The Unexpected Antidote to Procrastination
by Peter Bregman

A recent early morning hike in Malibu, California, led me to a beach, where I sat on a rock and watched surfers. I marveled at these courageous men and women who woke before dawn, endured freezing water, paddled through barreling waves, and even risked shark attacks, all for the sake of, maybe, catching an epic ride.

After about 15 minutes, it was easy to tell the surfers apart by their style of surfing, their handling of the board, their skill, and their playfulness.

What really struck me though, was what they had in common. No matter how good, how experienced, how graceful they were on the wave, every surfer ended their ride in precisely the same way: By falling.

Some had fun with their fall, while others tried desperately to avoid it. And not all falls were failures — some fell into the water only when their wave fizzled and their ride ended.

But here's what I found most interesting: The only difference between a failure and a fizzle was the element of surprise. In all cases, the surfer ends up in the water. There's no other possible way to wrap up a ride.

That got me thinking: What if we all lived life like a surfer on a wave?

The answer that kept coming to me was that we would take more risks.

That difficult conversation with your boss (or employee, or colleague, or partner, or spouse) that you've been avoiding? You'd initiate it.

That proposal (or article, or book, or email) you've been putting off? You'd start it.

That new business (or product, or sales strategy, or investment) you've been overanalyzing? You'd follow through.

And when you fell — because if you take risks, you will fall — you'd get back on the board and paddle back into the surf. That's what every single one of the surfers did.

So why don't we live life that way? Why don't we accept falling — even if it's a failure — as part of the ride?

Because we're afraid of feeling.

Think about it: In all those situations, our greatest fear is that we will feel something unpleasant.

What if you have that scary conversation you've been avoiding and it ends the relationship? It would hurt.

What if you follow through on the business idea and lose money? It would feel terrible.

What if you submitted the proposal and you were rejected? It would feel awful.

Here's the thing: More often than not, our fear doesn't help us avoid the feelings; it simply subjects us to them for an agonizingly long time. We feel the suffering of procrastination, or the frustration of a stuck relationship. I know partnerships that drag along painfully for years because no one is willing to speak about the elephant in the room. Taking risks, and falling, is not something to avoid. It's something to cultivate. But how?

Practice.

Which you get by taking risks, feeling whatever you end up feeling, recognizing that it didn't kill you, and then getting on the board and paddling back into the surf.

Have that difficult conversation. Listen without defensiveness when your colleague criticizes you. Name the elephant in the room. Get rejected.

And feel it all. Feel the anticipation of the risk. Feel the pre-risk cringe. Then, during the risk, and after, take a deep breath and feel that too.

You'll become familiar with those feelings and, believe it or not, you'll start to enjoy them. Even the ones you think of as unpleasant. Because feeling is what tells you you're alive.

You know that sensation you get after you've done or said something weird or awkward? How you turn around and kind of wince in embarrassment? Next time that happens, take a moment to really feel it.

When you do, you'll realize it's not so bad. Maybe you'll admit, "I don't know why I just said that," and apologize. Then maybe you'll both laugh it off. Or maybe you'll get into that conversation you've been avoiding for years but you know you need to have.

Soon, you won't fear feeling. You'll pursue it like those courageous early morning surfers. You'll wake up before dawn and dive into those scary conversations and difficult proposals. You'll take the risks that once scared you. And you'll fall; sometimes you'll even fail.

Then you'll get up and do it again.