



## Struggle: Process And Promise

by Esther Muller and Michael Williams, Ph.D.



We struggle to live, labor, and love. Struggling is in our DNA; our nature. Often, we consider struggling unnecessary and unimportant in achieving desired goals. However, without struggle its contribution to building character goes unrecognized and lessons that can be learned from the experience unrealized. To survive we must struggle. Struggling fuels living; without it we'd perish.

Interestingly, the process and promise inherent in struggle is inconsistently emphasized in our lives. Often, struggle is associated with resilience, endurance, and commitment. Encouragements such as “keep working at it” and “practice, practice, practice” are offered to fortify our efforts in times of weakness or exhaustion. Conversely, when the path to goal achievement becomes arduous or irrelevant, others question including “is this goal right for you?” or “perhaps your vision of achievement is not worth the struggle.” While in either context end results in some form will occur, it is in establishing and working toward our goals that the value of struggle is revealed. As American social reformer and statesmen Fredrick Douglass offered “Without a struggle, there can be no progress.” If true, then struggle and managing it must be a foundational component of our plans and actions associated with achievement. Struggle offers process and promise toward realizing our visions of the future.

Let's consider self-efficacy; our ability to complete tasks and achieve goals as a process in struggling to achieve.

### Self-Efficacy

Social psychologist Alfred Bandura considered self-efficacy an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations. To Bandura, self-efficacy emanated from our belief that we can affect situations. Typically, individuals possessing a strong sense of self-efficacy exhibit the following orientations towards achievement:

- perceive challenges as opportunities and tasked to be mastered
- develop a deep interest in activities
- form a strong sense of commitment to interests and others
- recover rapidly from disappointment and failures

Common to these orientations are belief systems. What we believe formulates and constitutes our world view. Belief systems can enable or disable self-efficacy. We may be aware or unaware of beliefs we hold and their influence on our thought and behavior. As futurist Peter Senge shares “Structures of which we are unaware can hold us prisoner.”

### Sources of Self-Efficacy

Bandura identified four major sources of self-efficacy.

1. *Mastery Experiences* - Through successfully performing tasks our self-efficacy is strengthened, in turn our ability to be self-efficacious; a cycle positive self reinforcement.

2. *Social Modeling* - Witnessing others who are like us succeed through sustained effort supports our belief that we can master comparable tasks and succeed.

3. *Social Persuasion* - Persuading others that they can succeed, in turn enabling them to believe that they possess the necessary knowledge, competencies, and skills to achieve desired goals.

4. *Psychological Responses* - When under stress or facing challenging tasks, our emotional states and physical reactions can influence how we perceive and interpret our ability to succeed. Through minimizing stress and electing a favorable perspective, we can improve our sense of self-efficacy.

### The Promise of Struggle

Promise is the providence of us all. Promise is fueled by possibility; the possibility in our talents and capabilities to the world that reside in our visions of the future. Abraham Lincoln, America's 16<sup>th</sup> President is a model of the promise of struggle. President Lincoln, confident in his promise to succeed rose above his challenging beginnings by struggling to acquire the time and materials necessary to study law. Years later, reflecting on this childhood and on the occasion of giving advice to a law student said “Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.”

We recognize the presence and possibility of failure in all endeavors. However, as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote “it not things, but our view of things” that determines our perspective. President Lincoln seemed resolute in his view of the value of struggle when he said “The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just.”

Struggle enables growth and insight. Through our struggles to achieve what we desire action becomes imbued with meaning; in turn liberating our potential. The value of struggle; its process and promise cannot be underestimated. As President Lincoln eloquently and powerfully captured the value of struggle “In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years.”

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