If you were to ask me where I’ve spent the most time, I would probably tell you second place. There’s a box in my basement containing a rainbow of participation ribbons, plastic dollar-store trophies, and “You tried!” certificates. Not every paper I’ve turned in to a teacher has come back with a gold star. And somehow, I’m most proud to tell of all the times I didn’t hear my name called, followed by thunderous applause. Why? Because this is proof that I have failed in the best way possible—by going out of my comfort zone.

When I was in the seventh grade, a benevolent adult in my life encouraged me to take part in a speech competition. Painfully shy and still struggling with a speech impediment, I initially balked at the idea but decided to give it a shot. I spent hours writing, memorizing, and practicing a three minute speech on how to be a good babysitter. On the day of the contest, I stood nervously in front of three judges and a group of other participants. I managed to get through the speech, only stumbling over my words once. Applause chased me back to my seat as I finished, the tiniest spark of satisfaction lighting up inside me. At the awards ceremony a few hours later, I waited for my name to be called—and waited, and waited, and waited. Did I win? No. I was fourteenth out of about thirty-two students. On the ride back home, however, I realized that the feelings of disappointment I had been prepared for—expecting, really—didn’t come. Sure, I hadn’t won, but during the weeks of preparation for the competition, I had grown infinitely more confident in my public speaking abilities.

A few years later, at the age of sixteen, I decided to take up dancing. Competitive dancing, to be exact. Having very little experience, I once again didn’t know what I was getting into. During the first number of the first competition, I ran out onstage at the wrong
time, bumped into someone else, and missed my cue to come in. I'm fairly certain that the blush I was wearing was unnecessary for the rest of the day. But the competition went on, and I went back on stage. I had to learn to get back in the game and smile my heart out at those judges, pretending they hadn’t seen me let my entire studio down less than an hour earlier. Over the next few years in dance, both I and my teachers learned that putting me front and center might not be the best idea, and I found myself okay with that. I might be in the back of the group, but the point is that I’m still on the stage.

People tend to shy away from failure. We’re taught from an early age to strive for perfection: the runner-up in the playground race doesn’t receive slaps on the back when filing back into the classroom, and only A+ papers are immortalized on the fridge. This has led to a generation being crippled by the fear of “messing up” or not being “good” enough. Our imaginations and hidden talents never come to the surface because we’re afraid we can’t measure up to someone else. But I’ve learned infinitely more from my failures than my successes. Sure, I’m a connoisseur of second place, and I’m happy to stay there, because I know where the real learning happens.

So this is my advice: mess up. Try new things. Let your cheeks become permanently red, as long as your stomach is sore from laughing about it later. If you trip (and you’re going to trip) make sure it’s over the edge of your comfort zone.