes the father-figure is a woman, but in numerous myths the atonement is a rite of manhood where the hero is born again as a grown man and leaves the mother's protecting arms behind. All the phases up to this have been a prelude towards this horrifying realization. Think Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader.

“Atonement consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster – the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (suppressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself, and that is what is difficult. One must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy. Therewith, the center of belief is transferred outside of the bedeviling god's tight scaly ring, and the dreadful ogres dissolve. It is in this ordeal that the hero may derive hope and assurance from the helpful female figure, by whose magic (pollen charms or power of intercession) he is protected through all the frightening experiences of the father's ego-shattering initiation. For if it is impossible to trust the terrifying father-face, then one's faith must be centered elsewhere (Spider Woman, Blessed Mother); and with that reliance for support, one endures the crisis – only to find, in the end, that the father and mother reflect each other, and are in essence the same. The problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands – and the two are atoned” (Campbell 1949, 125).

Apotheosis

In the climax of the story, the hero has learned that the Goddess (mother) and the father are in fact two sides of one being, and he now becomes one with both the masculine

(father-figure) and the feminine (mother) in himself, like yin and yang, finding within the god, the Boddhisatva that lives in all beings. This is where he finds that he himself is what he has been looking for. “With the final “extirpation of delusion, desire, and hostility” (nirvana) the mind knows that it is not what it thought: thought goes. The mind rests in its true state. And here it may dwell until the body drops away. — — And he is filled with compassion for the self-terrorized beings who live in freight of their own nightmare.” (Campbell 1949, 140–141)

The Ultimate Boon

This stage is where the adventure is finally accomplished. In the myths Campbell refers to, the hero is often after an elixir of immortality. The boon he gets is scaled to his stature and the nature of his desire. “The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth. Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy, and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realization. As he crosses threshold after threshold, conquering dragon after dragon, the stature of the divinity that he summons to his highest wish increases, until it subsumes the cosmos.” (Campbell 1949, 163)

Doctor of psychology and a Buddhist monk, Jack Kornfield, describes the initiation in a spiritual journey as a change that is intense, radical and rapid. The transformation of the hero often takes the archetypal shape of a rite of passage. It could be described as “a forced journey through a rocky canyon so narrow you can't take any baggage with you – a rebirth in which you must leave your old life behind” and that involves great risk, sometimes an encounter with death, and after which the hero or seeker finds fearlessness and greater powers, even immortality, within himself (Kornfield 2001, 39).

5.3 Return

Refusal of the Return

After the hero's quest has been accomplished, the adventurer has to return with the boon that has the power to change his community or the universe. The return has often been refused. Saints have passed away while in ecstasy, and even Buddha doubted if he could put his enlightenment into words that others would understand. (Campbell, 1972)

The Magic Flight

If the hero has gained his trophy with the blessing of his supernatural patron, the goddess or god, he is sent to journey back home to restore the society and supported by all the guardian's powers on the way. But if he has gotten the elixir against the will of its guardian, or if the gods do not grant the hero's wish to return to the world, his journey back may turn complicated and often even funny. The hero is chased, may distract his chaser or throw magical obstacles in their way in panic, escaping the abyss barely with his superhuman skills.

“The myths of failure touch us with the tragedy of life, but those of success only with their own incredibility. And yet, if the monomyth is to fulfill its promise, not human failure or superhuman success but human success is what we shall have to be shown. That is the problem of the crisis of the threshold of the return. We shall first consider it in the superhuman symbols and then seek the practical teaching for historic man.” (Campbell 1949, 178)

Rescue from Without

Sometimes the world needs to come and get the hero back from the supernatural realms – because who would not want to stay in eternal bliss, away from the strife and ugliness of the ordinary world? But life will call, and so will the society that is jealous of the ones who stay away from it. This stage and every one of the stages in the hero’s journey have been prelude to the great return threshold awaiting the adventurer.

“Whether rescued from without, driven from within, or gently carried along by the guiding divinities, he has yet to re-enter with his boon the long-forgotten atmosphere where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete. Has yet to confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend.” (Campbell 1949, 186)

The Crossing of the Return Threshold

To the hero’s return to his old world is included a key to understand myth and symbol in general. The two worlds, that of the divine and adventure, and that of the human, are like night and day, or life and death. But the two dimensions are actually one. The realm of gods is a forgotten part of this world, and it is the hero’s task to explore that dimension. He will see that the things we hold valuable and dear in normal life do not seem important anymore, and he has become one with what he thought was otherness before embarking on the journey. There is always a “baffling inconsistency” between the wisdom brought from the deep and the knowledge effective outside that zone. The hero has to find out how to communicate a three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface, and this is where many heroes don’t survive the impact of the world and fall.

“Many failures attest to the difficulties of this life-affirmative threshold. The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life.” (Campbell 1949, 189)

Master of Two Worlds

When the hero has learned to pass back and forth across the void between dimensions (that are one, he finally finds) without ruining one with the principles of the other, he has gained the talent of the master. “The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal

ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity.” (Campbell 1949, 204)

Freedom to Live

In the last phase of the journey, the hero finds balance in the worlds he masters, freed from the fear of death and able to live in the moment, and not seeking rewards of his deeds. “The hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he is. “Before Abraham was, I AM.” He does not mistake apparent changelessness in time for the permanence of Being, nor is he fearful for the next moment (or of the ‘other thing’), as destroying the permanent with its change.” (Campbell 1949, 209)

5.4 Comments and connecting points

Joseph Campbell quotes Saint Thomas Aquinas: “*The name of being wise is reserved to him alone whose consideration is about the end of the universe, which end is also the beginning of the universe.*” He continues: “*The basic principle of all mythology is this of the beginning in the end.*” (Campbell 1949, 231).

The perception of the end being a beginning is one of the main insights in Kantapään kautta. Our stories of failure fall into a continuum of myths and legends where the hero dies and is born again. Symbolically the protagonists in the book die or feel like dying at some point of their journey, and that is often the breaking point after which something new begins: a healing process, new business idea, new family (Eva Walhström: “*My baby helped me to stay alive*”). The structure of the stories varies, but the development from ordinariness to adventure (including failure) and something dying, then being born again, stronger, and taking that wisdom and strength to the outside world, remains.

There were questions I was asking before going deeper into the monomyth, mainly two. First: where is there failure in the journey? Is the whole story about getting through and over obstacles, a multilayered bundle of meanings where growth by struggling is the key to freedom? Second: Is this pattern found often in failure stories?

Very few stories are only about mistakes and failing - most popular stories, at least, have a happy ending, a lesson for which the story is told. Most popular movies include a phase where everything is at stake and nothing goes as it should (unless they’re about anti-heroes, when nothing ever goes as it should). That’s the Batman in the cave, broken and shattered into a sack of pain by his opponent (The Dark Knight Rises, 2012). The hero in him dies.

Then a mentor appears, an old man in the shadows, a doctor. Batman sees his city on television headed for doom, gets angry and starts to train. He has a mission again. The old doctor helps him heal both his physical and mental wounds, but not without pain. When he’s healed, but still weak, he has to take another leap – a risk, return threshold – to get back into the world and save the city and its people. He first tries to take the safe route and climb with a rope, but someone tells him he can only succeed by throwing

away the rope. He has to trust, take a leap into the unknown, and it's the only way he can fulfill his mission. The failure and the wounds stay in his mind and body, though. He's weaker physically, but his purpose has awakened and been reborn, and is thus stronger than before.

Batman's lowest point was also the point where he decides to save his city and start training for his return. Just like Eva Wahlström became a professional boxer in the middle of her illness (Kantapään kautta, p. 57) and Jari Sarasvuo started a morning training club to prevent falling ill by the stress caused by the failure (p. 96). Just like Batman, he trained and strengthened himself to be born again, to go back into his world and defeat the villain (failure).

A similar paradox to the end–beginning is the relationship of the hero to the villain. As an end becomes a beginning in a story, the hero actually usually becomes a hero because of the villain. He only has something to save and something to fight for when his counterpart has started a fight, destroyed or threatened to destroy something dear to him. This also means that in some way the villain controls the hero by driving him to act. Some villains use it to their advantage, like the Joker uses Batman's predictability in *The Dark Knight* (Swartz, 2012). It's good to remember the power of a villain when using a narrative structure like the hero's journey.

The hero's journey does not explain how telling a story might influence one's perception of events, but rather shows that all heroes in all stories struggle. It gives the reader, watcher or listener of the story permission to allow struggles and failures in their own lives as they identify with the hero. We tend to think that we worship heroes because of their bravery and extraordinary deeds, but it is the ordinariness and humanity of the hero that makes us love them and identify with them.

5.5 Analysis

The monomyth has been traditionally used to create and analyze works of fiction. But finding the pattern thematically similar to failure stories, I wanted to give it a try with non-fiction as well.

This chart shows how both *Star Wars* and *Matrix* fit into the pattern (Brennan, 1999–2006), listing common mythic elements on the bottom.

Campbell	Star Wars	The Matrix
I: Departure		
The call to adventure	Princess Leia's message	Follow the white rabbit
Refusal of the call	Must help with the harvest	Neo won't climb out window
Supernatural aid	Obi-wan rescues Luke from sandpeople	Trinity extracts the "bug" from Neo
Crossing the first threshold	Escaping Tatooine	Neo is taken out of the Matrix for the first time
The belly of the whale	Trash compactor	Torture room
II: Initiation		
The road of trials	Lightsaber practice	Sparring with Morpheus
The meeting with the goddess	Princess Leia (wears white, in earlier scripts was a "sister" of a mystic order)	The Oracle
Temptation away from the true path	Luke is tempted by the Dark Side	Cypher (the failed messiah) is tempted by the world of comfortable illusions
Atonement with the Father	Darth and Luke reconcile	Neo rescues and comes to agree (that he's The One) with his father-figure, Morpheus
Apotheosis (becoming god-like)	Luke becomes a Jedi	Neo becomes The One
The ultimate boon	Death Star destroyed	Humanity's salvation now within reach
III: Return		
Refusal of the return	Luke, come on! Luke wants to stay to avenge Obi-Wan	Neo fights agent instead of running
The magic flight	Millennium Falcon	Jacking in
Rescue from without	Han saves Luke from Darth	Trinity saves Neo from agents
Crossing the return threshold	Millennium Falcon destroys pursuing TIE fighters	Neo fights Agent Smith
Master of the two worlds	Victory ceremony	Neo's declares victory over machines in final phone call
Freedom to live	Rebellion is victorious over Empire	Humans are victorious over machines
Common Mythic Elements		
Two Worlds (mundane and special)	Planetside vs. The Death Star	Reality vs. The Matrix
The Mentor	Obi-Wan Kenobi	Morpheus
The Oracle	Yoda	The Oracle
The Prophecy	Luke will overthrow the Emperor	Morpheus will find (and Trinity will fall for) "The One"
Failed Hero	Biggs	In an early version of the script, Morpheus once believed that Cypher was "The One"

I chose two stories from our book: a business failure (Jari Sarasvuo) and an artist's career story (Anssi Kela), to see how they would work in the same chart. It's possible to find most of the phases in each story by not taking the names of the events literally, even though most of the book's stories consist of many stories in one. Some parts like Apotheosis and the mythic elements in these non-fiction stories require a bit of creativity to find – mentors and such were usually not asked in the interviews unless relevant. We didn't try to create worlds with the stories, only recreate experiences.

Campbell	Sarasvuo	Kela
I: Departure		
The call to adventure	Becoming a writer, first story	Death of father: learn to play the bass
Refusal of the call	Cannot write	-
Supernatural aid	Girlfriend & her mother write his stories, editor	Friends / dead father?
Crossing the first threshold	Reading news on the radio (dyslexic)	Playing in first band
The belly of the whale	-	Mourning?
II: Initiation		
The road of trials	Merger with Satama, IPO, "battles with demons" every night	Training with the band for 8 years, no success, band breaks up
The meeting with the goddess	New family	Record label producer likes his solo material
Temptation away from the true path	Escapist fantasies	Making the record lasts longer than expected
Atonement with the Father	Taking responsibility for the shareholders and employees, founding Fight Club	"Mikan faijan BMW," the first single, gets picked up by a small radio station after 6 weeks of waiting
Apotheosis (becoming god-like)	Stepping down from CEO seat, surviving depression	Other radio stations play the song, it becomes a hit
The ultimate boon	Wisdom, humbleness, new child	The record sells 5 x platinum
III: Return		
Refusal of the return	Refusing to let go of shame	Writing a book, race driving
The magic flight	Writing about the failure	Almost dying in an accident
Rescue from without	Customers come back	Surviving a surgery, healing completely
Crossing the return threshold	Losing millions in stock market	Warm-up for Eric Clapton
Master of the two worlds	Telling the story publicly	People enjoy the show
Freedom to live	Learning to be grateful for the experience	Writing songs, enjoying life
Common Mythic Elements		
Two Worlds (mundane and special)	-	Real world, stardom
The Mentor	Editors	Father
The Oracle	-	Asko Kallonen, the producer
The Prophecy	Trainers' House becomes a global coaching company with their technology	Anssi becomes a rock star
Failed Hero	Jari Sarasvuo himself	Pekka & Susi, the first band

(Sources include the original transcripts of the interviews; Kela & Sarasvuo, 2011.)

Another story that would have fitted in chart was that of Eva Wahlström, the boxing champion, who was a natural storyteller. We hardly had to ask her any questions during the interview – the story just poured out of her with an occasional laugh, even though it was heartbreaking. She used to train too much, so much she fell seriously ill during her best times as a winning young boxer. She could hardly stand or train anymore but somehow managed to fight a few matches and win her 10th national championship. Then she became even more ill, not being able to walk, leave the house or train. Just when she was about to give up on life, she got pregnant with her first child.

This ties into the monomyth's Road of trials where the hero has to give up her virtue, life and pride and bow to the intolerable – in this case, staying home and giving up the successful athlete's career. After that, Eva's journey includes many phases of the monomyth: she learns how she has mistreated her friends (woman as temptress), becomes one with her parents by becoming a mother herself (atonement), and finds balance in life that is not dependable on her career (apotheosis). She becomes a professional boxer and fights fewer matches. She has been reborn as a mother and a human being, not any more purely an athlete.

One of the most reflective heroes in the book is Mårten Mickos, who failed with his first internet company during the dotcom crash and eventually became the CEO of MySQL (which was acquired by Sun Microsystems for \$1 billion). He opened his struggle to us by writing the whole story and its lessons down. When he had been removed from the CEO's seat of the failing company, he went to a seminar and ruminated the failure with colleagues and friends during long nights in the hotel bar. His rebirth started there. He started doing consulting for other startup companies, using the lessons learned in the failure.

All of the stories have some kind of breaking point where the hero (interviewee) is about to die, symbolically or literally. We emphasized these to make the rebirth, the learning process and the positive side that followed, stand out. The points and the events in each story are as follows:

1. Jani Leinonen, artist: Sitting in a prison cell, crying. He made a work of art that got him locked up (for one day only). It turned out to be his most distributed work so far.
2. Mikko Ranin, co-founder and CEO of Igglo: Company running out of money, investors leave the meeting say they won't invest more. Sold part of the company to Sanoma, the biggest media company in Finland.
3. Marko Parkkinen, serial entrepreneur: his first technology business failed to secure more funding during midsummer, and he was publicly named "the bankrupt entrepreneur" by a journalist. He founded a new company using the lessons learned.
4. Eva Wahlström, boxer: Tried to solve everything by training more, caught a rare illness and lost the ability to walk for two years – with her will to live. Got a child and became a professional boxer.
5. Anneli Jäätteenmäki, former Prime Minister of Finland: Survived breast cancer, got negative feedback for publicly saying she was working despite the cancer. (Had to resign as PM due to what was dubbed "Iraqgate" in Finland, but did not

discuss this in the book.) Won the election to become a Member of the European Parliament.

6. Mikael Jungner, MP of Finland, former President of Yle, the National Broadcasting Company: Failed to understand Yle's culture and to make crucial changes in the company during his first year as President. Succeeded in getting employees excited about the change eventually.
7. Mårten Mickos, CEO of Eucalyptus, former CEO of MySQL: Had to resign as CEO of a sports portal MatchON when the company was failing during the 2000 dotcom crash. Continued to found and lead technology companies, most notably MySQL that was acquired by Sun Microsystems for a billion dollars.
8. Jari Sarasvuo, entrepreneur, management coach: Led his company Trainers' House to a failed merger and IPO, losing most of the stock value. Almost lost his ability to work, but managed to pick himself and the company up again. (Lately gone back to do his own radio show and TV talk show.)
9. Seela Sella, actress: Bullied for her big nose and speech defect as a child; many small mistakes on the stage; almost crashed during a miserably bad theatre play. Made her mistakes and defect fuel to work twice as hard, became one of the most loved entertainers in the country.
10. Krista Järvinen, former Miss Finland candidate, co-founder of Future Female: Gained weight before going to represent the country in an international competition and became the topic of a (yellow) media storm. Found out it was celiac disease, continued her career and ended up leading a branch of a digital marketing company.
11. Anssi Kela, singer-songwriter, author: Failed with his first band, which drove him to a wildly successful solo career. Made one of the most successful records of all time in Finland, but failed to make other hits after that. Published a novel, started racing cars, drove off a curve and brushed with death, but survived and understood what really matters.
12. Taneli Tikka, serial entrepreneur: His first company got into an argument with investors and had to file for bankruptcy. Even the bankruptcy failed and they lost their IP. He was left with a hefty debt, considered joining the French foreign legion because of the shame, but chose to join another startup, soon being able to pay the debt back when it was acquired.
13. Antti Kylliäinen, priest, author and speaker: After publishing a controversial book, he was shunned in his church for a long time. He started lecturing and consulting, founding his own company and drawing from those experiences, helping organizations while continuing working as a part-time priest.
14. Ismo Leikola, stand up comedian: Seeing an amateur perform badly on open mic, he found the courage to get on the stage himself and start his successful career. He deliberately uses failures and the most frustrating things that are wrong in the world to make jokes about them.
15. Helena Ranta, forensic dentist: She was close to getting killed or kidnapped by a guerrilla force in Kosovo when she was on her way to investigate a controversial area with victims that would have led to a breakthrough in justice. She had a TV crew with her and a microphone on and the encounter ended up in a documentary.

5.6 Questions for creating a powerful story

The hero in the monomyth becomes a hero through contending with difficulties, passing difficult tests, overcoming obstacles (even death) and yes, learning from failure. That is why my hypothesis is that one can, by thinking of his or her failures as phases in the hero's journey, see them in a new light or perspective. It is not necessary to try to fit each and every one of the phases into one's own story, but to think of it merely as a starting point. Countless variations have worked in the history of mythology and storytelling, and we have the freedom to create our own mix.

I have come up with some questions to ease the turning of a failure experience into a hero's journey story. The first question is one that we asked all our interviewees making Kantapään kautta. (We did ask many of the others, too, without knowing the monomyth in advance.)

1. Departure

If this was a movie (or story), where would it begin? Describe the situation, the setting and atmosphere as if it was a beginning of a screenplay.

If you think of the failure as an adventure, how did you get called into it?

Did you answer the call right away and if not, what happened?

Who else was there with you? Who or what helped you begin the journey? (Who made the decisions to take the risk with you?)

What was it like to jump into the risk? What kind of threshold did you go through?

Did you get sucked into a new world, situation, or perspective, and how was your inner processing of that like?

2. Initiation

What were the most difficult things in this experience? How were you tested?

What helped you to get over the difficult things?

Were there times that you just wanted to quit everything and/or escape?

What made you continue?

What kind of insights came then?

What did you learn about yourself and the world?

Can you think of three reasons why the failure was a gift?

3. Return

Did you feel uncomfortable or not ready to return to the public after the failure? Even refuse?

How did the return eventually happen?

Did someone or something help you to return and talk to people about what happened?

What kind of problems have you encountered after the failure, coming back to the public?

How have you combined the wisdom gained from the experience with your life and work after it?

How has the world around you changed and found balance with the experience eventually?

6. Conclusions and reflection

"All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure."

Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*

The monomyth does not explain the role of storytelling in reframing experiences; it is not its job. It is about stories that have been told throughout history, myths, that include negative experiences in the stories of the heroes. It shows that in the end failures, mistakes, struggles and little deaths are just a part of the journey. When they become a story, their power is amplified.

To me, the hero's journey explain why some of the stories in our book read better than others. If there is a real, honest account of heartfelt failure, if the storyteller (the interviewee) has really reflected their part in the events and accepted that they made the mistakes, the story does feel different – even to their writer when reading it. If they haven't accepted responsibility, there's little to build a story around. No death, no rebirth. And Jesus is known for his death and rebirth, isn't he?

We made the interviewees heroes by putting them in the position we did: asking them how they made the heroic act of defeating failure happen. Our assumption was that failure was hard to beat and it takes a certain strength (of a hero) to overcome it, like beating a villain or monster in a story.

They chose the narratives they did based on our brief, which was to tell their story, and our questions, which were designed to bring the interviewee into the middle of the story and battle the monster. The role of the hero was chosen by us unconsciously because we wanted the stories to be inspiring (also relieving) for others – and heroes tend to be inspiring. But the narratives are by no means objective.

As Jerome Bruner writes, "*The story of one's own life is, of course, a privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure are the same. This reflexivity creates dilemmas.*" The stories are thus told from the perspective of the teller's intentions, even though their acts might have been otherwise determined. We accepted the fact that these were personal accounts, not journalistic profiles or feature stories.

After reading all the literature for this thesis on both failure and narratives, hearing the stories of 15+ interviewees and writing the book and this thesis, I can conclude that there is a strong positive side to failure, and creating and telling a story from the perspective of the hero has much potential to show the positive side. How that story or its presentation might impact the storyteller and the listeners is another matter that would have to be studied. My hypothesis stands even more firm now: telling the story helps the person understand both negative and positive consequences and see the failure as a potential beginning as opposed to an end. Hearing a story like that helps the motivated listener fear their own failures less, and might even inspire them to live more courageously. This has been our experience based on the feedback for the book.

There are some doubts about the creation of heroes, still. For example Frank Herbert's epic science fiction saga *Dune* seems to follow the Hero's Journey on the surface. Herbert, however, deliberately wanted to show the other side of hero-worship: how dangerous heroes are. *"The bottom line of the Dune trilogy is: beware of heroes. Much better [to] rely on your own judgment, and your own mistakes,"* he said in 1979 (Clareson, 1992). In 1985 he continued to explain: *"Dune was aimed at this whole idea of the infallible leader because my view of history says that mistakes made by a leader (or made in a leader's name) are amplified by the numbers who follow without question."*

Having deep respect for Herbert and his work, his view makes me want to ask: Do we want to create more god-like heroes? Or could heroes just be normal people with weaknesses? If so, can anyone be called a hero? And if heroes would tell their failure stories more openly, would it make them less dangerous and more human? I see this changing already: heroes can be more like Ilkka Paananen, the CEO of Supercell, discussed in chapter 2. They can give space and power to others without losing theirs.

I see potential in using the monomyth pattern in therapeutical settings, coaching and teaching. The strenght of it is that it seems like a systematic way of breaking down or creating a story block by block, but it does its work in us unconsciously at the same time. It makes us think about our story, our quest and the meanings of events that form it. Just as a good story does.

There is more and more evidence of how reading fiction makes us more empathic and better in many ways. Something I continue to wonder is if creative non-fiction can do the same. In studies regarding fiction's impact on the reader, they have used non-fiction stories, but not necessarily creative stories that read more like fiction. I would like to know where the line is drawn: does the story have to be untrue, created, to work like fiction? Or is it about the style? Do I have to switch to writing fiction to have impact? I don't think so, but could not find enough evidence to back my thinking.

6.2 Future

On more than one occasions I found myself thinking of how a real study about failure and storytelling could be done with real people, their stories, assignments and questionnaires. Even though this work has taken two years to finish, it feels like barely scraping the surface. The subject – combining failure, narratives, myths, storytelling, learning and reframing – was too big to cover in a master's thesis. If nobody else does the research I wish to be done, I might have to continue from here.

I believe that the more open our societies become, willingly or by force, the more essential the skill of handling failure will be. As well as the pace of change in business environments, technology (and just about everything else but the human brain) makes it crucial to be able to test things, fail publicly and try again out in the open.

The subject has surfaced a lot more in the past two years than before (this might be a bias as I've studied it only during this time period) but we still need more information on how exactly we can learn to appreciate, embrace and use mistakes and failure.

Failure and storytelling are both hard and exciting subjects because they are wide and cross-disciplinary. They can and should be studied together and separately in different fields to create more data, to get the stories and lessons that might otherwise be buried under shame and silence, out. It might require some extra courage to go around asking people about their worst moments of shame. My experience was that surprisingly many are willing to share theirs if you ask in a honest way.

I think the way to make failure easier for ourselves and everyone else is to discuss what it means, share more stories to illustrate the meaning, and make sure we at least know for ourselves what really matters. I could not say it more beautifully than author J.K. Rowling.

"Ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure. But the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it. Failure means a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself to be anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena where I believe I truly belonged. Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I built my life."

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