

“Failure or Perhaps an Open Window?”

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February 4-5, 2012

When I was about 8 or 9 I lived in a neighborhood that was chock full of kids. Our ages ranged fairly close together. We often gathered in the neighbor's yard at the end of the block. They had a double lot which meant more room for our games and activities, plus the family who lived there had about 6 kids which meant that there was always someone there to play with. Our games went from wild and imaginative play such as horses or pirates to typical games of kick the can, football and baseball.

I loved the imaginative games. I was good at coming up with intriguing ideas and plans that kept us involved for hours. I was pretty good at kick ball and dodge ball as well but if someone brought out baseball my interest would wane.

For some reason I stunk at baseball. Looking back now I think it was because I needed glasses but didn't know it at the time. At least that's what I tell myself now! I could never match up my swing with the ball and I always struck out. Being out in the field was even worse. Catching the ball hurt my hands and I often dropped it but usually I failed to even catch it at all. In the neighborhood we all knew which kids were good and who was lousy. I was lousy.

So I developed a solution. If someone wanted to get a game of baseball going I would suddenly state that I had to go to the bathroom and then I would run home. Of course I did not return. I thought it was brilliant. It saved me the embarrassment of being the last kid picked since everyone knew I stank. It saved me the ultimate embarrassment of letting down the team with my terrible game. But it also insured that I never got any better at baseball.

I come from a family that likes to be prepared, who likes to do well. My husband still marvels at how my family will know well in advance who is doing what and where we are going when we plan a family event. “You should have known better,” was something I heard a lot in my childhood home. I truly don't believe that my parents were trying to be negative. I think they really thought they were teaching us to be prepared for any possible outcome. But I also learned that if things did not go the way I had planned, then I had failed and that was a problem.

This way of living and planning ahead works most of the time. So ultimately I was rewarded often enough with positive comments and success. Yet, it left me with very few tools in which to deal with failure. I learned rather quickly to move towards things that I was good at and to stay away from things that I was not so good at. Looking back now, I see that I was not letting myself develop fully because of my fears of failure.

A good analogy of this idea is the way that I play tennis. I played a lot of tennis when I was young. I never had lessons but I was okay. I had three friends with whom I played with daily during the summers. I had a terrible backhand so instead of looking at what I was doing wrong with my backhand, I literally ran around it. Literally, I ran around the court so I could limit the use of my backhand. This lopsided way of playing tennis illustrates the lopsided way that I was living my life because I was afraid to fail. This fear kept me from really looking inwardly at my true self. I was stunting my own growth and limiting my own potential.

People grow through allowing themselves to fail. We get very little wisdom through success. Wisdom is ultimately gained when we have come through failure and sat with it instead of going around it. Yet, our culture supports this way of avoiding failure in the way that we demand perfection from businesses, products, services and leaders around us. If something goes wrong, we want to blame someone. We want someone to take responsibility and pay for those mistakes. A major failure can destroy a business, quickly end loyalty and end a career. “They should have known better” we tell ourselves and we immediately turn our backs and run off to find the next successful thing.

And yet, intuitively we know that creativity blossoms when we allow ourselves to make mistakes. In fact, the greatest mistake we can make in life is to be afraid that we will make one. Our understanding of learning and the creative process is in direct contradiction to the high standards of perfection that we demand as a culture. This is another example of the lopsided way in which we embrace failure and success in our culture.

I had the great pleasure of hearing Parker Palmer speak at Lawrence University last week. Palmer is an educator and author who encourages us to see the whole person in the learning process. His talk was entitled “Five Habits of the Heart That Make Democracy Possible.” Palmer believes that the heart is where everything begins. The heart is where we learn as children about love, acceptance, honesty and justice from our dealings with our parents first, then siblings, teachers and friends. These experiences are deeply ingrained and affect our ways of seeing, being and responding to the world around us. They influence our development of meaning and purpose in life.

Due to disappointment, failure and loss, Palmer felt that all of us experience broken hearts at some point in our lives. He believes that our life experiences can either harden or soften our hearts and influence how we respond to these heart aches. He felt due to our history and experiences that some folks develop brittle hearts. When faced with difficulties these folks experience their hearts to shatter, sending splinters and shards out into the world that can cause damage to others and to the self.

Folks who have had more support in their lives can go through similar heart breaks but instead of causing damage they have what Palmer calls a supple heart. Instead of shattering, these hearts break open. These folks feel safe enough within their communities, families and self to be able to look inward and learn from their failures and losses and see the value of those experiences.¹

The wisdom to learn from failure is incontrovertible. Yet folks who do it well are pretty rare. Failure and fault are virtually inseparable for most folks. Every child learns at some point that admitting failure means taking the blame, something that we find difficult to do. Our culture attaches great shame to this act and we see many adults model ways in which to avoid taking blame on a regular basis. Reality TV seems to be full of this kind of behavior where people's lives fall apart and then they turn to point a finger at someone else. We hear co-workers, bosses, politicians and even ourselves reach for anything to blame for the cause of failure except for admitting what is most likely true...I made a mistake.

Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard's School of Business tells us that in the business world we struggle with creating a safe place in which we can admit and report failure without creating an environment where there is an anything goes attitude.² How can we feel safe to admit our failures within an environment that seeks high standards of behavior? Parker Palmer feels that we need to begin this work at an early age and I believe he is right. It is something that we often fail to do as parents and educators, both in the schools and in our churches. Bridget confessed to me that as she looked for a children's book that dealt with how to handle failure, she came up practically empty handed. What does this say about the way that we teach our children about failure?

How can we help our children feel safe and unashamed about failing and yet still feel

1 Parker Palmer, “Five Habits of the Heart that Help Make Democracy Possible”, lecture, Lawrence University, Appleton WI, January 25, 2012.

2 Amy Edmondson, “Strategies for Learning From Failure”, Harvard Business Review, January 2012.

responsible for learning to move forward from it? Palmer lifted up some habits that surprisingly seem to come almost directly from our Unitarian Universalist principles.

He believes that we need to create in children an understanding that we are all in this together. I see a direct relationship to our 7th principle of recognizing the interconnective web of life. My actions influence your actions and so I must be accountable and responsible for what I do with integrity and honesty, not just to you but to myself and the world as well.

Palmer calls us to cultivate an understanding of the value of otherness or the inherent worth and dignity of each individual. We grow from stepping outside of our tribes and that “us and them” does not mean “us versus them.” I thought these words were particularly important for us who believe in a liberal faith as we consider our neighbors who might hold more conservative beliefs. It truly is not “us versus them,” although our culture loves to embrace this kind of drama. Yet if we are to be successful in creating a world of justice and peace we must realize it IS “us and them” together. This is how a supple heart breaks open.

By opening up we create the ability or habit to hold tension in life-giving ways instead of life-limiting ways. When we open ourselves up to new ways of understanding ourselves and our world we create pathways of life enhancement not just for ourselves but others. We are able to do this if we feel safe to develop a sense of personal voice and agency and are able to seek our version of truth while checking and correcting it against the truths of others.³ Again an echo of our UU principle encouraging the responsible search for truth and meaning.

What a delight to see that our UU principles are literally tools that we can use to grow supple hearts within ourselves and others. By letting ourselves open up to each other and to experiences we allow one another to be truly whole and we can become our best selves. And yet fear often steps in the way.

Violinist Joshua Bell shared what he called his favorite mistake. He was 12 years old and entering into his first violin competition. Almost everyone else was college age so he did not expect himself to do very well. The piece he was playing had a very difficult opening. As he began to play he messed up worse than he could ever have imagined. He had never made such a terrible mistake before. His parents traveled a long way to see him in this first big competition and it was a completely embarrassing way to start.

No one had told him what to do when you completely flop at the beginning of a performance. His teachers had never given him any tools and he did not know the etiquette, but he thinks he did the right thing in the moment. He stopped and turned to the audience and said “I’d really like to start over.” He felt like he had already lost the competition and the chance to do well but he wanted to try again.

It could have been his worst performance because his confidence was already low. But somehow, knowing that he had nothing to lose turned it in the other direction. He got into this zone of feeling completely liberated and relaxed because he thought he had already lost. He feels even to this day, that he played the best he has ever played in his life in that moment. The experience taught him that when you take your mind off of worrying about being perfect, sometimes amazing things happen.⁴

Failure can be a teacher. Failure can be a window of opportunity for change, for learning and for deeper reflection. Failure is a place of transition and it is up to us to decide which way we will move in response to failure.

In this place of tension, will we revert to old habits, avoid it and run home to “go to the bathroom?” Or can we pause and see the experience for what it is and let it transform us into something new?

Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, says that when we feel that squeeze, that uncomfortable place of embarrassment or feelings of failure, our tendency is to give up, run away, take a pill, a drink or

3 Parker Palmer, “Five Habits of the Heart that Help Make Democracy Possible”, lecture, Lawrence University, Appleton WI, January 25, 2012.

4 Joshua Bell, “My Favorite Mistake”, Newsweek, January 9, 2012, Vol. 2, 64.

check out in front of a screen. We may feel like what we were standing on is no longer supporting us. This is an uncomfortable place to be. We don't feel in charge, we feel pathetic and hopeless. It is easier to escape that feeling than to pause and sit with it. And yet Chodron invites us to stop and consider this feeling a stroke of luck.⁵

We are in a place of transition when we feel squeezed by failure. We can chose to move towards what may feel like security, clinging to old habits of denial and blame that keep us from looking inward or we can let ourselves feel exposed as if we have just been born into a new reality.

What would happen if we encouraged ourselves and one another to be inquisitive in this new territory? What if we make of our lives a study like we read in our reading today? What if we take this moment of transition and look within? What might happen if we let ourselves imagine that failure is positive? We need to encourage this kind of thinking because as Joshua Bell discovered, when we feel we have nothing to lose, amazing things can happen.

This kind of thinking is the very thing that Parker Palmer was inviting educators to focus on as they worked with children. This kind of thinking can help us to develop supple hearts, ones that feel safe enough to break open into new understandings instead of shatter into damaging shards.

For me the first step to embracing this way of learning and transition is to get to a place where we are willing to feel what we are going through. It starts with being willing to have a compassionate relationship with the parts of ourselves that we feel are not worthy of existence. If we aspire to stay awake and open to what we are feeling, to recognize and acknowledge it as best we can in each moment, then something begins to change.⁶ We will find that we are able to open ourselves up instead of shut down. Our old habits and patterns will soften. As we learn to have compassion for ourselves, the circle of compassion for others and what and whom we can work with and how, becomes wider and more possible.

A dear friend of mine gave me a card during a time when I felt like I was a failure. It sits on my kitchen window sill so that I can see it each day. It says "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone." I can attest that this is true. We can make a choice in each and every moment. We decide if we will relate to our circumstances with bitterness or with openness. The key is changing our habits, particularly the habits of our mind. We create our situation by how we use our mind, by how we keep patterning our response to life. Chodron tells us that if we refuse to react to situations in our old ways, this change causes our thoughts to slow down and magically it seems that there is a lot more space to breath, a lot more room to dance and ultimately more opportunities for happiness.

By opening up a supple heart and expressing compassion for ourselves we give ourselves room to take a difficult situation and encourage ourselves to leap, to step out into that ambiguity.⁷ That is why whatever occurs can be regarded as the path and that all things, not just some things are workable. This doesn't sound like failure to me, it sounds like opportunity.

The next time you feel that you have failed, I invite you to stop and pause. Feel the tension and the squeeze and then sit with it. The world will not end; your heart will not stop beating. You are still just as valued as you were the day before, but now you know something new. Which way will you chose to go? Will you let your heart become brittle and shatter or will you pause and allow the moment to be what it is and let a supple heart open into the experience?

May it be so.

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5 Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, Boston, MA, Shambhala, 2000) 117.

6 Ibid. 84.

7 Ibid 146.

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