

"A SAFE PLACE TO FAIL"

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Professor Lord Robert Winston became Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University in 2001. On 19 November 2001 he presided at his first two degree ceremonies in Sheffield's City Hall. At both ceremonies, in offering his congratulations to the new graduates on their academic success, he also spoke of failure, and the notion that it is not always a completely bad or negative thing, but an opportunity to learn.

In the morning ceremony, this distinguished academic, scientist and teacher told of his own difficulty in passing the pharmacology exams in his medical course. And in the afternoon ceremony he told of the student who deliberately failed his exams for eleven years. He was in receipt of a stipend from a trust fund - a stipend which he could receive only while he was a student - and he figured it was better to be a stipended student than an impoverished doctor.

In an article entitled "The Courage to Be a Failure", American Unitarian minister Suzanne Spencer wrote:

I first met Sylvia in one of the churches in which I was a student minister. ... She is a woman in her late sixties, who grew up poor in a large city. ... As Sylvia grew up, her poverty was emotional as well as economic. As she tells it, her mother could barely get up in the morning, let alone give her daughter the affection and affirmation that would help her grow into self-confidence.

Because Sylvia was clever and resourceful - a "survivor" -- she worked her way out of economic poverty through various small businesses of her own. Eventually, she married and had several children. But now she is alone - her children have moved far away from her and her husband died some years ago.

Since her husband died, she has been prone to spells of deep depression, and these have made it difficult for her to earn a steady income. She gets by now, for the most part, on public assistance, living in an inexpensive, cheerfully decorated apartment.

Sylvia was a member of the church in which I was working. Once every few months, a church member or a member of the church staff would phone me - "Could you look in on Sylvia? She's going through one of her bad times again. She's talking about committing suicide."

And I would go out to her house and we would sit and talk for a long time. One part of the conversation would always be the same. Sylvia would tell the story of her life, a story which by now had become stylized into a litany. And then she would cap it off: "Look at all the people in the church who've done so much. And then look at me. I'm a failure! Why shouldn't I end it all? Who would miss me if I did?"

And Suzanne Spencer posed four questions prompted by Sylvia's story:

First: Is Unitarianism a "sunshine religion" only, or a religion for all of the seasons of human life?

Second: Is Unitarianism limited in its appeal to the fortunate and the prosperous, or can it minister effectively to persons in loss, estrangement, and hopelessness?

Third: What from our faith could Sylvia carry with her as she walked through the valley of the shadow?

Fourth: What could a church full of achievers, full of people who, as she saw it, had achieved "success", offer her?

One possible response, of course, to Sylvia's lament, "I'm such a failure", would be: "Don't be silly!· You may not have succeeded at everything you set Out to do, and you've been through some difficult times, but that doesn't make you a *failure*! We all fail at times, but very few people are, really anti truly, failures."

There is a difference between failing and being a failure; but all too often they are linked in our minds. There's a temptation in our culture to use the labels "success" and "failure" in general ways rather than in specific ways.

The essayist Peter Fleck noted that this is a relatively new phenomenon. There have always been successful and unsuccessful endeavours, but it is only in recent decades that individuals have tried to "be a success" in general, and considered themselves "a failure" if they were not successful.

. This sort of thinking has made it difficult for us not only to be failures but also to fail.

We Unitarians are not exempt from all this. I hope that we are likely to reject - verbally, in principle at least - any allegiance to the trappings of financial success. We may even be offended if people who flaunt their wealth appear in our midst. But we' do have our-own standards, don't we, which we apply against ourselves and perhaps against others.

For example, we Unitarians tend to value academic success and intellectual achievement; and we are prone to be self-conscious if we fear that we don't measure up. Or we may feel like failures if our personal relationships haven't worked for us; we may feel like failures, for example, if we're not part of the kind of family unit that we believed was the norm. Or we may be devastated if our bodies fail us; or if we find ourselves psychologically feeling weak, vulnerable, or in deep pain.

- Our theology may even encourage this fear of failure - or fear of being a failure. It has been said that religion for people who are poor - who are dispossessed - lays its emphasis on grace, on salvation as the unearned gift. Middle-class religion, on the other hand, tends to see salvation - whether in earthly or in heavenly terms - as the result of striving, as the product and reward of human efforts.

If we Unitarians fit the pattern - and we certainly are a middle-class religion - then it seems natural that we might fear failure because it would seem to be an indictment of ourselves. If we believe that

' good things come about through our own efforts, then what are we to believe if things turn out badly?

But there is good news. We can be saved from this kind of thinking. There is good news from people who say that failure is not only okay, but actually necessary. Physician and essayist Lewis Thomas, for example, suggested that failure is built right into the life process, through DNA. He wrote:

The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of NDNA. ... The molecule of DNA was ordained from the beginning to make small mistakes - mistakes that led ultimately to the evolution of human beings.

Without this capacity for error, he wrote, "we would still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music."

Thomas suggested that intellectual evolution also depends upon our capacity to make mistakes. He wrote:

If we were not provided with the knack of being wrong, we could never get anything useful done. We think our way along by choosing between right and wrong alternatives, and we make real progress only when we make wrong choices as frequently as right ones.

A lucky day in a laboratory, he said, is the day when someone makes an error from which others can learn. He went so far as to say: "The capacity to leap across mountains of information to land lightly on the wrong side represents the highest, of human endowments."

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote in a completely different realm, but in the same spirit. In several essays on the Hebrew Scriptures, Buber explored the interplay between success and failure in the Biblical vision of the world.

He found consistently that failure is glorified and success is mistrusted. The ones who are chosen to carry out the divine plan are always the weak, the humble, or the markedly flawed. The work of the supposed heroes is persistently plagued by defeat.

- . Moses never makes it to the promised land. David never builds the temple in Jerusalem. The true prophets are never heard by the people until it is too late - while the false prophets, the ones who promise success, who tell the people what they want to hear, are welcomed.

Buber's theme is carried through into the Christian Scriptures. The life of Jesus ends in defeat and disgrace. But that is why his power is still felt. Had he been "successful", would we have heard so much of him?

- . A generation later, the Apostle Paul proclaimed that "When I am weak, then I am strong," and he consistently extolled the power of community over the strength of an individual.

When success and failure are viewed in a community context, they take on a significance quite different from that which they have when viewed in an individualistic context. In a community context, the success of one-person can get in the way of the life of the whole.

For example: one person, chairing a committee, can and does do everything on his/her own. There is nothing for anyone else to do, so other people can be left feeling powerless, superfluous. Another person, chairing a committee, understands his/her own limitations, and calls on the strengths of others to carry out the work. They are empowered.

There is a potential for creative problem-solving when someone says: "I don't know where to go with this; - can you help me?"

One of the most important functions of a church community is to provide a place where it is safe for people to fail. Of course, a place where it is safe to fail is also a place where it is safe to learn and to grow.

Suzanne Spencer told of one church's experience with the Christmas pageant. Many of the church school parents advocated giving the children speaking roles in the pageant, rather than having them mime to adult narration, as had been done in previous years. The parents understood that the growth that would come from the children's taking speaking parts was worth the risk that they might not be heard easily by the congregation. The results of the experiment were enjoyed by children and adults alike.

Perhaps we could see the church not only as a place where it is safe for people to fail, but also as a place where it is safe for people to *be* failures.

To the extent that we are a place where people are loved and accepted, then we are such a place.

My late friend and colleague Phillip Hewett said that one of the historic strengths of Unitarianism is that our bond of union has been love rather than creed or faith. We are in a position, he said, "to show that love, our full acceptance of each other as persons, our recognition that we find our own fullness only in relationship to one another. ...

this constitutes the foundation upon which religious fellowship can be built."

There is a need for us to transform liberal religion from the faith of the heroic individual to the faith of the compassionate and caring community.

The faith of the compassionate and caring community.

Love: Our full acceptance of each other as persons.

What about Sylvia?

Suzanne Spencer wrote:

The best thing I could do for Sylvia was to reach out, give her a hug, and say, "You're special. I'd miss you. I'll check in with you tomorrow to see how you're doing." Other members of the church community did similar things. And Sylvia has found the will to keep on living.

A hug. The assurance that someone is special and would,, indeed, be missed. The offer to walk for a while through the valley of the shadow. In difficult times, that may be the best that we can offer each other. But that may, in itself, be enough.

Enough to give another person the strength to go on.

Enough to provide the courage to fail or to be a failure.

Enough, perhaps, even to transform failure into something else entirely.

Amen: