

The Spiritual Lessons of Failure

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November 15, 2009

Nobody wants to fail. Am I right? No one sets out to fail. And yet, nearly all of us, I would wager, do fail in small and large ways during our lives. Unless we never even attempt to do anything. Fallibility is a part of the human condition, and so we are bound to fail or fall short at least occasionally.

But then, we've probably all received the message, repeatedly, that failure, in itself, does not make you a bad person. What counts is how you handle and respond to failure. The only real failure is when we concede defeat and absolutely give up, or when we let fear of failure paralyze us into never making an effort in the first place.

And what is the right response to failure? Learn from your mistakes, so you can avoid them next time and become more successful. Each failure contains its own lessons if we are open to learning them. But the lessons of failure go beyond simply refining our efforts and making each attempt come closer to success. The spiritual lessons of failure have more to do with bringing out the best qualities of our character. With providing wisdom about the healthiest, most productive ways of approaching life in general.

Before we look at some of those spiritual lessons, let's think a little bit about what failure is. One simple way to define failure is not having things turn out how we plan or want them to. You set a goal. You fail to achieve it. There's a failure. Failure may mean not living up to your own expectations of yourself. Or it may mean not living up to the expectations of someone else. You let someone down, and their reaction might be: "You've failed me." But in either case, we're dealing with unmet expectations. Results falling short of hopes.

One of the most fundamental spiritual lessons of failure is persistence. Don't give up. How many times have you heard someone – usually someone who has succeeded spectacularly – say something like: "It just goes to show that you can do anything if you just want it badly enough." And there are all of the standard object lessons that are repeated *ad nauseam*. Thomas Edison tried 10,000 different filaments before successfully creating the electric light bulb. That's 9,999 failures. Henry Ford went bankrupt three times before he produced a successful automobile. Colonel Harlan Sanders, at the age of 65, tried peddling his chicken recipe to over a thousand restaurants before finding a buyer.

J.K. Rowling was a divorced, single parent with no job and no prospects, surviving on government assistance. Despite her lack of writing experience, she kept at it and somehow came up with the Harry Potter series, one of the most successful children's literature franchises ever. Rowling spoke last June at the commencement ceremony at Harvard University, and she talked about what failure had taught her:

Failure set me free because my greatest fear had already been realized and, here I was, still alive. I still had a daughter who I adored. I had an old typewriter and a big idea. I discovered that I had a strong will and more discipline than I'd suspected. I also found that I had friends who loved me. And so rock bottom became the firm foundation on which I built my life.

She didn't give up. She continued to give success a chance. It wasn't that she was a failure, and then suddenly she turned into a success. She may have failed several times, but she

was not a failure, because she kept trying. Even if she had not become rich and famous, she would not have been a failure, because she didn't give up.

But this spiritual lesson of persistence should not be interpreted to mean that, no matter what you want to achieve, you will do so if you keep trying. Sometimes we may set our sights too high. Our goals may sometimes just not be reasonable. No matter how much I dream, I am finally resigned to the fact that I am never going to be a major league baseball player, no matter how hard I work at it,

Sometimes the lesson inherent in failure may be a simple reality check. An important piece of feedback that can guide us toward more realistic goals. And so another important spiritual lesson we may take from failure is acceptance. The acceptance of the realities around us. The famous Serenity prayer, usually attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, applies here:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

It's a matter of discernment. And many, many failures can be avoided if we just have the sense not to keep butting our heads against an immovable brick wall. If you have totally unrealistic expectations, then persistence is futile and foolish. And yet . . . Edison may have seemed foolish to keep on after the first several thousand failures. But failure is sometimes just a state of mind. When asked whether he ever got discouraged about all those failures, Edison answered that none of his attempts were failures. They were each successful experiments in finding what didn't work. So even if he had never found a filament that worked, he would at least have ruled out many possibilities for future inventors.

Another way to talk about acceptance in the face of failure is in terms of doing your best and letting go of outcomes. If there are circumstances beyond your control that preclude the outcome you're hoping for, it's all right. You can still hold your head up high, knowing that you did what you could. Your efforts may have failed, but you are not a failure. Too great an attachment to hoped-for outcomes is what makes you feel like a failure.

Someone named Christopher Hayes – no relation – posted a blog a couple of years ago titled “A Brief Description of the Spiritual Lessons Gleaned from the Cubs’ Failure to Win the World Series for the 99th Consecutive Year.” The blog’s message was actually shorter than its title: “The Buddha was right. Attachment is suffering.”

So the lesson is to be realistic, accept that which is beyond your control, and don't be too attached to particular outcomes. Another way to do that is to redefine failure in such a way as to allow yourself to see whatever happens not as failure, but as information. And then use that information to reformulate either your goals or your strategies for achieving them.

Another related lesson we might take from failure is humility, which is really just the acceptance of ourselves as less than perfect. Perhaps considerably less. I've talked here about perfectionism before. One feature of perfectionism – of setting too high standards for ourselves – is that it sets us up for failure. It's that thing about unreasonable expectations again. In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris writes:

Perfectionism is one of the scariest words I know. It is a marked characteristic of contemporary American culture, a serious psychological

affliction that makes people too timid to take necessary risks and causes them to suffer when, although they've done the best they can, their efforts fall short of some imaginary, and usually unattainable, standard. Internally, it functions as a form of myopia, a preoccupation with self-image that can stunt emotional growth.

A little bit of humility can be very helpful. Recognizing and acknowledging that I am imperfect and fallible, but that I am good enough just as I am, can save me from the double torments of being terrified to try anything for fear it won't be good enough, and the devastation of seeing my efforts fall short of impossibly high standards.

Another spiritual lesson that failure offers us, if we're willing to embrace it, is empathy, compassion, and perhaps even forgiveness for the shortcomings of others. By facing and acknowledging our own limitations, we should be more understanding and supportive of others when their experience doesn't live up to their – or our – expectation. In those cases, our support and encouragement will be more helpful than disgust or criticism.

Two additional spiritual lessons, that don't so much come from failure, but certainly help cope with failure, are to remember to laugh and to find the silver lining in seemingly bad situations. After all, how bad a situation is for us is not so much about the circumstances as it is about how we respond. Being able to laugh at ourselves and our imperfections is a sign of wisdom and maturity. It's a matter of keeping a healthy perspective, and not taking things overly seriously. And besides, it's more fun to be laughed with than to be laughed at.

And every cloud has a silver lining, if we have the wisdom to see it. Seeking that silver lining can ease the pain of a difficult situation. One youngster brought home a report card full of really bad grades. His mother asked, "What have you got to say about this?" The boy replied, "One thing is for sure, you know I'm not cheating!" I hope his mother got a laugh out of that to help her keep things in perspective.

During one period of my life, Cathy and I moved to a new community, and set about looking for jobs. Cathy found one quite quickly, but I wasn't so successful. I started getting down on myself, feeling like a failure, even though the situation had more to do with the job market than with my personal worth as a human being. Finally, I stepped back and tried looking at things from a different angle. Here was an opportunity, that I had never had before, to try something that had always been a dream in the back of my mind.

I set to work putting together a used paperback bookstore. I found an old stone house on Main Street to rent. I visited dozens of yard and garage sales gathering up thousands of books. I bought lumber and built bookshelves of my own design. And I went into business. By any objective financial standard, my store could not be considered a success. I made enough to pay the rent, and that was about it. When I closed the store after two years, I could easily have been described as a failed bookseller. But you know what? Those two years were among the best of my life. The cloud of unemployment, in that particular case, had a very bright silver lining.

I'd like to close this morning with a statement by self-empowerment guru Lori Prokop that sums up much of what I've tried to say this morning:

Failure does not mean you are a failure;
It means you are becoming a success.

Failure does not mean you have accomplished nothing;
It means you have more to learn.

Failure does not mean you have been a fool;
It means you have enough faith and belief to experiment.

Failure does not mean you are disgraced;
It means you have the [courage] to try.

Failure does not mean you are out of options;
It means you have to move forward in a different way.

Failure does not mean you are inferior;
It means you are not perfect.

Failure does not mean you have wasted your life;
It means you have a reason to start again.

Failure does not mean you should give up;
It means you should increase your persistence.

Failure does not mean you will never make it;
It means you need more practice.

Failure does not mean you are stupid;
It means you need more possibilities.

So embrace your failures, and make the best of them. They, along with your successes, will help make you who you will be. And that is who you should be.

So may it be.