

Failure Is My Teacher
A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge
March 22, 2009

Have you failed yet?

Ever failed a test at school? Failed to get a job you wanted? Ever lost a job? A friendship? A marriage? Ever failed to keep a promise? To get to an appointment on time? To meet your own standards of quality or integrity? Failed to be generous or courageous or kind? Is your body failing? Is your mind?

If you haven't failed, you will.

Failure comes to us all, right up there with death and taxes. Some of us fail to file our tax return on time, but nobody fails at death, itself the ultimate failure of the body.

Failure is what makes us human. Human progress is impossible without risk, risk impossible without failure.

To fail is to grow. To grow is to fail.

Fifty percent of new businesses fail within five years. In a lifetime, the average American changes employers ten times, careers three times, not always voluntarily.

Famous failures abound.

Walt Disney's first cartoon production company went bankrupt. Viewing Fred Astaire's 1928 screen test, a producer noted: "Can't act. Can't sing. Balding. Can dance a little." In 1947, one year into her contract, Marilyn Monroe was dropped by 20th Century-Fox because Darryl Zanuck thought she was unattractive. Barbra Streisand made her stage debut at 19 in a show that closed after one performance. John Grisham's first novel was rejected by sixteen agents and a dozen publishing houses.

Maybe the most notorious failure of all was Jesus of Nazareth. Here's a guy they were calling the Messiah, the next King David, who was gonna lead the Jews in triumph against the Romans. Instead he ends up betrayed, arrested, convicted, condemned by the crowd, mocked, brutalized, stripped naked, and summarily executed.

Failure is not always what it seems.

Maybe it's never what it seems.

1988 was a bad year for me. Everything fell part—my home life, my social life, my work life. As 1988 drew to a close, I wrote in my journal: "This year I lost my lover. I lost my roommates. I lost my apartment. I lost my record label. I lost my children's book publisher. I lost my agent. I lost my clerical worker. I lost my counseling class. I lost my hair. [That was the year I began to notice!] I lost my confidence in the climate. I lost my confidence in the survival of my planet. All I have left is me."

My failures piled up in a train wreck that year. They roughed me up pretty good. Though not to be compared with the torments of Job, they succeeded in getting my attention.

Failure can be the two-by-four that smacks you upside the head and gets your attention. Robert Frost wrote:

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down across our path is not to bar
Our passage to our journey's end for good
But just to ask us who we think we are.

In their excellent book *When Smart People Fail*, Carole Hyatt and Linda Gottlieb write, "Failure brings you up short. It cuts away all the trappings It throws you off balance Failure makes you look at yourself in the bathroom mirror at midnight."

What do you see when you look in the mirror after you've failed? Do you see a pathetic excuse for a human being? Do you see a child of God, flawed and holy? Do you see a student of life ready to learn?

It's all interpretation, isn't it?

Failure is never a fact. It's always a judgment, an interpretation of events. We can't choose the events, but we can choose the interpretation.

Do you remember Apolo Ohno at the 2002 winter Olympics?

Just 19 years old, Ohno is favored to win gold in the thousand-meter short track. Speeding elegantly around the circuit, he's seconds away from winning gold, he can taste it, but four skaters wipe out, Ohno's leg is sliced open, he throws himself skate-first across the finish line for second place.

He could have been enraged. He could have been resentful. He could have been disconsolate. Instead, he's up on the stand with his silver medal, jumping up and down like a little kid, grinning from ear to ear. In his mind, he didn't fail, he triumphed.

Four days later he places second in the fifteen hundred meters but wins the gold medal when the first-place skater is disqualified.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first—especially in short track.

As children, we learn in school that failure is shameful, quantifiable, and determined by someone other than ourselves. How often are we asked in school what *we* think of our work? We're trained to be other-directed, to derive our self-esteem from what other people think.

But self-esteem can't come from anyone else. It's *self*-esteem. It comes from inside. Failure reminds us of that, if we're paying attention.

The sting of failure can help us by moving us to reappraise our lives—to examine what actually works for us and what doesn't, to ask, what are my values? What do I truly care about?

If I get fired or my spouse or partner rejects me, failure calls me to consider what my contribution to the problem may have been. How sensitive have I been really to other people's needs? Am I a good listener? How well do I receive criticism? Do I work in partnership, or am I mainly out for myself?

If I lose my job, how important is money to me? Why am I in this line of work anyway? What are my options?

The options were there all along, but failure allows us to see them. Failure shoves us outside the box to draw upon unrecognized resources, meet new people, contemplate new possibility.

Or maybe I didn't fail at all. I have the power to interpret it as I choose. Maybe the job was in fact a poor fit: Maybe the culture of the workplace clashed with my personality, or worse, violated my core values. Maybe a relationship was violent or

lacked integrity. Leaving an unethical workplace or an abusive relationship isn't failure, it's growth.

Even the worst, most abject, most humiliating failure is no failure at all, if—if—I learn from it.

Success only confirms what I know, failure awakens me to what I don't.

Thomas Edison believed that the more failed experiments he completed, the more likely his eventual success. Edison saw failure as his best teacher, and every failed experiment as a stepping stone to breakthrough.

Even when my heart breaks, it can break open—open to life, open to love, open to mystery.

Psychologist John Welwood writes, "In truth, the heart can never break, for it is already by nature soft and receptive. What actually breaks open is the defensive shell around the heart that we have constructed to try to protect our soft spot, where we feel most deeply affected by life. When this is exposed, we feel the vivid presence of reality as never before."

Failure has a kind of purity to it.

My view is transformed as if I've awakened to find the world blanketed in snow, all my familiar landmarks erased. The Japanese haiku poet Masahide wrote, The barn has burned to the ground. Now I can see the moon.

Disillusionment is a place of great power. The artist Carla Needleman calls disillusionment "a sacred state that bring[s] about in my whole organism a quiet and seriousness that unite me as nothing else Only then the mind is receptive and can experience a moment of more precise knowledge."

Every loss teaches me what I am not.

I lose my job. I learn I am not my job.

I lose my money. I learn I am not my money.

I lose my marriage. I learn I am not my marriage.

I lose my family. I learn I am not my family.

I lose my reputation. I learn I am not my reputation.

I lose my body. I learn I am not my body.

I lose my mind. I learn I am not my mind.

I lose what I have been taught to believe is everything. I learn that I am less than nothing and more than everything.

So failure becomes a bridge into the realm of spirit. When the outer road to happiness is blocked, we may turn to the inner. When we are deprived the satisfactions of status and approval, we may seek a deeper source not subject to the fluctuations of the economy or the favor of the crowd.

The Sufi poet Rumi tells of a priest who blesses thieves and muggers in the street

Because they have done me such generous favors.

Every time I turn back toward the things they want

I run into them.

They beat me and leave me in the road,

and I understand again,

that what they want is not what I want.

Those that make you return, for whatever reason,

to the spirit, be grateful to them.
Worry about the others that give you delicious comfort
that keeps you from prayer.

Jack Kornfield, the Vipassana Buddhist teacher, reminds us, “The place where we can most directly open to the mystery of life is in what we don’t do well, in the places of our struggle and vulnerability. These places always require surrender and letting go: When we let ourselves become vulnerable, new things can be born in us.”

An old Christian story tells of a monk whose heart is troubled. He goes to Abba Sisoïus and says, “Father, I have fallen. What am I to do?”

The Abba replies, “Get up.”

“I did get up, but I have fallen again.”

“Get up again.”

“I did, but I confess I fell yet again. What should I do?”

“Do not fall down without getting back up.”

Let us pray for success, but pray for failure, too. One will bring joy, the other wisdom, without which our joy will be short-lived.

And let us not fall down, without getting back up.

Amen and Blessed Be.