

Reading: "Failure is a Good Thing" Jon Carroll, *This I Believe II*

"Last week my granddaughter started kindergarten and, as is conventional, I wished her success. I was lying. What I actually wish for her is failure. I believe in the power of failure. Success is boring... Failure is how we learn. I have been told of an African phrase describing a good cook as "she who has broken many pots." If you've spent enough time in the kitchen to have broken a lot of pots, probably you know a fair amount about cooking. I once had a late dinner with a group of chefs, and they spent time comparing knife wounds and burn scars. They knew how much credibility their failures gave them.

Each week I am aware that one column is going to be the worst column of the week. I don't set out to write it; I try my best every day. Still, every week, one column is inferior to all the others, sometimes spectacularly so. I have learned to cherish that column.

A successful column means that I am treading on familiar ground, going with the tricks that work, preaching to the choir, or dressing up popular sentiments in fancy words. Often in my inferior columns, I am trying to pull off something I've never done before; something I'm not even sure can be done."

My younger daughter is a trapeze artist. She spent three years putting together an act. She did it successfully for a decade with the Cirque du Soleil. There was no reason for her to change the act—but she did anyway. She said she was no longer learning anything new and she was bored; and if she was bored, there was no point in subjecting her body to all that stress. So she changed the act. She risked failure and profound embarrassment in order to feed her soul. And if she can do that fifteen feet in the air, we all should be able to do it.

My granddaughter is a perfectionist, probably too much of one. She will feel her failures, and I will want to comfort her. But I will also, I hope, remind her of what she learned, and how she can do whatever it is better next time. I probably won't tell her failure is a good thing, because that's not a lesson you can learn when you're five. I hope I can tell her, though, that it's not the end of the world. Indeed, with luck, it is the beginning."

An old Sufi story tells of a man who is wandering through the desert. At some point he begins to sense a tiger is chasing him. He has nowhere to go. Frantically, he runs and runs and comes upon a well. As the tiger approaches, he has no choice but to jump into the dark well. As he falls, he can see the tiger growling above him but he can suddenly see that a dragon is hissing and waiting for him at the bottom of the well. Just then, he sees a branch growing out of a stone in the well. He grabs it and amazingly, it holds his weight. As he strains to hold on, with the tiger above and the dragon below, a single ray of light falls on the one leaf on the branch that holds his life. On that leaf, is a single drop of honey. The man summons all his strength, and before leaving one life for another, licks the single drop of lighted honey as the tiger and the dragon wait.

The question we are left with is, who has won? The tiger, the dragon, or the man? It is likely that the man was devoured by either the tiger or the dragon but the man determined how he would spend his last moments. But in the end, sometimes the dragon wins. There are times when we are successful and times when we are not. As mythology expert, Joseph Campbell wrote, "If the path before you is clear, you're probably on someone else's."

Robert Fulghum, a UU minister in the late 60's, found that out the hard way. Like many of his contemporaries, he sought perfect happiness. He chose Zen Buddhism as the path believing

that enlightenment would cure his restlessness. He estimated that would take about six weeks. After all, he was already a professional in spirituality. So he took a six week leave of absence, went to a temple in Japan, shaved his head, put on a robe and figured he had just enough time to, as he put it, "suddenly be hit by a might wave of comprehension beyond words."

Well, things didn't go exactly as planned. He found the sitting uncomfortable to the point of pain. The food that was served made him sick and his back ached terribly from sleeping on a board. Admitting his defeat, well before the six weeks had ended, he decided to leave. Beforehand, the master of the temple asked to see him. The master rarely spent time with the part-time "monk tourists," so this was a pretty special invitation.

The minister was in awe of this master who he assumed had life figured out perfectly. As they sat on cushions in silence, the master leaned to one side and scratched his rear and said, "I have hemorrhoids. They hurt and itch. [They] come from stress, you know. From worrying about tourists burning down this firetrap of a temple. From worrying about trying to get enough funding from businessmen to keep it in repair. From arguing with my wife and children, who are not as holy" –he smiled- "as I am. And from despairing over the quality of the lazy young fools who want to be priests nowadays. Sometimes I think I would like to get a little place in Hawaii and just play golf for the rest of my life."

The master scratched himself again and said, "It was this way before I was 'enlightened,' you know. And now it is the same after enlightenment." He stood up and gestured for the minister to follow him to the entrance of the temple where an ancient scroll was hung. He then told him it was time for the minister to go home as he thought the minister was a "thirsty man looking for a drink and all the while standing knee-deep in a flowing stream."

The master then read the scroll to the minister in Japanese and then in English. It read: There is really nothing you must be. And there is nothing you must do. There is really nothing you must have. And there is nothing you must know. There is really nothing you must become. However. It helps to understand that fire burns, and when it rains, the earth gets wet... And then the master said, "Whatever, there are consequences. Nobody is exempt." He winked and walked away scratching himself as he went.

You see, whatever our career, our level of spiritual enlightenment, our position, or our wealth, we can all get hemorrhoids, so to speak. Sometimes the dragon wins. In mythology, the dragon represents both what we fight both externally and internally. However, Campbell says, "The ultimate dragon is within you." That dragon might be fear, perfectionism, or shame.

When it comes to fear, we often fear what other people will think of us if we fail. In reality, chances are that there are very few, if any, people who really care if this is the fourth time you took that test, or the tenth time you've joined Weight Watchers. Truly, people are pretty self-centered and they are much more concerned about their own lives.

You are probably the only one keeping score on your failures. And if someone other than you is keeping a tally of your struggles, consider getting other friends. Most often, we are our own worst critics when it comes to our losses, especially if we are perfectionists. But as

Confucius observed, "Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." And there are many ways to rise after the dragon wins.

For instance, I know that a lot of people have been feeling lost and depressed after the recent election. Just because you lost this battle does not mean you can't do something. John Oliver, a comedian with a weekly show on HBO gave some suggestions on how to rise up if you are feeling defeated. Some people may be concerned that the liberal initiatives that are near and dear to their hearts may be dismantled during the Trump presidency. So Oliver offered this list of organizations that you might support to combat new policies. They include: Planned Parenthood, Center for Reproductive Rights, International Refugee Assistance Project, Natural Resources Defense Council, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, The Trevor Project, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

How about rising up after one of our personal dragons wins? One thing we can do is to reframe the mistake. A great example is the story of a Zen master that constantly taught his students the importance of "when eating, just eat, when reading the newspaper, just read the newspaper. Don't do anything other than what you are doing." One day, one of his students catches the master eating and reading the newspaper at the same time! He confronts the master about contradicting his own teaching. The master replied, "When you eat and read the newspaper, just eat and read the newspaper."

Another way to rise back up is to flip our dragons on their heads and transform our mistakes into some piece of wisdom or quality that you are proud of.

Psychologist, Judith Rich says for instance, "Lacking confidence, [or being] shy becomes compassion and understanding when it transforms. Lazy transformed becomes the ability to unplug and recharge."

So if we are perfectionists who are afraid to fail, perhaps we can begin to learn to be authentic and vulnerable, which is simply an admission that we are human. As author and poet, Mark Nepo puts it, see yourself as rare, not perfect.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, in his book *Taking Stock*, wrote that in the wake of our own mistakes, "we . . . can become better [people] or bitter people." Unfortunately, sometimes we might see our failures as so big, that we carry them with us our whole lives. We call this dragon "shame" and it lives deep within our hearts and oftentimes it is never released. Shame doesn't necessarily come from our own mistakes but somehow we make them ours. This is common in instances of abuse and PTSD. Shame can be destructive to the lives of individuals and even families because it can be so hard to confront. But if not dealt with, it is the dragon that can eat us alive from the inside out.

Any time the dragon wins, but especially if it you feel shame, it helps to remember that failure is an event, not an identity. We aren't our mistakes. These things pass through our lives but they are not the totality of our lives unless we let them. Let's hope that most of our losses are minor. But when the dragon does win, perhaps these simple strategies can help. First of all, surround yourself with the people that you love. They won't judge you and will support you as you recover. Secondly, consider setting smaller goals next time. Were you trying to accomplish too much in the first place? Was it something you really wanted or were you just trying to impress others? Be sure that what you are trying to achieve is what you are really after. Third, be good to yourself. So many of us give ourselves a treat when we accomplish

something big. How about treating ourselves to something to make us feel better when things don't go so well? Do something nice for yourself, give yourself a pep talk and say, I'll do better next time.

The last and perhaps the most important strategy when the dragon wins is something I learned from one of my favorite holiday movies. I've been watching it for nearly 50 years. Here's a little clue. (Put on hat) Remember this guy? Yup, Bumbles bounce. When the dragon wins, we have to bounce back.

Author Rachel Hollis writes, "Every single minute of the day is a chance to start over so don't use one tiny mistake as an excuse to throw in the towel. Start again. Start again and again and again. Train yourself to bounce back every time and suddenly the higher ground isn't a place you're struggling to get to, it's just your normal state of being."

There are times, my friend,
When no matter how brave the Noble Knight
No matter how swift his Gallant Steed
No matter how pure the Maiden he would rescue
No matter how Just the cause for which he fights
There are times, my friend,
When the Dragon will still win. And when he does, be like the bumble my friends, and bounce.

May it be so.