

Failing
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Reading: Excerpts from this article in *UU World*: <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/embracing-failure>

Sermon:

How many of you took a physics class in school? Did you ever see the film of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge collapse from 1940 in Washington State? The collapse has been studied for years as a spectacular structural failure. I told Tadd the story of what happened and said that I was going to illustrate the collapse with a piece of paper. He said, “no way, I can’t believe that it’s real, you have to show it.” So here is the film of what happened. [Start film - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-zczJXSxnw>] There is no sound, so let me tell you a bit about what happened as it plays. When the bridge opened, it was the third longest suspension bridge in the country. There are other videos that show the construction workers swinging on wires like trapeze artists, with no rigging. They nicknamed the bridge “Galloping Gertie” because even as it was being built, there was movement in the bridge, but it was up and down like this (show with paper). Engineers declared it sound though and felt the bridge would hold up to the movement. About 4 months after it opened, there was a day with 40 mph winds—strong, but not too strong. When I was in school, I was taught that the wind hit a certain resonance with the bridge, and that is what caused the bridge to suddenly change from moving up and down, to twisting side to side. Apparently that is not entirely what happened, it failed because of something known as aeroelastic flutter, which I think means that the fluid flow of the wind interacted with the elasticity of the bridge in such a way that it started doing this (video of bridge touring). The film was shot by Barney Elliott, who owned a local camera shop on Kodachrome film. How cool is it that we have color film of this moment? Remarkably the only fatality was a dog who would not leave the car on the bridge. (...I love the calmness of the man with the umbrella and pipe. Sure, the bridge just collapsed behind him, but no need to run.)

What constitutes a failure? Does it mean not mastering a subject? Having an different outcome than intended? Something breaking apart? Not winning? Sometimes failures can feel incredibly embarrassing, we can feel vulnerable. A silly example is the body language of a cat who has aimed for a high counter and falls short in their jump. They often slink away, or puff out their chests as if to say, “I totally meant to do that.” The Tacoma Bridge collapse, especially so soon after being opened, was a failure. And yet, out of that failure, so much was learned about engineering and physics. The decking of the bridge was used to build an artificial reef. In order to innovate and learn new things, we need to risk failure. In Peter Morales' article on failing, he focuses on the spiritual discipline we need to prepare for failure, by getting to: “Empathy. Compassion. Humility. Letting go. Playfulness. Courage. Passion. Facing the truth. Embracing failure.”

This week is the tenth anniversary of another structural failure. It has been 10 years since the flooding after Hurricane Katrina changed New Orleans. Beyond the structural changes to the city, Katrina reshaped population distribution all along the Gulf coast as many people who were

evacuated were not able to return home. That moment in our history highlighted many failures: structural failures in the levy systems, systemic failures in disaster response, and compassion failures in responding to tragedy. Since Katrina, we have learned a lot about rising sea levels and their potential impact on our coastal cities, tons of work has been done in the city to rebuild not only homes but infrastructure and community supports.

When we say something like, out of every failure comes an opportunity, that can edge toward the platitude territory of everything happens for a reason, but it is not the same. Let's break it down. When someone says to a person in pain, "everything happens for a reason," often what the person hears is, "I am not with you in your pain right now, but I will be with you when you realize what is happening next." That is not necessarily the intention, I think what people are usually trying to say is, "I am so sorry this is happening, and even though this hurts, you are going to be okay and I am here with you." But it feels different when you say it that way, doesn't it? Sometimes what we learn out of failure is the power of our relationships. We learn our boundaries and limits, we learn to let go, to change, and new ways to see. Change is not necessarily good or bad, it just is. The same is true for failure. Sometimes when something fails, that is what saves us, and sometimes it hurts us, but failure in itself is just a process, a moment where a path stops and a new way must be found. Our preparation for and response to failure, shape our experience. When our failures impact other people, when we cause hurt, it is so important to be prepared, humble, and compassionate.

When I was a sophomore in college, in the fall semester I was taking organic chemistry, physics, and labs for both classes. I was planning to major in biochemistry. But a funny thing happened on my way to biochemistry. It turns out that even though I love science and find it incredibly interesting, I am not so great at it. I am a terrible memorizer, and that is what organic chemistry is all about. I am good at math, so physics was a lot easier, but I had no idea what I was really solving for, I was just good at the math part. So when it came to physics lab, I was a disaster. My lab partners had to carry me through that semester, and the professor had a private oral exam for the final with person everyone in the class. We got to the end of my exam, and it was clear I was in way over my head. The man asked, "so what is your plan here again?" I said, "I am going to go to seminary and become a minister." He said, "so I am never going to see you in my class again?" I said, "no sir." He said, "C-" and I said, "Thank you very much."

A couple amazing came out of that class for me. I faced not being very good at something academically for the first time. That was an important growth moment, an exercise in humility and finding my limits. Equally important, in order to complete our lab analysis, that professor taught us how to use spreadsheets, how to make charts and graphs, and basic database logic and formulas. I was able to use that knowledge to do really well on the skills tests that I took when I was temping during the summers and that helped me to get my first real job, and to develop budgeting and data management skills that I use at my day job every day. That year was challenging for me. I had to accept that the plan that I had for myself was not the right one, make a new one, and find a new path. I had to go through the process Morales wrote about, "Humility. Letting go. Playfulness. Courage. Passion. Facing the truth. Embracing failure."

Rabbi Sharon Brous once wrote, "If we are to live religious lives of purpose and meaning, we must be willing to take risks, to engage new ideas, to stretch ourselves. We do this not with arrogance, but with deep humility. We do this not because newness is fundamentally more worthy; we innovate in an effort to make our religious lives real, authentic and compelling

rather than allow them to become echoes of something that once spoke to our ancestors.”¹ Failure can hurt emotionally, it can hurt physically—so can being stuck. When we are spiritually prepared for failure, we can be in a place to speak up when we are on the wrong path, say if we were an engineer on a bridge project that has some clear safety issues. We can be ready to fail and move forward with our next try.

When you are faced with a “Gallopig Gertie” (show paper) level failure, how do you respond? How do you prepare yourself? As Morales' wrote, we need to listen, release preconceptions, and foster our spiritual discipline. Our spiritual community helps us on this path. “Empathy. Compassion. Humility. Letting go. Playfulness. Courage. Passion. Facing the truth. Embracing failure.”

So may it be.
Amen.

¹ Sharon Brous, “Joy and Jeopardy”, Judaism 54 no 3-4 Sum-Fall 2005,