As a public speaker, my goal is to entertain the audience and provide them with a few serious takeaways, usually on the subject of failure. I believe humor can be an important tool in dealing with failure. However, time must pass. I’d like to share an experience I had five years ago while living in New York City doing standup comedy. Actually, before I jump to New York, I want to back up and explain how I got into comedy.

In college, I was on the wrestling team. Before practice, my teammates and I would sit around the training room and try to make each other laugh, primarily to distract ourselves from the misery we were about to endure. I often had the most to contribute during these sessions.

Once, my friend Chip Bunner and I thought it would be funny to order a pizza to the wrestling room for our heavyweight, Bobby Henderson. Around the middle of practice, the delivery guy entered the wrestling room, and walked across the mat in his uniform, holding a large pizza. The exchange between our no-nonsense, grizzled coach and the poor pizza guy was pretty brief.

“What are you doing here?”

“I have a pizza, sir”

“For who?”

“Henderson, sir.”

“Henderson?!!! Does he look like he needs a #$%in pizza?. Get the #$%@ outta here”

One of the older guys on the wrestling team thought I was pretty funny and convinced me to enter a contest at the local comedy club. I stacked the audience with a bunch of my friends and won. I did comedy a few more times in college, but I was more focused on wrestling and school. Upon graduation, I thought about becoming a comedian, but I was nervous about jumping into something so nebulous. I took a job in sales with Procter & Gamble. During my ten-year career at P&G, I moonlighted off and on as a comedian.

Towards the end of my P&G tenure, I began to realize that I probably didn’t have as much passion as I should for the grocery business. One morning, I was in the waiting room of a large grocery chain headquarters, preparing to see the buyer to completely revamp our Pringles business. If the call succeeded, it would be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. I tried to focus on what I was going say but my mind kept wandering to a TV show I had watched the previous evening. It was the first of a two-part episode of the show *Renegade* on the *USA Network.* The main character, Reno Raines appeared to have died at the end of the episode. Instead of focusing on my big pitch, I kept wondering if they were really going to kill off Reno. I mean, how could there be a show without him? He was The Renegade. At that moment, it occurred to me that maybe I was not as committed to my job as I should have been. Soon after, I quit to become a full time comedian.

I took a 90% pay cut and I lived out of my car for a year. I moved to Los Angeles. I traveled the country. I was fortunate enough to appear on several national TV and radio shows. I experienced some big successes and equally big failures. When I was 45, I thought I needed a change of scenery to take my act to the next level. I moved to New York City.

Three years later, I was living in Queens in a two-bedroom, 400 square foot apartment with a roommate, 20 years my junior. I was uncomfortable, but I was definitely honing my craft. One day, I had a commercial audition in Manhattan that did not go well. I don’t remember the specifics other than I stumbled over the copy. I got on the subway to go back home to Queens.

When I first got to NYC, I genuinely enjoyed riding the subway. It was unfamiliar and new and there were always interesting characters. A few years later, the train had lost quite a bit of its’ luster. It never arrived on time. The stations were dirty and extremely hot in the summer. (I don’t know a lot about fashion but I’m pretty sure “sweating in jeans” is one of my worst looks.) I began to dread the “interesting characters”. They usually wanted money. Some danced; some sang; some just asked for the money. Some demanded the money. (The dancing was actually pretty good, but some days you are just not in the mood to see dancing.)

After the failed audition, I wasn’t in the mood for any characters. I remember saying to myself, “I would be so grateful if I could just ride in silence for five minutes.” Three minutes later, a lady got on the train and started to sing. She was not a good singer. These were her lyrics: *“All I want for Christmas is a Fish Sandwich. All I want for Christmas is a Fish Sandwich. All I want for Christmas is a Fish Sandwich.”* I was irritated and despondent. I hated the lady. I hated the fact that I just did terrible at an audition. I hated the subway. All of those separate hates comingled into one big “I hate New York”.

I didn’t think anything more about the lady and her Christmas wish until a week later while I was writing in a coffee shop. Writing comedy is tricky. It’s hard to sit down and answer the question, “What is funny?” Through trial and error, I’ve learned to start with, “What interrupted the continuum of the day?” Sometimes, I can turn that into something funny. So I’m writing in my journal thinking, “What did I do yesterday…what did I do last week…who did I meet…how did I feel...well, there was that fish sandwich lady…that was certainly different…not funny…but different.”

I wound up writing a pretty good bit about the whole experience. My latest CD is actually called “Fish Sandwich”.

When I was on that train and that woman was singing, I saw absolutely zero humor in the situation. A week later, I thought it might be somewhat interesting. A month later I tried it on stage. A year later I put it on a CD. Two years later, it was the key bit in a comedy special.

At some point, we all fail. We become disappointed, defeated and sometimes depressed. It is important during these times to consider the fact that in the future, we may have a different perspective on our failures. They may not turn out to be the defining moments of our career. We may actually look back and find humor in them. We will be able to find humor in these events because we will be on to something much bigger and better. The Fish Sandwich Lady was annoying. She came along at a time when I was down on myself. Time passed. She became the centerpiece of my act. If anybody knows where she is, I owe her several fish sandwiches.