

Teacher's Guide and Questions for Course Discussion from *The Rise* by Sarah Lewis

Themes to consider: importance of journeying, complications of solitary/challenging endeavors, difficulty of patience with long-lived tasks, “hefting” the weight of adversity, factors we can control versus those we can’t, hardship as crucible for innovation, the importance of play in our lives in order to redefine failure, embracing clumsiness, and building the potential for creative ingenuity.

Reflect on Key Quotes

1. “A paradox of innovation and mastery is that breakthroughs often occur when you start down a road, but wander off for a ways and pretend as if you have just begun”(143).
2. Lewis tells the story of celebrated physicist Andre Geim, who structures freeform, playful experiments into his weekly schedule: “Out of the two dozen or so attempted Friday Night Experiments, many have been near wins, such as one attempting to find the “heartbeats” of unique yeast cells, in which they detected no pulse or electrical signals, but noticed that when threatened, yeast emitted what the physicists jokingly called “the last fart of a living cell...” The third FNE hit was the Nobel Prize-winning isolation of graphene”(147).
3. “Experience is what gets you through the door. But experience also closes the door...you tend to rely on what has worked before. You don’t try anything anew. Without off-road exploration, we have little way of figuring it out”(151).
4. “That’s been the biggest barrier—people see it as the opposite of work, as something childlike...but play is actually the opposite of depression, since depression is being numb to possibilities”(Lewis, quoting marketing and design executive Ivy Ross, 159).
5. Key quote: “People driven by a pursuit that puts them on the edges are often not on the periphery, but on the frontier, testing the limits of what it is possible to withstand and discover”(64).
6. Key Quote: “pain is not a punishment, and pleasure is not a reward. You could argue that failure is not punishment and success is not reward. They’re just failure and success. You *can* choose how you respond” (Lewis, per Colonna, 78)
7. Key quote: “When you surrender enough, you feel the heft of a situation or an environment and can better judge how to move it”(73).

Guiding Questions

Topic 1: Work and Play

1. What do you consider your “work?” What do you consider your “play?” Is the dichotomy between those two things a false one?
2. What questions do you want to answer? What problems do you want to solve? How can you create a laboratory of sorts in order to grapple with your questions, your problems?
3. When was the last time you failed at something....and gave up? And continued going? What were the stakes in those situations?

4. If there were no grades, paychecks, or evaluations to worry about, what would you do with your time?
5. Does US university culture encourage “productive play?” Why or why not? How can we build productive play into our lives?
 1. How is your college different from other schools? What is your college’s definition of “productive play”?
6. Would you agree, as Lewis quotes one of her interviewees, that we can “choose” how we respond to success and failure? Are those terms just subjective after all?
7. What kinds of stories can we tell about our “failed” endeavors? What story do you want to tell about your unfolding future?

Topic 2: Life on the frontier

1. Lewis illustrates the concept of inhabiting the frontier through the story of Arctic explorer Ben Saunders, who quit his job to devote his time to polar expeditions, “to unearth a capacity within himself to shatter his own geography of human limits”(64). He nearly died on his first two trips, and failed to reach the North Pole. He lost sponsors, had no steady income, and was living at home for nearly a year before he reached his goal. Many of us think pursuing a dream so doggedly is crazy, but is it worth it? What are the benefits of remaining on the “frontier?” What are the costs?
2. Not all of us are Arctic explorers. What are the difficult terrains in our own lives? Does our culture (our American culture, our university’s culture) encourage, or discourage us to inhabit these spaces?
3. The periphery can be a lonely place; whether we’re in a groundbreaking genomics lab or climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, we occupy a world outside the scope of many people’s experience. Does being alone make it more difficult to achieve our goals? Is there a specific personality suited for the solitary endeavor?

Topic 3: Negative Drift

1. “Negative drift” is the technical phrase for the ground lost on a hike like Saunders’ due to the migration of the polar ice sheets he traverses. While he may move forward 10 miles, the sheet may drift 9 miles in the opposite direction, leaving him with little to show for his work. We all face obstacles to our goals, obstacles we cannot change. How can we cease to be frustrated, or “burnt out”, and instead incorporate them into our reality?
2. How can we distinguish the true barriers to our achievement from mere roadblocks in the way? Are adversity, failure, and “plateaus” objective realities, or can we (often/always) leverage them for our advantage?
3. Lewis talks about practicing “equanimity,” or connectedness with the things we can change and those we can’t in our lives. What is the boundary between recognition of “negative drift” and a complacency that numbs us to action? We might connect this interplay of environment and effort with the Civil Rights Movement of a few decades past or, indeed, the conversations about race and justice in our country at present. What is the balance between acceptance and resistance in these situations?
4. Lewis writes: “Surrendering is...giving yourself over to another mode of being”(75). Do you agree? Is the word “surrender” problematic?

Topic 4: Redefining Failure

1. We often re-appropriate failure in hindsight; we call it a learning experience or a childish mistake, incorporating it into our personal narrative in some productive way. For example, Saunders said of his first expedition, in which he was life-flighted, near death, before reaching the North Pole: “This hasn’t been a giant failure. In many senses, I’ve got an enormous amount of experience under my belt, a very hard-won first experience and, actually, I’ve come closer to achieving the skill than anyone in my position on the planet. I just haven’t quite finished it, so I need to get back out there and get on the job”(Lewis, quoting Saunders, 83). How do the stories we tell about failure, whether to ourselves or aloud, change our approach to them?
2. How can we liberate ourselves and our definitions of success/failure from external approval? We are caught in the human need for affirmation from others, as well as the educational and professional systems that inherently reward certain outcomes and punish others. Can we totally disregard those institutions? Is there room to recognize the value of radical self-enquiry?
3. Is the age of explorers gone? Are these only romantic stories, or can we identify grueling difficulty of this caliber in ongoing efforts today?

Topic 5: The Rewards of True Grit

1. Key quote: “Grit is focused moxie, *aided* by a sustained response in the face of adversity...if we fail to cultivate grit, it is because we often grant little importance to the practice of making and the process that it can teach us through our lives”(170, 192).
2. When does the “dogged pursuit,” as per Saunders, become “dysfunctional persistence?”(168). In other words, how much failure is too much? When do we close the door?
3. The psychological studies of Angela Duckworth suggest that grit, more so than IQ, talent, or other assets, is the best indicator of an individual’s future success (Lewis 169). Are you and your peers cultivating your grit? In the high-performance culture of a university, students look for positive reinforcement—grades, praise from professors, that top job offer. Are we passing up more unwelcoming paths for that which appears more traveled? Why?
4. Lewis argues there is something valuable down the road not taken, that grit turns “development” into “discovery.” How do our surroundings influence our energy? What type of people and environment might we seek in order to produce strength, achievement, innovation? Is there a creative benefit to adversity, to the grit engendered?

*Reading Group Guide and Questions for Course Discussion from
The Rise by Sarah Lewis developed by Bailey Sincox at Duke University.*

This guide has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.