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From Mistakes to Meaning

Owning Your Past So It Doesn't Own You

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For Antoinette and Jamie

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PART 1

What Have We Done?

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It's Time

Late one night in 2015, Michael called Josh in a panic. Months earlier, the North Korean government had hacked Sony Entertainment, shutting down its operations and leaking company secrets. As CEO, Michael had been spending twenty-hour days reassuring colleagues, answering questions from the Tokyo headquarters, and trying to get help from the FBI as he managed one of the worst corporate IT crises in history.

WikiLeaks had taken thousands of Sony documents, posted them online, and created a search function that allowed reporters to find the gossip that Sony executives had unwisely committed to writing. Story after story appeared about salaries, movie budgets, and casting decisions, along with deeply troubling comments about race and gender.

Through the WikiLeaks search function, reporters discovered that Michael had used his corporate email for personal matters as well. Suddenly, the crisis became intimate; the world could find sensitive information about Michael's family—including his children. Having

spent so much of his energy and political capital trying to protect his colleagues, he now worried about his three daughters.

On that late-night call, as Michael explained the risk, Josh appreciated why Michael sounded so agitated, angry, and eager for help. Michael was at his best, totally focused on his family, and at his worst, almost incoherent with rage and fear. Unknown to Josh, but very much on Michael's mind, was that he had personally green-lit the movie, *The Interview*, that had enraged the North Koreans. That one decision, that terrible mistake, had upended thousands of lives.

Michael blasted his emotions at Josh in a long rant. By the end of the call, we had devised a plan that ameliorated some of Michael's anxiety. The call—painful, confusing, and frustrating—actually made us closer. Michael revealed aspects of himself that might have taken years to come out under normal circumstances.

That was the last meaningful conversation we had about the hack for more than five years. The door slammed shut on one of the most traumatic episodes of Michael's life. For five years, whenever Josh asked about the impact of the hack on Michael's emotions or his outlook on the world, Michael changed the subject. Sometimes, as we often do with each other, he used humor to deflect. Other times, he would testily make clear that he did not want to discuss it. No one, not his family, colleagues, or friends, got another glance.

Michael's reticence annoyed Josh in the way that we all get upset by seeing our own shortcomings manifested in others. For years before the hack, we had almost exactly opposite roles: Michael as inquisitor, Josh as the artful dodger. Michael nudged, prodded, and practically begged Josh to talk about how his private diary had become damning evidence in the Clinton Whitewater scandal. As chief of staff at the Treasury Department, Josh had become front-page news as part of the investigation that ultimately led to the revelation of President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky and his impeachment trial.

As with Michael and the hack, Josh refused to talk about his experience. At the slightest mention of the word *diary*, he would laugh nervously and push the subject aside.

We had each made incredibly painful mistakes that, despite a decades-long friendship, we refused to discuss—with each other or anyone else.

We talked about everything else. When Michael got prostate cancer, Josh heard about all the unappealing side effects. When Josh's rigidity and perfectionism damaged family vacations, Michael got the details. Bad parenting? We know what each other's children have endured. Marriage? We share how our respective long-suffering wives call out our regular missteps. We've celebrated and mourned together, and traveled and enjoyed endless dinners in each other's company.

We've left virtually no historical or emotional stone unturned. Except for our biggest mistakes. They weren't secrets. Indeed, both had generated headlines, but we had hidden them in plain sight beneath deep layers of shame and anger. Mistakes that had altered our careers, changed our views of ourselves and the world, and stayed with us long after the rest of the world moved on. Two people who had every possible advantage growing up—loving and demanding parents, supportive siblings, "prestigious" educations—had never had the courage to talk about their worst moments.

Until one day during COVID, when we took a beach walk along the Atlantic. Maybe we had run out of British police procedurals to discuss. Maybe we felt worn down by the pandemic. Or perhaps the threat of death or serious illness made us realize that the window for telling the truth might close without warning.

Almost certainly, our age had an impact on our decision. Erik Erikson famously wrote about the eight stages of psychosocial development, which culminate in "integrity versus despair."[1] Unsurprisingly, we wanted to believe that we had made progress on "integrity"

by leading fulfilling, purposeful lives. We also knew, however, that we felt some bitterness and regret that risked metastasizing into "despair." We hoped that by coming clean about what hadn't gone well we could mitigate that risk and might even increase our sense of purpose. For all those reasons, for the first time we decided to talk about our mistakes.

Our efforts began slowly and rather unsuccessfully. You can't go from hiding to open confessional overnight. For someone just learning how to swim, the high dive looks scary. So, we talked about relatively trivial mistakes: the time that Michael blew up at a friend for being late; and when Josh left the speech for a presidential candidate on the campaign plane. We moved on to more significant ones when we had said things that hurt people we loved or let ambition swamp judgment.

When we finally got around to the Sony hack and Josh's diary, we recounted facts and chronologies rather than reactions and feelings. We skimmed over the parts that had caused the deep wounds and dwelled on the anecdotes that didn't reveal our underlying emotions.

We had to encourage and prod each other; it took attempt after attempt. We learned to trust each other—to trust our reactions and questions, and respect our fears and embarrassment. Importantly, we provided each other with positive reinforcement that allowed even greater honesty. The honesty provided relief.

As we unpacked our ugly mistakes and pushed each other to unveil the truth, we became more and more intrigued about what we learned. We began to wonder what would happen if we gave our mistakes the kind of empathetic, open treatment that we use for our most serious conversations about relationships or work. We wondered if that process might make mistakes windows into parts of our lives that we had previously hidden. We hoped that opening that window would help us relate better to our families and friends, operate more effectively at work, and feel better about ourselves.

We came to believe that mistakes reveal hidden aspects of our

histories and personalities. If that was true for us, we thought others might feel similarly. We asked our spouses and friends about the topic. They too had buried mistakes.

Then we expanded the circle even further to some of the most interesting, intelligent people we knew—inside our families and out. Normally, when you call someone accomplished and request an interview, you ask about their greatest successes. We did the opposite.

We asked people to tell us about a mistake that they deeply regretted. In some cases, we knew about a mistake that we thought that they had never discussed. With others, we simply asked if they had a story, like ours, that they had never examined.

The more we learned, the more we wanted to know, so we began to look for articles and books about mistakes. There simply aren't a lot. While excellent books covered aspects of our questions, we couldn't find one that gave us the framework we needed to understand what had happened or why. Nothing we read made us feel like part of a broader community of people who had also made mistakes. Nothing gave us permission to talk about something that had for years felt so pathetic.

We had gone from refusing to talk about our mistakes, to becoming intensely curious about them, to being frustrated that we couldn't get the answers we needed. That's when we decided to write this book. We quickly realized that we needed an expert guide.

Happily, we met Dr. Alison Papadakis, a teaching professor at Johns Hopkins University who became our key partner. Alison, who's a clinical psychologist, helped us find the academic evidence to support our hypotheses and, equally important, let us know in no uncertain terms when our ideas were bunk. She brought just the right combination of academic expertise and practical experience.

She helped us think about how what happens before a mistake can lead to poor decisions—and the healthy and unhealthy ways people

process the regret that follows. She served as our guide in that dark region known as the human psyche. We could not have found a better fellow explorer.

Through our reflections, interviews, and research, we've come to believe that mistakes don't get the attention they deserve. For years, we thought that they "just happen"—like rain on a wedding day: unfortunate, but out of our control. What's the point of examining something that's unavoidable?

It turns out that they don't just happen. They follow patterns and have identifiable causes. Instead of treating them like unlucky accidents, we want to talk about them as openly as we do our major life events. They're a bit like broken bones: if they don't get properly reset, the aftermath becomes far worse than the accident itself. By discussing and analyzing our mistakes and those of the other people you'll read about in this book, we believe that we can all transform how we feel about ourselves, our family, friends, and colleagues.

This is a storybook, but it's not a "hero's journey"—one mistake after another doesn't lead to a magical outcome. But by treating the mistakes seriously, and telling and retelling these stories, by unpacking them like Russian nesting dolls and then lining up all the dolls in order, we formed narratives. They became less mysterious, more comprehensible, and eventually, as a result, they lost their power over us.

In the first chapters of this book, we describe our two mistakes in all their unseemly glory. How Michael made a rash decision that caused one of the worst corporate breaches in American history. How Josh kept an ill-advised diary that embarrassed the White House and landed him on the front page of *The New York Times*. Then you'll read about the mistakes of people who generously told us about their own terrible moments.

As you will read in later chapters, Malcolm Gladwell, the author,

described a passion that he abandoned; Karol Mason, the president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, recounted a painful interaction with the police; Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, reflected on a career choice that he regretted; Irv Gotti, the music impresario, lamented a terrible interview that destroyed a friendship.

They, and many others, took the plunge right alongside us. During the interviews, we witnessed tears and shame; we also sensed catharsis. Once we started, we never had to turn back. Each mistake felt fully worthy of exploration.

As they say on *Law & Order*, these are their stories—raw and often full of regret. They form the backbone of this book. They are not hypothetical or imaginary, but real chronicles of painful human experience. In their individuality, they illuminate larger, more universal phenomena that apply to all of us at one time or another.

To analyze those phenomena, we needed definitions that captured what we had experienced and gave us insights into what we had felt. When we couldn't find just what we wanted, we considered bank shots: mistakes and failures seem like synonyms, and we knew that failure has received lots of attention. So, we began to study failure.

Historians love ambitious failures. Would we remember the Battle of Thermopylae as vividly if the Greeks had won? Ernest Shackleton's expedition never crossed Antarctica, and it nearly killed his crew, but the *Endurance* lives on in our imagination. The Apollo 13 mission stays imprinted in our memory precisely because it failed.

That's unsurprising since these stories inspire us by virtue of their heroism and perseverance. Failure led to success of a very different kind: the celebration of the human capacity for teamwork and survival. It's true in business too. The *Harvard Business Review* devoted an entire issue to failure.

We think failures usually follow a similar pattern: painstaking planning that includes careful risk assessments, a series of important accomplishments along the way, and then an unsuccessful outcome. To fail, one must have strived to fulfill a real achievement—usually with the help of others. Failure requires a level of self-awareness about the ultimate goal coupled with a determined resolve to reach it.

Those characteristics are actually quite similar to success—except the outcome. We remember and applaud both Neil Armstrong and Shackleton. One landed on the moon; the other failed to cross the Antarctic continent. Both relied on years of preparation by legions of people in service of reaching a seemingly impossible destination. We draw inspiration from both despite their very different conclusions.

Failure isn't just the opposite of success; it's actually a sibling. Success and failure come after planning, commitment, and hard work in pursuit of an ambitious goal.

Those attributes make success and failure worthy of study, which is why you can find so many books about them. But our mistakes involved something very different. As you will read, we had made decisions without consulting with or listening to other people. We had acted on impulse, emotion, or old habits. Our actions did not come close to qualifying as noble failures.

Mistakes can feel as if they can come out of nowhere. We've all been there. We stub our toe on a corner, kick the wall in anger, and end up hobbling around with a broken bone. Then, when people ask us how we hurt ourselves, we either blame a poorly located wall or pretend that our toe doesn't hurt. When they point out that we're limping, we claim that it's just a blister. We're so embarrassed and angry that we lie. And, if anyone points out that we have a pattern of turning small hiccups into major mistakes, we practically boil over. A small accident, stubbing our toe, turns into a mistake when we decide to kick the wall and then lie about it.

At work, we get overcommitted, forget to read materials before a meeting, and then get teased when we ask a question that got answered in what we had failed to read. We then react defensively and get the reputation as someone who's thin-skinned.

When we make these kinds of impulsive mistakes, we may not even know that we're making an important decision or any decision at all. There is rarely anything thoughtful about the process, and the result often leaves us feeling embarrassed.

As you'll see from the stories in the book, many much more serious mistakes have remarkably similar characteristics to the kinds we make in our daily lives.

Here's our definition of a mistake: a decision taken without careful consideration or self-awareness that causes regret. Compare that to a failure, which follows hard work and planning and often leads to learning and growth.

There's no bright line where one begins and another ends, but try thinking of it this way:

Great mountain climbers make meticulous plans to achieve an incredibly difficult goal and still sometimes don't reach the summit. They "fail" to reach their goal. The same climber might forget to call home to let her family know that she got safely back to base camp. That's a "mistake" that stresses out the people she loves.

At its simplest: marriages "fail." Drunken Vegas weddings are generally "mistakes." In the case of marriage, two people come together in the hope of living meaningful lives as a couple—until death do them part; they have an ambitious goal, and, sometimes, they fail to achieve it. Marrying someone you meet after four cocktails doesn't take a lot of planning, and the goal is usually not entirely obvious. No wonder we hide that kind of mistake: no one wants to get ridiculed for such bad judgment.

Now, if you get married after four cocktails or kick a door in anger,

is that really a decision? Our answer is yes. A bad one, but still a decision. We believe that even impulsive actions constitute decisions. No one forced you to kick the door or get married. Sure, you made it without careful consideration (Vegas wedding) or self-awareness (you get so angry that you kick the door), but that's what makes it a mistake. And, if you make a decision that rolls out over years, that too can constitute a mistake even if it didn't occur in one defining moment.

With that definition in hand, we began to think of all the different types of mistakes. Once you get started, it's hard to stop: you overreact, procrastinate, brag, rush to judgment, lie, catastrophize, drink too much, show bias, and become impulsive. That's before you become impatient, distracted, self-absorbed, intolerant, and venal.

We started to drown in all of the ways we make bad decisions. There were so many of such different types that we couldn't find any organizing principles. We weren't the first to try.

For literally thousands of years, people have tried to classify mistakes. They've used categories to try to improve behavior and enforce religious orthodoxy. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* classified virtues and vices: "All the actions of men must necessarily be referred to seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reason, anger, and desire."[2]

Platonic thought broke a person down into the body, the soul, and the mind, and then early Egyptian Christians assigned a series of problems that went along with each of them. The body had nutritional and sexual needs. The soul could make people argumentative or rude. And the mind could lead one to envy and hubris.

Eastern religions give us further classifications. Buddhism warns that we will encounter five hindrances while trying to achieve enlightenment and nirvana: sensory desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.[3]

In Judaism, you find three types of sin: *pesha* (deliberate sin,

committed in defiance), *avon* (lust, perversity), and *chet* (unintentional sin, human fault).[4]

By the sixth century, Pope Gregory I codified what we now call the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

Almost all the historical efforts came with a healthy dollop of judgment. As Kathryn Schulz writes in *Being Wrong*, many people think that "our errors are evidence of our gravest social, intellectual, and moral failings." For centuries, "in our collective imagination, error is associated not just with shame and stupidity but also with ignorance, indolence, psychopathology, and moral degeneracy."[5]

We don't think of ourselves as degenerates and certainly didn't come to view the people we interviewed as indolent or stupid. Religious and moral language just didn't fit the stories that we heard or how we felt about ourselves.

We'd done something wrong, but ethics and religion alone hadn't given us the way to figure it out. Perhaps we could find the answer in academia.

In fields such as medicine and aircraft maintenance, there are psychological studies and technical literature on why we make professional mistakes and keep them hidden. To help in those jobs, where mistakes can prove so costly, scholars have devised precise classifications.

James Reason, professor of psychology at the University of Manchester and a world-leading expert in human errors, has written thoughtfully about the differences between errors, slips, lapses, and mistakes. The research demonstrates the complexity of classifying and understanding even relatively straightforward mistakes.

Imagine an airplane pilot flips the wrong switch. Reason refers to that broad category of problem as an "error." In Reason's language, that is "a planned sequence of mental or physical activities [that] fails to achieve its intended outcome [and is not due to] some chance agency."[6]

Put differently, turbulence didn't push the pilot's hand onto the wrong switch. So, what else could have caused it? Maybe the switch had poor labeling (that's a "slip," an action that did not go as planned) or the pilot forgot a step in the correct sequence (a "lapse," an error due to a memory glitch). Or, if the person who wrote the checklist had organized it poorly or not made clear its intended purpose, that's closer to a "mistake," an error in the plan.

Reason's work and that of others in the related field of cognition helped us understand specialized problems. Appropriately, the academic research has precise and somewhat esoteric descriptions relating to problems with regularly repeated, mission-critical tasks, but that didn't get us much closer to the kind of experiences we had had. The mistakes that interested us didn't involve those kinds of sequences or processes. Ours involved fluid situations in which emotions and other people's actions played crucial roles.

We felt a little like detectives before the development of professional policing techniques. For most of history, society focused on the crime: Who did what to whom? Authorities tortured suspects and made assumptions based on stereotypes, but did not employ a systematic approach to understanding why the crime occurred. In the nineteenth century, Hans Gross, an Austrian jurist and criminologist, articulated and popularized the now widely adopted investigative technique of considering "motive, opportunity, and means." He set out a crucial three-part process that worked with almost all cases. Prior to Gross's systematic approach, criminal investigations relied on the intuition and subjective interpretations of the investigators.[7]

We too needed to stop relying on "intuition and . . . subjective interpretations." Examining failures hadn't helped. Morality, ethics, and religion made us feel guilty, and didn't even get us closer to figuring out why we had made the mistakes or how to get over our shame. We knew that we hadn't committed crimes, but we thought about our

mistakes in the same way that police acted before Gross formalized his approach: we tortured ourselves and applied all sorts of assumptions and judgments.

Even if we hadn't committed any crimes, Gross's recognition of the importance of "motive" gave us an important clue. We realized that while a mistake can take place in an instant, what happens before the mistake makes just as big a difference. All our initial lists of mistakes failed to capture cause and effect—the way our pasts influence our behavior and affect how we process what we've done.

In *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*, George Saunders, the remarkable author and teacher, writes, "Causality is to the writer what melody is to the songwriter: a superpower that the audience feels as the crux of the matter; the thing the audience actually shows up for."[8]

What Saunders recommends for writers echoes what we all learn as children: cause and effect. Break the rules: get punished. Do well: get a reward. Drop a glass: watch it break. Saunders knows that it drives good writing. We all know that it drives a lot of life.

We get angry and shout hurtful words; we grow impatient and cancel worthwhile plans; we cut corners and hurt our reputations; we gossip and alienate our friends. It's easy to come up with another one hundred examples.

As we thought about those examples of "cause and effect," we realized that the kinds of mistakes that interested us the most related to emotions and behavioral patterns. We had spent so much of our lives reasoning our way through problems and had still made these terrible mistakes. Our "thinking" had only taken us so far. We hadn't given sufficient weight to our emotions or figured out how to tell stories about ourselves.

To understand "cause," what happens before the decision, and "effect," how we process our regret, we needed to understand how our mistakes fit into the larger continua of our lives. We had begun

our explorations thinking of mistakes as events that take place in a moment—the instant when you make a bad decision—but we realized that just the way motive provokes the crime, mistakes actually take place over a longer time. There's your life before the mistake. There's what's happening during the moment you make the decision. Then there's what happens after it. To figure out what happened and, more important, why, you have to go back and forth in time.

There is no shortage of ways to think about that time sequence: before, during, after. Or, backstory, action, and consequences. Whether for pleasure or work, we all use stories to convey ideas. From the Bible to *The Iliad* to the origin stories of successful companies, narratives help us absorb ethics and ideas.

Syd Field, in his famous book on screenwriting,[9] universalized this storytelling process and gave it three parts: the setup, confrontation, and resolution. You need all three to define a story: a confrontation on its own has no interest. The audience wants to understand what caused it and how it gets resolved. Our lives follow a somewhat similar pattern. From Greek mythology, it's the riddle of the Sphinx: What starts on four legs, goes to two, and ends up with three? Humans. We crawl, walk, and then use a cane. The three acts of our lives.

Only after we unpacked our mistakes did we realize that they almost always took place over an extended time. Even if the frame gets frozen at the very moment of action, rarely does any event that matters occur in isolation.

Remember the definition of a mistake: a decision taken without careful consideration or self-awareness that causes regret. To really understand that mistake, you need to divide it into three parts. What happened before you made that decision? What was going on that prevented you from careful consideration or having self-awareness? And then how did you handle your regret?

This book will argue that our most important mistakes almost

invariably follow a three-act structure. Act I: what happened BEFORE the decision. Act II: what's happening DURING the time you make the decision. Act III: how you handle the regret AFTER your decision.

When people told us their stories, they started the conversation thinking that they had identified "the" mistake: their bad decision. They all started their stories in Act II. That's understandable. If you tell the story of slamming the door on your colleague, you don't usually start by explaining all the bad things that had happened in your day before the argument. Nor do you begin with saying how badly you feel about it.

As we discussed our mistakes and those of the people we interviewed, our views evolved; we came to believe that when it comes to serious mistakes, there are no one-act plays. Each serious mistake involves a bad decision, but what happens before and after can prove even more important.

That's because mistakes fall within the arc of our lives. We experience every event through the prism of what preceded it. Even on our most ordinary days we confront so many stimuli that we need a way to process them without having to figure them out afresh each time. We use previous examples that help us make sense of what we're seeing, and we consolidate those experiences into mental models.

How, we wondered, does that history shape our perceptions, emotions, and reactions in ways that can lead to mistakes?

2

Know Thy Schema

In 1981, psychologists William Brewer and James Treyens performed an experiment that showed how much our pasts shape our perceptions. They told their volunteers that before the experiment "began," they had to wait in an office while someone else finished. After a brief stop in the office, the volunteers took a memory test of what they saw inside it. The subjects hadn't realized that the experiment was actually a test of what they remembered.[1]

The volunteers were much more likely to remember things that they thought belonged in an office than the objects that didn't belong in a typical one. And they remembered objects such as books that weren't even in the office. They had a visual "template" for how an office should appear that overrode what they actually saw. The template came from the volunteers' memories and experiences of seeing many different offices. Through those experiences, they developed and remembered a prototypical office, which they applied to the real world. As Henry David Thoreau wrote, "The question is not what you look at, but what you see."[2]