

#1 *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHN C.
MAXWELL

SOMETIMES YOU

WIN

SOMETIMES YOU

LOSE
LEARN

LIFE'S GREATEST LESSONS
ARE GAINED *from* OUR LOSSES



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GAINED FROM OUR LOSSES

JOHN C. MAXWELL



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To Paul Martinelli, Scott Fay, and the thousands of coaches around the world who are part of The John Maxwell Team:

You share my heart.

You communicate my values.

You live out my vision.

You are adding value to others far beyond my hopes and expectations.

Thank you for creating a legacy for me while I'm still around to see it.

[A Note from the Author](#)

For many years, I had the opportunity of meeting regularly with former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden. I'd spend a day preparing to meet with him, deciding what questions I would ask. I was very conscious of how rare a privilege it was to learn from a mentor such as him.

Coach was always so kind and thoughtful. The last time I met with him, he asked me what I was working on. I had just finished the outline for *Sometimes You Win—Sometimes You Learn*, and I was very excited about it. I took the pages from my briefcase and showed them to him, detailing the thesis and what had prompted me to write it.

“What a tremendous idea. You can help people with this,” said Coach. Then he really surprised me. He asked, “Can I write the foreword for it?”

What an honor! Of course I said yes.

Coach wrote the foreword as promised, and a few months later he died. I was very humbled, realizing that this was one of the last things he probably wrote.

The world of book writing is a funny thing. My publisher decided that they wanted me to write *The 5 Levels of Leadership* first, then *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth*. During that time, this book had to wait. After a delay of a couple of years, I finally got to write it.

So that's the story of how John Wooden came to write the following foreword. I am grateful for his thoughts. He may have gone on before us, but he is surely not forgotten.

Foreword by Coach John Wooden

John C. Maxwell is a man I am proud to call my friend.

It isn't just that he has authored more than fifty books on leadership and character, though that is pretty impressive. It isn't just that his words of encouragement have inspired millions of people to reevaluate their choices and priorities, though that is important. It isn't just that he is a man of principles and faith, though those are admirable qualities. I am proud to call John my friend because he is a man who understands that above all things, life is about learning—and about using those lessons to become a better employer, better employee, better parent, better sibling, better friend, better neighbor, better steward of our blessings.

This philosophy has been the bedrock of my own life, and I credit John with always serving as a wonderful reminder of how much more learning can be done. I never saw myself as a coach but rather as a teacher whose primary classroom was the basketball court. But I also understood that I was an eternal student, as well. I have tried every day to learn something new, to gain a different perspective, or to harbor a more mature understanding of the world. That way of thinking is what keeps a mind young, optimistic, and joyful. Every time John would visit me, his yellow legal pad covered with the questions he planned to ask me, I always got a chuckle at the sight of one of the professional world's leading answer men still eager for deeper insights and still willing to ask questions to gain them. It was a wonderful reminder that I should do the same.

After all, learning isn't something that stops when we are handed a diploma. In fact, that's actually the point when the real learning begins. The lessons we are given in school are not the things that carry us through life; those are just the lessons that give us the basic tools to face the real world outside the classroom walls. And that real world is going to sting. It is going to hurt. Sometimes it is going to bump and bruise you; other times

it is going to knock you off your feet. The losses are going to come at you in every shape and size, and hit you in every area of your life from your finances to your heart to your health, and more—that much is guaranteed. What is not guaranteed is how you react to those challenges.

As John discusses in this book, there is a marked difference between the people who learn from their losses and the people who do not. Do you want your spirit stuck in the infirmary, too battle weary for another try? Or do you want to seize the opportunity to study, evaluate, and reconsider what happened—and use that knowledge to arm yourself for another charge at life?

The elements of learning that John outlines in the following pages are profound observations as to how the process happens, and he pinpoints what character trait or attribute comes from each. By dissecting the “DNA of those who learn,” as he so succinctly puts it, John walks us through the necessary components of dealing with different types of loss and turning those lessons into valuable weapons both to ward off and fight through future challenges.

I would challenge anyone who has ever suffered a setback, felt disappointment, or been the recipient of bad news (in other words, every human who has ever walked the earth) to read John’s message and not find at least one insight that can drastically change his or her own perspective on life’s darker moments.

If we follow John’s advice and learn to look at losses as opportunities for growth through learning, then we become undefeatable. Life will always be fraught with loss, but if we are properly armed, the loss will not overcome us. Because the man or woman who takes something worthwhile from the bad times strips them of their control over our minds, bodies, hearts, and souls.

These pages offer more than just a how-to manual for getting through difficult times; they offer the most valuable gift of all: hope.

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When You're Losing, Everything Hurts

My friend Robert Schuller once asked, “What would you attempt to do if you knew you wouldn’t fail?” That’s a great question, an inspiring question. When most people hear it, they start dreaming again. They are motivated to reach for their goals and to risk more.

I have a question that I think is just as important: what do you learn when you fail?

While people are usually ready to talk about their dreams, they are not well prepared to answer a question about their shortcomings. Most people don’t like to talk about their mistakes and failures. They don’t want to confront their losses. They are embarrassed by them. And when they do find themselves falling short, they may find themselves saying something trite, such as “Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.” The message is, “Hope to win, expect to lose, and live with the results either way.”

What’s wrong with that? It’s not how winners think!

Successful people approach losing differently. They don’t try to brush failure under the rug. They don’t run away from their losses. Their attitude is never *Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose*. Instead they think, *Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn*. They understand that life’s greatest lessons are gained from our losses—if we approach them the right way.

This One Really Hurt

I’ve experienced many wins in life, but I’ve also had more than my share

of losses. Some losses came through no fault of my own. However, many were of my own making, coming from bad choices and dumb mistakes. On March 12, 2009, I made the mother of all stupid mistakes. I tried to go through security at a major airport with a forgotten handgun in my briefcase. That is a federal offense! It was by far the dumbest thing I've ever done. Here's how it came about.

The previous Saturday, I was in Birmingham, Alabama, speaking at the Church of the Highlands. It's a wonderful church with a marvelous leader named Chris Hodges. He is a good friend who serves on the board of EQUIP, the not-for-profit organization I founded to teach leadership internationally. Chris's people are fantastic, and I had a terrific time with them that weekend.

Many times when I have a speaking engagement, I fly commercially. But whenever the engagement isn't far away from home and it means that I would be able to come home and sleep in my own bed, I try to fly on a private airplane. That was the case following my time with Chris in Birmingham.

As I was about to get on the plane at the general aviation airport to fly home, a friend of Chris's who had ridden with us wanted to give me a gift: a Beretta pistol.

"This is for Margaret," he said, "so she can feel safe when you're traveling."

I have friends who know a lot about guns. Some do a lot of hunting. And I've gone hunting with friends several times. I've shot rifles and shotguns, but I don't really know a lot about guns. And to be honest, they don't have great interest to me. I'm not really pro- or antigun. I just don't think a lot about them. And I'm not a technical person. But I knew this pistol had been given as a gift from the heart, so I accepted it and put it in my briefcase.

After we landed, the pilot remarked on what a nice gun it was. And he asked me, "Do you know how to load it?"

"I have no idea," I answered.

"Let me do it for you," he said.

He loaded the gun, made sure it was secure, and gave it back to me. I put it back in my briefcase and went home.

And then I forgot all about it.

The next several days were very busy for me. I had a commitment to speak to a large group in Dallas, and I was entirely focused on getting

ready for it. There was one brief moment while I was working on my lesson when I thought to myself, *Oh, I need to remember to get that gun out of my bag.* But I was in the middle of writing, and I didn't want to stop because I was on a roll. So I thought, *I'll do it later.*

Time passed. Life was busy. I kept working. And before I knew it, Thursday morning rolled around and off I went to the airport.

If you're my age, you may remember a cartoon character named Mr. Magoo. He was a man who seemed to wander from danger to danger without ever getting hurt. Some of my friends used to call me Mr. Magoo. (If you're not old enough to know Mr. Magoo, maybe you remember Forrest Gump. Friends have called me that, too.)

On that Thursday, in my worst Mr. Magoo moment, I strolled right up to security and dropped my briefcase on the conveyer belt. Just as I was about to walk through the metal detector, I remembered the gun.

In a panic I blurted out, "There's a gun in there! There's a gun in there!"

Truly, it is one of the stupidest things I have ever done. I felt like an idiot. And to make matters worse, many of the people who were at the security checkpoint knew me, including the man who operated the screening device. He said, "Mr. Maxwell, I am sorry but I will have to report this." Trust me, that came as no surprise. They stopped everything, shut down the conveyor belt, handcuffed me, and took me away.

It turned out that the head of the sheriff's division who filled out the police report knew me too. He was all business for about an hour. But then after we had completed the procedure, he turned to me, smiled, and said, "I love your books. If I had known we would meet up like this, I would have brought them here for you to sign."

"If you could get me out of this mess, I'd give you signed books for the rest of your life," I replied.

The man who took my mug shot knew me. When they brought me into the room where he worked, he said, "Mr. Maxwell, what are you doing here?"

He took the handcuffs off of me and told the officer that I didn't need them.

Needless to say, when he took my picture, I didn't smile.

Assessing the Loss

Immediately after being released on bail, I met my attorney, who said,

“Our main goal is to keep this quiet.”

“That’s impossible,” I responded, telling him of all the people I encountered who knew me during the entire ordeal. Sure enough, the news broke that evening. In order to let people know what happened and to minimize publicity damage, before the news broke I tweeted the following message: *Definition of Stupid: Receive a gun as a gift; Forget it’s in carry-on and go to the airport. Security not happy!*

Too often in my life I have not been careful enough. I knew better than to put a gun in my briefcase. Immediately after security found the gun, I began silently lecturing myself about my carelessness. The words of Hugh Prather fit me perfectly: “I sometimes react to making a mistake as if I have betrayed myself. My fear of making a mistake seems to be based on the hidden assumption that I am potentially perfect, and that if I can just be very careful I will not fall from heaven. But a mistake is a declaration of the way I am, a jolt to the way I intend, a reminder that I am not dealing with facts. When I have listened to my mistakes, I have grown.”

“When I have listened to my mistakes, I have grown.”

—Hugh Prather

The words *be careful* have been my takeaway from this experience. Mistakes are acceptable as long as the damage isn’t too great. Or as they say in Texas, “It doesn’t matter how much milk you spill as long as you don’t lose your cow!”

I am convinced that we are all one step away from stupid. I could have “lost my cow” because of this incident. None of us does life so well that we are far away from doing something dumb. And what it has taken a lifetime to build has the potential to be lost in a moment. My hope was that a lifetime of striving to live with integrity would outweigh an act of stupidity.

Fortunately, as soon as the story became public, my friends started to rally around me and support me. Because I knew that people would begin asking questions about it, I immediately wrote about it on my blog, JohnMaxwellonLeadership.com, in a post called “Stupid Is as Stupid Does.” The supportive response from people was overwhelming. Their words of encouragement and prayers certainly lifted my spirit.

Other friends took a more humorous approach to me. When I went to

speak at the Crystal Cathedral, Gretchen Schuller said, “John, security wants to pat you down before you speak.” Bill Hybels wrote me a note that said, “No sex? No money scandal? Boring...” Angela Williams e-mailed my assistant, Linda Eggers, with these words: “Tell John he’s my hero. His estimation has risen in my eyes. I come from a long line of ‘Bubbas.’ Lots of pistol-packing men and women. Art’s mom was arrested in the Atlanta airport in the ’80s for having a Clint Eastwood–type pistol in her large purse... she too forgot about it.” And Jessamyn West pointed out, “It is very easy to forgive others their mistakes; it takes more grit and gumption to forgive them for having witnessed your own.”

Then I started to receive people’s suggestions for the title of my next book, including:

- Developing the Gangsta within You
- 21 Irrefutable Laws of Airport Security
- The 21 Indisputable, Irrefutable Reasons Why Not to Forget Your Gun in Your Briefcase When Going to the Airport
- Leading from the Middle of the Gang
- Have Gun, Will Travel

Today, I feel very fortunate because the incident was dismissed by the court and it has been expunged from my record. I can laugh about the whole thing. In fact, not long after the ordeal, I created a reminder for myself of the fact that in life sometimes you win, sometimes you learn. I often carry it in my briefcase (instead of a gun). It’s a laminated card. On one side is the April 2009 cover of *Success Magazine*. I was featured on that cover, and I look great! Million-dollar smile. Blue suit. A posture of success and confidence. Half a million people bought that magazine, saw my picture, and read my words about success.

On the other side is my mug shot. It was taken only two weeks after the magazine came out! No million-dollar smile. No blue suit, just sweats. Poor posture and a look of complete discouragement. It just goes to show you that there’s not much distance between the penthouse and the outhouse.

Why Losses Hurt So Much

In life, sometimes you win. In my younger years I played basketball and

was very competitive. I liked to win, and I hated losing. When I was in my early twenties, I went to a class reunion, where I played in a game against other former players. We were all eager to prove we could still play at the same level, and it turned out to be a very physical game. Of course, I wanted to win, so I was very aggressive. After I knocked one opponent to the floor, he shouted in frustration, “Back off, it’s only a game!”

My reply: “Then let me win.”

I’m not exactly proud of that, but I think it illustrates how much most of us like to win. When we win, nothing hurts; when we lose, everything hurts. And the only time you hear someone use the phrase “It’s only a game” is when that person is losing.

Think of some of the losses in your life and how they made you feel. Not good. And it’s not just the pain of the moment that affects us. Our losses also cause us other difficulties. Here are a few:

1. Losses Cause Us to Be Emotionally Stuck

Author and speaker Les Brown says, “The good times we put in our pocket. The bad times we put in our heart.” I have found that to be true in my life. In my heart I still carry some of the bad times. I bet you do too. The negative experiences affect us more deeply than positive ones, and if you’re like me, you may get emotionally stuck.

“The good times we put in our pocket. The bad times we put in our heart.”
—Les Brown

Recently I experienced being emotionally stuck after I made a foolish mistake. Ron Puryear, a wonderful friend, invited me to stay a few days at his beautiful river house in Idaho so that I could get away and begin writing this book. The setting is inspiring and perfect for thinking and writing. The view overlooks a beautiful body of water with tree-covered hills in the background. It’s spectacular. Since I had speaking gigs in Spokane, Edmonton, and Los Angeles, all western cities, I decided to take him up on his offer.

My son-in-law Steve and our friend Mark were with me because they would be going with me to Edmonton, Canada. As we got into the car in

Spokane, Washington, to head for the airport, Steve asked, “Do we all have our passports?” My heart sank! I had forgotten mine!

Now, this was no simple matter of turning around and going back to get it. I was out west and my passport was in Florida, more than two thousand miles away. In six hours, I was supposed to be speaking in Edmonton. I started to feel sick. What was I going to do?

How could an experienced, international traveler like me make such a foolish error? I felt like an idiot.

Steve, Mark, my assistant Linda, and I tried to solve my problem over the next two hours. Each passing minute revealed that I had a big problem. I knew I would not be allowed to board a plane to Canada without my passport. (Trust me. I asked!) We also discovered that we could not get the passport in time via air express. Nor would a family member in Florida be able to get on a commercial flight and bring it to me in time. I would not be able to fulfill my speaking commitment that night. The situation felt impossible to solve.

Finally after a lot of work and creative thinking we found a solution. Our host in Edmonton agreed to move my evening speaking engagement from that night to the following evening. Meanwhile, we hired a private jet to fly from Florida to Spokane with my passport. In my mind was a ridiculous picture of someone placing the passport in one of the seats, as if it were a passenger. Boy, did I feel stupid.

At midnight when the plane arrived, we got on board and continued on to Edmonton. We arrived the next morning, and I was there for the next day’s meeting and the evening speaking engagement. We had made it.

The good news was that we had solved the problem. The bad news was that the price of fixing my mistake was \$20,000!

The rest of that day, I was emotionally stuck. I continually asked myself:

How could a veteran traveler like me make such a rookie mistake?

How much inconvenience did I cause the people who had to move the meeting from one night to the next?

Why didn’t I think about the passport twenty-four hours earlier so it would have cost me hundreds of dollars, instead of thousands?

What would I have done if we had not found a solution?

All these thoughts and questions exhausted me emotionally. To try to bounce back, I drank a milk shake (comfort food), went swimming, and tried to rest. But no matter what I did, I still continually kicked myself for