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Arlington Street Church
15 September, 2013

The Spiritual Practice of Failure

Sarah Blakeley is the youngest self-made female billionaire in the world. Against steep odds, with very little cash, no formal education in business, and, as she says it, the word “no” said to her face a thousand times over, she founded what is now a one hundred and fifty million dollar hosiery company called Spanx.

According to Sarah Blakeley, this is the best business advice she ever received: “When I was growing up, [my father] encouraged [my brother and me] to fail. We’d come home from school, and at dinner he’d say, ‘What did you fail at today?’”¹ “If we didn’t have something, he would be disappointed.”² “I specifically remember coming home and saying, ‘Dad, Dad, I tried out for this or that, and I was horrible, and he would high-five me and say, ‘Way to go.’”³

Somehow, Sarah Blakeley’s father created the paradigm for an extraordinary reframing of failure: “It changed my mindset at an early age that failure is not the outcome,” she says.⁴ In other words, *failure is not the lack of success; failure is the lack of trying.*

¹ Stacy Perman, “How Failure Molded Spanx’s Founder,” *Business Week*, November 21, 2007. Please see businessweek.com/stories/2007-11-21/how-failure-molded-spanxs-founderbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice

² Sarah Berry, “Perfect Failures” in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 28, 2013. Please see smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/perfect-failures-20130322-2gl10.html

³ From an interview with Kara Cutruzzola, “My Favorite Mistake: Spanx Founder Sarah Blakeley,” *Newsweek Magazine*, April 30, 2012. Please see thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/04/29/spanx-founder-sara-blakely-s-favorite-misake.html (yes, both “Sarah” and Blakeley” are spelled incorrectly in that URL!)

⁴ Sarah Berry, *op cit*

“It’s important to be willing to make mistakes,” she continues. [“Don’t be afraid to fail.”⁵] “The worst thing that can happen is you become memorable....

“I think very early on in life,” she concludes, “we all learn what we’re good at and what we’re not good at, and we stay where it’s safe. To have someone encourage me to actually go out and embrace not being great at something taught me over and over ... that what will happen is you have a story to tell, or you meet someone new and that takes you on a different path.”⁶

Can we imagine engaging failure in our own lives, making failure a spiritual practice? My fear is that the more success we enjoy, the more risk-averse we become. In her book *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals*, social psychologist Heidi Grant Halvorson writes, “Anxiety and frustration disrupt the many cognitive processes we rely on for creative and analytical thinking.” Jaimal Yogis, author of *The Fear Project*, concurs. “I’ve been seeing people – very capable, smart people – not even attempting to act on their great ideas for one reason: They’re afraid of failing.”

We have to be willing to try ... and try, try again. My all-time favorite quotation on failure is Thomas Edison’s response to the question as to how he felt about his countless, fruitless attempts to make a light bulb. “I have not failed,” he intoned. “I’ve just found ten thousand ways that won’t work.” Winston Churchill said, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

As part of a project on perseverance, psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth did an interesting study of spelling bee contestants across the United States. She learned that the winners were not necessarily smarter, nor did they study longer than the losers. What were they doing differently? “They identify their own weaknesses,” says Dr. Duckworth, “and then they work just on that.” In other words, they let go of “be good” and embrace “get better.”

“Be good,” says Heidi Grant Halvorson, is the mindset that focuses on proving that we know what we’re doing. “Get better” is the mindset that

⁵ Sarah Berry, *op cit*

⁶ *ibid*

focuses on increasing our capacity. Obviously, “get better” means entertaining a lot more failure. Picture Sarah Blakeley’s dad standing by with a high-five!

A really compelling part of the “get better” position is that it can relieve some of the pressure that generally successful people feel to be perfect. In fact, permission to fail can actually help us to succeed. Edward B. Burger and Michael Starbird, authors of *The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking*, write, “In our classes, five percent of our students’ course grades is based on their quality of failure. You want an A in our classes? You had better fail and fail productively; that is, learn through those failed efforts. Every mistake is a teacher and holds a lesson.” Michael Jordan – who did not make the cut for his high school basketball team! – writes, “I’ve missed more than nine thousand shots in my [professional] career. I’ve lost almost three hundred games. Twenty-six times, I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot, and missed. I’ve failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”⁷

I’m thinking of my own biggest failures so far. One of the ways I know that my marriage is a miracle is that the record-holder for my worst debacles goes to relationships, specifically those in which I could not figure out how to stay engaged without some measure of self-destruction. There are several iterations of this. One involves believing that, somehow, I could see someone’s potential – their hidden greatness – while disregarding all evidence to the contrary. My great uncle Sherm tried to warn me; I can hear him saying, “What you see is what you get.” I ignored him at my own peril. And then there was trying to save people who didn’t really want to be saved ... often, the very same people whose potential I was sure I saw.

I could go on, and there’s still time to fail bigger! But the point is that, at some point, I was compelled to give up. Is giving up a failure?

Here is Portia Nelson’s *Autobiography in 5 Short Chapters*.⁸

Chapter I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

⁷ Edward B. Burger and Michael Starbird, *The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking*, pp. 49-50

⁸ Portia Nelson, *There’s a Hole in My Sidewalk: The Romance of Self-Discovery*

I fall in.
 I am lost ... I am helpless.
 It isn't my fault.
 It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I pretend I don't see it.
 I fall in again.
 I can't believe I am in the same place.
 But it isn't my fault.
 It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I *see* it is there.
 I still fall in. It's a habit.
 But my eyes are open.
 I know where I am.
 It *is* my fault.
 I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.
 There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
 I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson has a very clear guideline for knowing when to “walk down another street.” She suggests that we ask ourselves two questions:

1. What will it take for me to succeed?
and
2. Can I get access to those resources for success?

The answer to 1., “What will it take for me to succeed?,” she says, might be more time, more effort, a new strategy, expert help, money. The

answer to this question, though, is never, “I don’t have what it takes,” or “I don’t have the ability.”

The answer to 2., “Can I get access to those resources for success?” has to include a consideration of the cost of success. Will it literally cost too much? What else will it compel me to sacrifice? In a sentence, will the process of getting to success compromise so many other really important things or make me so miserable that’s it’s really time to say enough is enough?⁹

It’s not failure until we’ve figured out that it’s time to walk down another street. And that’s success!

In her 1997 commencement address at Wellesley College, Oprah Winfrey said, “Turn your wounds into wisdom. You will be wounded many times in your life. You’ll make mistakes. Some people will call them failures, but I have learned that failure is really G*d’s way of saying, ‘Excuse me, you’re moving in the wrong direction.’ It’s just an experience, just an experience.

“I remember being taken off the air in Baltimore,” she says, “being told that I was no longer fit for television...” (Oprah’s news reporting was not seen as effective, because she was crying for the people in the stories.) She continues, “I was demoted as an on-air anchorwoman and thrown into the talk show arena to get rid of me. The first day I was on the air doing my first talk show back in 1978 ... I allowed my own truth to come through.... It felt like breathing, which is what your true passion should feel like. It should be so natural to you. And so, I took what had been a mistake, what had been perceived as a failure ... and turned it into a talk show career that’s done OK for me!”¹⁰

Beloved spiritual companions,

Failure is not the lack of success; it is the lack of trying.

Failure is letting go of “be good,” and embracing “get better.”

And it’s not failure until we’ve figured out that it’s time
to walk down another street.

⁹ Sarah Berry, *op cit*

¹⁰ Oprah Winfrey, Wellesley College Commencement Address, May 30, 1997. Please see web.wellesley.edu/PublicAffairs/PAhomepage/winfrey.html

Failure is G*d's way of redirecting us.
Failure is a spiritual practice.

Let's get to it!
Amen.