Driven by dreams

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.

LAST WEEK, I mentioned the tales of Tesla’s CEO Elon Musk and Amazon’s founder Jeff Bezos; both men who invested hundreds of millions of their own money to pursue their dreams of space exploration.

Like Musk, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos has also been a big fan of space exploration since he was a kid.

As a teenager, Bezos created an education camp for younger kids, called the Dream Institute — where children were encouraged to read books such as The Lord of the Rings, Treasure Island, The Once and Future King, and much more as a way to enrich their imagination.

Bezos himself is always full of imagination; he quit his job as a senior vice president at a hedge fund, and founded Amazon at the dawn of the age of the internet.

Using the riches he earned from Amazon, Bezos founded Blue Origin, an aerospace research and development company working on spacecraft and launch system in 2000, which has cost him hundreds of millions of dollars in failed launch attempts.

Indeed, Amazon is also well known for its big money failures, such as the Fire Phone and the Fire TV, but that never stopped him from trying.

As he said: “Failure comes part and parcel with invention. It’s not optional. We understand that and believe in failing early and iterating until we get it right.” I believe this is his secret to success.

Today, Amazon is one of the most successful companies in the world.

Many consider Musk and Bezos winners in life, but the truth is both have failed many, many times before they emerged victorious in their quests.

Their dreams of space exploration drove their adventures forward, and the fortune they made as successful entrepreneurs only add more fuel to them to pursue their dreams.

In Hong Kong, we often hear people say that one needs money in order to have a dream, and to do so, many would pick a “stable” career over risk-taking. They do not see the changing world as a possibility for them or for Hong Kong, and sometimes those who have dreams are afraid to pursue them as they do not want to be ridiculed by their peers or society.

What is often overlooked in this rhetoric is that “stability” itself has become a nebulous expression in today’s fast-changing, technology-driven world.

Typewriters, cell phones, and even notebook computers have seen their prominence taken away from them mercilessly with the advent of new technologies.

When one makes his career choice, instead of only pursuing “stability,” one could also consider choosing “impact” and “dream.” Dreams can be the engine to take us far, but only if we dare to do so.