

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
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Successful Failure

“Nothing ... stands alone as a failure without knowing something more about it....” Columbia University professor and neuroscientist Stuart Firestein is speaking. “There is a continuum of failure.... Yes, there are failures that are just mistakes or errors, and they may often be no more than an unfortunate waste of time. There are failures from which [we] learn simple lessons: be more careful, [slow down], check your answers. There are failures that can be ... much larger life lessons: a failed marriage, a failed business venture; painful but perhaps character building. There are failures that lead to unexpected and otherwise unavailable discoveries: they often seem like serendipity, ... [a] failure [we] didn’t even know was there. There are failures that are informative: if it doesn’t work this way; there must be some other way. There are failures that lead to other failures that eventually lead to some kind of success about learning why the other paths were failures....”

“Failures,” he concludes, “can be minimal and easily dismissed; they can be catastrophic and harmful. There are failures that should be encouraged and others that should be discouraged.... We’ll come upon all sorts of failures as we proceed, and we would do best to think of them as discoveries....”

This morning, I invite you to join me in a reflection on the spiritual practice of failure as a path to success, an opening to spiritual depth.

At its most base, failure looks like this: We make a mistake – unintended or unavoidable – or maybe we’re naïve or ignorant, or maybe it was inevitable – and civil society asks that we make an excuse or give a reason or, at best, apologize. This is everyday failure; this is life. And sometimes it turns out to “reveal something unexpected [or even] wonderful.” But that’s just lucky.

At its most exalted, failure can be “meaningful” or “successful; what Stuart Firestein calls “good” failure. Good failure doesn’t come “from ineptitude, inattention, or incapacity,” but is an end in itself, leaving “a wake of ideas, questions, paradoxes, enigmas, [and] contractions;” and giving rise to something new and valuable. Can we imagine being *intentional* about good failure?

You know where this is going: Beyond expecting to fail, we have to want it – to make failure a goal. Because when we commit to the spiritual path, we are saying *yes* to having our insights destabilized, to being proven wrong. The life of the spirit calls us to the willingness to see things in a whole new way.¹

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Helen Snodgrass has a sign posted in her high school science classroom² that says,

Failure is not an option; it is a requirement.

This is not the high school I went to, and I’ll wager it’s not your high school, either. But it’s never too late to post that sign someplace we’ll see it every day:

Failure is not an option; it is a requirement.

Isaac Asimov – science fiction writer and professor of biochemistry at Boston University – said, “The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not ‘Eureka!’ but ‘That’s funny....’” Behind virtually every success is a “good failure.”

James Dyson invented the wildly successful Dual Cyclone bag-less vacuum cleaner; his net worth is just under five billion dollars. But on the way to that success, he spent five years living on his wife’s teaching salary and failed and failed again, building five thousand one hundred and twenty-seven prototypes before he got it right.

James Dyson is inspiring because he doesn’t regret a single failure; each of them, he believes, got him closer to success. He says, “... My [days and] my life are full of failures. Failures are interesting.... Be persistent,” he advises. “... Don’t give up.... Often success is just around the corner from the moment of despair.” Babe Ruth said, “Every strike brings me closer to

¹ Stuart Firestein, *Why Science is So Successful* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

² Yes Prep Public High School, Austin, TX

the next home run.”

* Akio Morita invented a rice cooker that, instead, burned the rice. Understandably, he sold fewer than one hundred rice cookers. You may not know his name, but went on to found Sony.

* Largely ignored during her lifetime, having fewer than a dozen poems accepted for publication? Emily Dickinson.

* Harland David Sanders had his famous secret recipe rejected one thousand and nine times before a restaurant finally accepted it, and called it Colonel Sanders’ Kentucky Fried Chicken.

* Fired from her job as a television reporter because she was “unfit for TV?” Oprah Winfrey.

* Rejected by 36 publishers? Arianna Huffington.

* And who was fired by a newspaper editor because “he lacked imagination and had no good ideas?” That would be Walt Disney.³

Running through all of these personalities, we can see a deep river of spunk and pluck – sheer audacity and bravado – willfulness and stubbornness, or perhaps what we might call faith. Who among us wouldn’t want more of that? We can have it. We get to choose it.

I am greatly inspired to the spiritual practice of failure by American designer and inventor Bucky Fuller, grandson of a Unitarian minister and grandnephew of Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller. I heard Bucky speak in the chapel at Middlebury College, near the end of his life – a long, rambling presentation, which he punctuated with an exuberant if seemingly random gesture, hand in the air, fingers pointing down, as he intoned, “The dodecahedron!”

Bucky spoke movingly about the year 1927, when he was 32 years old. He had already been admitted to Harvard twice ... and expelled twice. He and his wife had lost a toddler to illness. And then he lost his job, with no savings as a safety net. Another child was born. He was completely overcome. That fall, drinking heavily, he contemplated suicide, so that his young family could benefit from his life insurance. But one night, on a bridge at Lake Michigan, I think, he had a kind of mystical experience, in which he heard a voice saying, “You do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You do not belong to you. You belong to [the] Universe.” Shaken to the core,

³ For these and more, please see budbilanich.com/50-famous-people-who-failed-at-their-first-attempt-at-career-success/

he vowed, he said, to “find what a single individual [could] contribute to changing the world and benefitting all humanity.”

Bucky is remembered as a visionary, who went on to pioneer many practical, inexpensive solutions to global problems of shelter and transportation, and energy. To this day, his continuing influence can be seen on “architects, scientists, and artists working to create a more sustainable planet.”⁴

On her “Simple Life Strategies” blog, life Coach Zoë B calls us to make a choice “to embrace failure instead of fighting it... Every failure encountered brings [us] one step closer to success,” she writes, “and that is just a natural part of the process.... [Failure] is just feedback; it’s simply showing [us] what’s not working so [we] can find out what will work.... If we didn’t have failure, how would we know what to do next? The process of learning from our mistakes is truly invaluable, and is something we need to run toward....”⁵

This is the spiritual practice of failure: to say yes to risking failure; to take the shame and embarrassment out of that risk, knowing that we will fail; and to commit to plumbing its spiritual depths. Basketball great Michael Jordan said,

“I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career.
I’ve lost almost 300 games.
Twenty-six times, I’ve been entrusted to take the game-winning shot
... and missed.
I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life.
And that is why I succeed.”

Beloved spiritual companions,

Failure is not an option; it is a requirement.
May we embrace the spiritual practice of failure
as a path to success.
May we celebrate not just ‘Eureka!’ but ‘That’s funny....’
May our failures be discoveries.
May every strike bring us closer to the next home run.

⁴ Please see bfi.org/about-fuller

⁵ Please see simplelifestrategies.com/about/