

Inspiring Tales of Failure

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When I was a child, I found myself forced to sit through an entire church service – I think it was summer, no Sunday School, no RE wing to escape to. The subject of the sermon was failure, and I'll never forget it. The main message was there's no such thing as failure. There's only not trying. I could grasp that as an 11-year old, or however old I was. When we're kids, we're asked to succeed a lot; we're not asked to fail, but we should be. We should know that option is open to us.

What this minister was saying in his sermon is that it doesn't matter as much what the outcome is, it matters that we are a part of the process of something, that we participate, that this is more important than anything. And at a young age, this is absolutely true. I won't be a total Pollyanna, however, it's true as you get older, it does matter more and more what the outcome is. But it's a message of courage; just have courage, it doesn't matter if you win or lose, it matters that you try at the things you're drawn to, that you get to know yourself by figuring out what you're good at, and what you're not good at.

When I was an intern minister 2003 – 2004 in Austin, TX, one thing that helped me greatly was to know I had "permission to fail." That was my supervisor's phrase, and it was perhaps the most attractive thing about this church for internship, because it seemed to turn failure on its head and take the sting out of it. It was okay to fail! In fact, it was expected. Failure didn't seem like such a specter then; instead of walking on egg-shells trying to do everything right, I could just be myself.

Of course my supervisor was not shy about telling me when I failed. Mostly this had to do with the first drafts of sermons, which he proof-read before delivery. I pretty much failed all of first semester with my preaching; I just didn't get what I was failing to do. But I finally succeeded with the sermon I delivered at the very beginning of the New Year. I had an "a-ha!" experience, and I finally got it. I doubt I ever would have understood what I was doing wrong, what was missing, unless someone wasn't kind enough to tell me how I was failing - over and over.

And now I'm a working minister delivering a sermon on the topic of failure. If I fail at a sermon on failure, is that a success? I'll worry about that later.

What are some of your most prized failures? The failures from which you learned and grew, the failures that eventually led you to success? *Which failures do you still need to learn from?* At the beginning of a New Year, it may be these areas of our lives that we resolve to do something about. Maybe we've failed to maintain our health, or spend enough time with certain family members. Maybe we've failed to nurture our creative sides. Maybe we've failed to reach some kind of cherished ideal.

We tend to forget, though, that ideals aren't meant to be reached. We set high ideals to remind ourselves of what we want to be close to, our highest aspirations. We set our sights high to push ourselves to go higher, but there's no need to actually arrive at the highest point. Setting high goals is not about getting down on ourselves when we don't achieve them. It's like getting out in the country with a clear view of the night sky and finding the North Star again. It's a re-centering. It feels necessary to make *some* move toward it, but we'll never *reach* the North Star, or our highest ideals.

The truth is, that, most of the time, we are off-course. The nature of the world and of us is one of imperfection, of never quite getting it together.

Perhaps some of you remember when, 30 years ago, the commercial plane *The Concorde*, began flying across the Atlantic for the first time in less than 4 hours. Because of its phenomenal speed, the course was actually maintained by two computers, one to take course readings every few seconds, and one to correct the course when it was going off-course. A passenger touring the plane asked the pilot, "what percentage of the time is the plane off-course?" The pilot smiled, and replied, "About 99 percent of the time, sir."

This story was taken from Rachel Remen's collection, the medical doctor who writes beautiful stories about healing.¹ She asks, "Might it be possible to focus ourselves on the purpose we wish to serve in the same way... [as] the *Concorde*? Once we stopped demanding of ourselves that we be on course all the time, we might begin to look at our mistakes differently, giving them... a frictionless response. *They will not prevent us from reaching our dreams nearly so much as wanting to be right will.* [my italics]

Those who have the courage to offer us honesty, to be our navigators, might even come to be seen as worthy of... gratitude... 'You are off-course,' they might tell us. 'Why, THANK you,' we might reply. "

She goes on to say, "Serving anything worthwhile is a commitment to a direction over time and may require us to relinquish many moment-to-moment attachments, to let go of pride, approval, recognition, or even success. This is true whether we be parents, researchers, educators, artists, or heads of state. Serving life may require a faithfulness to purpose that lasts over a lifetime. It is less a work of the ego than a choice of the soul."

"Soul" is a loaded word, so it might be helpful if I define it. When I use the word soul, I'm referring to the divine spark that is in each of us, that connects us to something much larger than our finite selves. The soul contains the self-knowledge that is true, that we can trust. The soul not only has your best interests at heart, it contains the wisdom of the collective unconscious, to use a Jungian term. In short, the soul knows best how to live.

If we're allowing our *souls* to choose a destination, it is easier to take in stride our failures along the way. We get in trouble when we make the *ideals of the world* our destination. We have to ask, what are the ideals of my soul? Am I trying to succeed in becoming more human, more whole? Do I do what I love? Do I know what my gifts are, and does it offer some gifts to others? These are the questions I don't think anyone can answer for us. When we forfeit these questions to the generic ideals of the world, we risk serving the ego rather than the soul.

While they don't have to be the gifts the world wants, we do need to offer the world something; but it has to be what we are able to offer. Nobody gets all the gifts, and there's wisdom in being delighted with the few we've got - loving to use them and offer what little we have to offer. Howard Thurman, a theologian, can help us figure out what this is when he said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive."

The gifts we have, though, aren't always the ones we would choose for ourselves. There are going to be things, that, in the end, we wish we'd been better at; there are failures we regret, but there are probably some gifts we've been given too that we didn't even know we gave to others.

There was a very successful businessman named George who got diagnosed with lung cancer. He was told he didn't have much time left. He said to his therapist, "I have wasted my life... I have two ex-wives and five children. I support all of them but I don't know any of them... I don't think they'll miss me. I've nothing behind me but a lot of money."

It turns out that the business of this man was selling a gadget of medical equipment that he invented. The therapist – who was Rachel Remen - had another patient who used this device, and knew that it had completely changed her life. Her name was Stephanie. Rachel asked her if she might write a letter to the dying businessman, to thank him. The woman wanted to have him over to dinner, and he came. Rachel Remen writes,

"The week after this dinner, he sat in my office shaking his head in wonder. He had expected to have dinner with this young couple, but when he had arrived, George was welcomed by Stephanie's whole family. Her mother was there, her three brothers and sisters, several of her aunts and uncles, and a crowd of nieces, nephews, and cousins. Her husband's parents were there, too, and many of her friends

¹ [My Grandfather's Blessings](#), Rachel Remen, 2000.

and neighbors - the whole community of people who had sustained her in the years she was an invalid. They had decorated the little house with crepe paper, and everyone had cooked. It was an extraordinary meal and a wonderful celebration.

But George told Rachel that wasn't the most important part. George said, "'They had really come to tell me a story; they had each played a part in it and had a different side of it to share. It took them over three hours to tell it. It was the story of Stephanie's life. I cried most of the time. And at the very end, Stephanie came to me and said, 'This is really a story about you, George. We thought you needed to know.' And I did, I did.'"

Rachel asked, "'How many of these things do you make every year, George?' . . . 'close to ten thousand,' he said softly. 'I just knew the numbers, Rachel. I had no idea what they meant.'"

That kind of story asks us to measure success and failure correctly: by our effect on others, by the gifts we've shared, not necessarily by the world's standards - or maybe even our own standards. There is always the chance that our own definition of success is flawed in some way. This is why it is so important that the soul is involved in choosing our definition of success. Our minds and even our hearts may not always get it right. The soul is the sanctuary of our deepest love and our deepest passion, so in a way, the soul can't fail, if the motivation and inspiration for our actions comes from this holy place of goodness.

Here is a famous story about Moses:

He was passing through a forest and he saw a man praying. The man was saying such absurd things that Moses had to stop. What the man was saying was profane, sacrilegious. He was saying, "God, you must be feeling sometimes very alone – I can come and be always with you like a shadow. Why suffer loneliness when I am here? And I am not a useless person either – I will give you a good bath, and I will take all the lice from your hair and body..."

Lice?! Moses could not believe his ears: what is this man talking about? "And I will cook food for you – everybody likes what I cook. And I will prepare your bed and I will wash your clothes. When you are ill I will take care of you. I will be a mother to you, a wife to you, a servant, a slave – I can be all kinds of things. Just give me a hint so I can come..."

Moses stopped him and said, "What are you doing? To whom are you talking? Lice in God's hair? He needs a bath? Stop this nonsense! This is not prayer. God will be offended by you."

Looking at Moses, the man fell at his feet. He said, "I am sorry. I am an illiterate, ignorant man. I don't know how to pray. Please, you teach me!"

So Moses taught him the right way to pray, and was very happy because he had put a man on the right track. Happy, puffed up in his ego, Moses went away.

And when he was alone in the forest, a thundering voice came from the sky and said, "Moses, I have sent you into the world to bring people to me, to bridge people with me, but not to take my lovers away from me. And that's exactly what you have done. That man is one of the most intimate to me. Go back and apologize. Take your prayer back! You have destroyed the whole beauty of his dialogue. He is sincere, he is loving. His love is true. Whatsoever he was saying, he was saying from his heart, it was not a ritual. Now what you have given to him is just a ritual. He will repeat it but it will be only on the lips; it will not be coming from his being."²

Maybe the only true failure in life is to not allow ourselves to live from our deepest being. The trickiest thing about life, and about faith, is that we could be wrong. Perhaps that's why we hold back – it's better to not participate in faith, thereby avoiding the question of whether we get it right or not, whether we succeed or fail. But by making faith a non-issue, we forfeit so much, we miss out on so much.

² This story was taken word for word from Osho's *Parables for Renewal in Everyday Life*, p.59.

Much of what we conventionally define as failure, is actually blessing. How many dead-ends have you reached in life, how many closed doors, and failed relationships, have actually led to something better? Failures are so often offerings of tough love that eventually teach you to accept something new, to accept the challenge of being a better person, to succeed.

When you're told you can either succeed or fail, either way you are being challenged. Challenge is one of the nameless anchors of liberal religion, of Unitarian Universalism. We don't get a lot of religious direction; we each have to challenge ourselves to identify our own noble trajectories. When we find ourselves seriously off-course in life – when we are failing – that's our opportunity to find the north star again, to re-orient and embrace the challenge of setting a new course. It was Edwin Friedman, the brilliant family therapist, who said, "Challenge is the basic context of health and survival, of a person, of the family, of a religious organization, or even (in the course of evolution) an entire species."

The hardest part may be deciding which challenges to pour our hearts and souls into, because we can't do them all. The one we should pick is usually the thing we have the most fear about doing. We have to ask, what challenge is going to honor my life, my family, my community, my country, my planet?

You have permission to fail. You also have permission to succeed.

No matter how old you are, do not be afraid to do the things that make you come alive! Because what the world needs is people that have come alive.