

Having Faith in Failure

by Donne Hayden

One of my spiritual mentors is William Shakespeare. Although he didn't write specifically about religious subjects, his themes always dealt with questions of how should we live together, how should we treat each other, what happens if we treat each other this way or that way. So I consider him one of my spiritual mentors, especially during the period when I was unchurched and not particularly comfortable with orthodox religious teachings and doctrine.

Shakespeare wrote hundreds of sonnets, all of them are generally considered love sonnets written for some person in his life, the "dark lady" or the "young man," possibly his son who died very young. Sonnet #29 is one of those, but today, I ask you to think of it as a spiritual love poem. When the poet refers to "*thee*," think of it as the *Light* instead of a person.

"When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, / I all alone beweepe my outcast state / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries / And look upon myself and curse my fate . . . Haply I think on *thee*, and then my state, / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; / For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

SONNET 29

by William Shakespeare

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends
possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on *thee*, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth
brings

I don't know why it should be so, but often what makes sense or seems logical is not what is true. For instance, it makes sense that success would lead us humans to higher achievements. The truth is, however, that success less often leads to growth than failure does. Nothing, in fact, is quite so effective at teaching us as *failing* at something we've tried very hard to do. Nothing teaches us better, stronger, faster, harder, than "being in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." Failure that results from trying something new, or taking a risk or being creative is the most powerful learning tool we humans have.

Years ago I heard about a university professor, Dr. Jack Matston, who offered a business course at the University of Michigan called "Failure 101." In order to "pass" the class, students had to attempt a business venture so risky it was doomed to fail. For instance, each semester Matson began the class "by giving each student a bunch of Popsicle sticks and telling them to make something ridiculous that [would] never sell." Students came up things like "a hurricane-strength box kite" and "a device that supposedly allows you to identify the sections of the brain." The students then had to take that invention and try to *market* it to businesses, the goal being that they would "feel the sting of failure." If they actually managed to sell it to someone, they failed the class. Because the goal was *failure*. "If you are doing something innovative, you are going to trip and fumble," Matson said, "So the more failing you do faster, the quicker you can get to success."¹

What a *difference* that attitude would make if we had it in our schools, in our lives in general, if we weren't so consumed with the idea that we have to succeed at everything we do, and that failure is humiliating or that failure is devastating.

Great teachers and leaders in all disciplines acknowledge the importance of failure. Let me give you a few examples from the business world. For instance: "It's fine to celebrate success," says Bill Gates, "but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure." Thomas Watson, Sr. of IBM, says "the fastest way to succeed is to double your failure rate." Robert

Shapiro of Monsanto knows that “fear of failure stymies creativity.” In “The Failure-Tolerant Leader,” the authors tell us “Failure is a necessary prerequisite of invention, which requires risk taking. Failure also provides insights that cannot normally be gained from successes.”²

Chairman of the Board for CBS and Viacom, Sumner Redstone, says, “Success is not built on success. It's built on failure. It's built on frustration. Sometimes it's built on catastrophe.” A good example of this is Thomas Edison. One night in December 1914 when Edison was 67 years old, his workshop and laboratory caught fire and burned to the ground, destroying everything he had been working on for years. The next morning, Edison surveyed the smoldering ruins and told his son, “There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew.” Three weeks after the fire, Edison produced the first phonograph.³

We remember with great clarity times when we have failed. We can mark points in our lives of deepest humiliation and most growth and see how often they coincide. I don't know about you, but I have trouble sometimes remembering clearly my triumphs and successes; they fade. The most interesting parts of my life, the most interesting stories to tell about my life, have been the times when something didn't work; when I didn't achieve something, when I had to back up and start over.

As good as it feels to know we've done well, success doesn't usually result in inner change. Why would we change? We just keep doing what we've been doing as long as it succeeds. But the time line of my life is marked indelibly with certain failures; and the discomfort, the lesson, and the growth that those failures provoked are still vivid.

I am a proud person; my pride gets hurt when I fail. So some of my failures I'm not going to tell you about. There a few I will share with you and the following is one of them. (Why is it

¹ Joshua Hyatt. “Failure 101.” *Inc. Magazine*, January 1989.

² Dan Clendenin. Reflections. *The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself*. “Successful Failure.” Week of Monday, October 7, 2002.

³ Charles Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, 1978, pp. 82-83.

all right for me to share this story with you and not some others? Probably because this is something I failed at that I really didn't care much about.)

In high school geometry, I made a C for the first quarter. My stepfather, who was an accountant and valued math, found this unacceptable. So we went to see Mr. Robinson, my geometry teacher. He agreed to change my grade to a B, if, by the end of the next quarter, I completed 200 geometry proofs on my own, in addition to regular homework (keep in mind this was *before* calculators or computers). For weeks, I worked on geometry problems constantly; day and night, I labored to prove theorems. One problem stumped me; I worked on it for several days but couldn't solve it. Then one night, I dreamed the answer—solved that proof in my dream! When I woke up, I tried it and sure enough, it worked! The quarter passed, and I spent every spare minute on geometric proofs. Finally, a week before the end of the quarter I had solved only 175 problems; I knew I could not prove 25 more that last week, so I essentially gave up. I took my C in geometry, and, since I had already been grounded for most of the quarter, my dad relented and let me off the hook. Though I failed to solve the 200 problems, I learned that I have access to knowledge somewhere inside that did not come from my conscious mind. While I cannot invoke that capability at will, knowing that it is there has made a difference in the way I understand life. My biggest sense of failure here is probably the fact that I didn't finish the task.

Failure clarifies and defines success. For the first fifty years of my life, I never applied for a job that I didn't get, and I was never fired or let go from a job. Not until I was in my 50s and I decided to quit teaching and look for a different kind of job did I fail to be hired. Hmmm. This was a sobering experience, one that others are experiencing right now. I tried to figure out what was going on—was it because I was older, was it ageism? Of course, I was over-qualified for many jobs, and the economy was not good—but for whatever reason, I was not succeeding at something I had always experienced success with. The low point was probably when I got turned down for a job working in a video store. Suddenly I fully appreciated the ease with which I had

found jobs when I was young—I suddenly, *really* understood the success I had taken for granted. Emily Dickinson says “Success is counted sweetest/ by those who ne’er succeed.” Only those people who don’t succeed know how really sweet it is.

Not being able to bring myself to go back to teaching and not being able to find anything else had the effect of what Quakers call “Way opening,” in this case, “Way closing.” I felt like I was being herded—doors kept closing on all sides, and I was not able to proceed in any direction that was familiar. I couldn’t get a job of any kind. When in desperation I decided to go back to teaching, I couldn’t even get a teaching job—the only offer I got was teaching English in Korea!

Sometimes things happen that cause us to fail as a way to *force* us to grow spiritually. In my case, I got all the way to the bottom. Finally, driving back from another unsuccessful job-hunting trip, I said, “I don’t know what to do. I’ve done everything I can think of. Everything in *my* control. So show me what to do, Lord, and I’ll do it.” Having been away for three days, I came home to find one piece of mail in my mailbox—a letter from a seminary. “Are you *sure* about that?” I asked.

Once I turned in that direction, however, I couldn’t do things fast enough to get through the doors opening in front of me. It was a remarkable time when I felt led, and guided, and watched over.

A couple of examples. I had just remodeled a house in Colorado Springs. I loved that house, but I had to get to the point where I could let go of it. I lived in a neighborhood where houses had been for sale for over a year; the market was flat; nothing was selling. But when I let go of the house, I put a sign out in front of it, “For Sale.” I sold my house two days later, for cash, for my asking price. Another example of way opening: I made a trip to visit the Quaker seminary, Earlham School of Religion, in Richmond, Indiana, and my daughter went with me. Before we left ESR, both of us had two-year tuition scholarships to attend seminary.

But if I hadn’t had those two years of really hard times, when I was in “disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,” when I was a failure in my own eyes, if I hadn’t had those two years, I

couldn't have gotten to the point where I would relinquish control and say, "Show me where to go and I'll go there."

Now here is the crux of my message. We may find ourselves in situations where we fail, and fail miserably, so that we are forced to grow. One writer suggests that "the more we mature the tougher the spiritual life gets," and that difficulties may be a sign of spiritual maturity.⁴ In other words, the more we achieve, the higher the bar is raised to challenge us. We are pushed beyond what we already know, pushed into areas where we will most probably fail because it is only there that we encounter experiences that stimulate us to grow. We may find ourselves failing repeatedly at the secular level because our soul requires growth it cannot find in the safe and familiar ruts we've dug for ourselves. Those ruts of security and safety give us the *illusion* of certainty and that removes our capacity for faith. Who needs faith when we have certainty? Finding ourselves in risky, challenging, scary places, we may re-discover a relationship with something greater than ourselves, with an Inner Teacher. We may find that "haply when [we] think on that Inner Teacher, / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, [we will] sing hymns at heaven's gate / and scorn to change [our] state with kings ..."

⁴ Dan Clendinin