

## Failure

First of a Sermon Series on Scary “F” Words  
Rev. Roger Jones  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento  
*Sunday, October 25, 2015*

### Invocation

“Fall” by Rainer Maria Rilke

The leaves fall, fall as from afar,  
Like distant gardens withered in the heavens;  
They fall with slow and lingering descent.

And in the nights the heavy Earth, too, falls  
From out the stars into the Solitude.

Thus all doth fall. This hand of mine must fall  
And lo! the other one; - it is the law.  
But there is One who holds this falling  
Infinitely softly in hands of love.

### Music for Meditation

“There Is a Balm in Gilead,”  
duet by Keith Atwater and Rev. Lucy Bunch

### Reading

“Masks and Revelations,”  
by Rev. Kathleen McTigue<sup>1</sup>

It was a few days after Halloween and I had just retrieved my daughters from their daycare. As we drove home in the early darkness we passed a house with a big picture window, lit up from within. My daughter Hannah was not yet three years old, and she practiced her vocabulary through a running commentary on the world as it went past. She announced from the back seat, “Mommy, that house had two peoples and a dog in it!” Thinking about Halloween and all the decorations that were still around, I asked absently, “Were they real or pretend?” She answered firmly, “They were real!”

Ten minutes later when we were nearly to our own driveway and my mind had drifted far afield, her voice again floated out from the back seat. “Mommy, are we real or pretend?” I suddenly felt

the ear of God inclined toward me. Is this a simple question of information, or is it a theological test? A three-year-old isn't looking for an existential discourse, but long after the child has left the question and its simple answer behind her, an echo still dances around in the psyche.

Are you real, or pretend? Probably a little of both. It's a rare and saintly person who can bring forth a depth of authenticity to every moment. Quite aside from the easy masks we might play with on Halloween, we run the risk of getting caught up in more serious disguises, all those images we can carry around in our minds without even being aware of it. Maybe it's our idea of the perfect mother or the dutiful son, the beloved teacher or pious minister, the skilled social worker or respected CEO – whatever it is we hope the world will see when it looks at us. When we confuse what we do with who we are, are we real? Or are we pretend?

How about the rest of the lives around us. Are they real to us? The people caught in traffic in the car next to you, the waiter who just took your order, the woman who cleans your work space after you're gone home for the day – are they completely real to you? Consider those far away in terms of geography, belief, or circumstance. The people suffering in Haiti, Palestine, or Pakistan, the hundreds of thousands of men imprisoned in our own country, the homeless woman on a bench downtown, or those who come to mind when we hear words like *Muslim* or *evangelical* or *conservative*. Are they real, or are they pretend? Do we let them blossom into genuine human beings who are complex, maddening, unpredictable, and different from us – or do we reduce them to parodies, people we can dismiss, who we can easily call our enemy?

Sometimes we put on our own masks. Sometimes we put masks on other people. One of the purposes of a spiritual life is to help us engage deeply in the search for truth. Sometimes that search is sharpened and focused by the query of a child, ringing out like the sound of a meditation bell.

Are you real or pretend?

The reading we heard speaks about our tendency to mask ourselves, to put forward faces that look different from the ways we feel inside. One thing we try to keep behind our masks is failure, and the fear of failure. Failure is a big scary word. Better to keep a mask over it.

Yet failure recently has been getting a makeover. In the world of motivational speakers and business coaching, if you don't fail often you aren't being bold enough. Business writer Al Pittampalli makes this challenge: "What would you try if you knew you couldn't fail?"<sup>ii</sup>

This question gets your attention, but it's a false question. It's not realistic. Of course I'd try many things if success were guaranteed, if I knew I could not fail. I'd play the lottery, ask a movie star to marry me, wrestle the cutest tiger in the zoo until it agreed to be my kitty cat and come home. Success is not guaranteed.

Every June when the UU ministers gather for two days before our denomination's General Assembly begins, we hear a major essay lecture from one of our colleagues. This year's essayist said he was going to talk about the F word. Not the crude word we hear in movies, but the one that haunts us. The Failure word. Much of the time we'd rather keep quiet about our disappointments--our setbacks, regrets, and mistakes. We'd rather mask our feelings of inadequacy, our sense of "not-enough," our feelings of shame.

And you know, I think we'd prefer for others to keep their self-doubt or shame or loss behind their own masks most of the time. When others are vulnerable in such a way, we feel awkward, not sure what to say. Perhaps we'd rather not hear about shame or failure—it might be catching, it reminds us that we might also fail.

My ministerial colleague's essay was entitled "Mission Impossible: Why Failure Is Not an Option."<sup>iii</sup> Sounds like an exhortation to work harder: Don't let anything hold you back! Of course: we ministers have to save the world; we

have to build a better Unitarian Universalist movement!

But the real Mission Impossible is the idea that we could live and work without experiencing loss, making mistakes, having regrets. For those of us who put ourselves out there and make ourselves vulnerable, "Failure Is Not an Option," he said; it's inevitable!

He reframed the question of "What would you try if..." to ask it this way: "What is worth trying even if you know you might fail?" That's a better question. What is worth aiming for, even if you know you might miss? What's calling you to try it, even if you might not make it?

A good friend of mine got a new job with Facebook. He loves working there. He says it has the best employee culture of any high-tech place he's worked in 20 years. The firm urges employees to take initiative, make decisions for themselves. Try new things. And risk failure! He told me: "I asked if I could try something out, and my boss told me, 'Yes,' and don't ask for permission again."

My friend sent me photographs of company posters. "Fail Harder," says one. "Fail Up!" says another. What that means, I think, is to learn from failure, the way scientists and inventors learn. We should learn from failures and mistakes, not hide them. Maybe Facebook will change the world so much that we no longer fear failure or let shame hold us back. In the meantime, however, most of us know that failure hurts. Failure is hard and painful.

The American Buddhist writer Pema Chodron has written of an earlier time in her life, before she became a successful teacher. She went to the Buddhist leader who was head of Naropa University in Colorado, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. She unloaded her desperation on him:

My life is over.  
I have hit the bottom.  
I don't know what to do.  
Please help me.  
And ... he said, "Well, it's a lot like walking into the ocean, and a big wave comes and

knocks you over. And you find yourself lying on the bottom with sand in your nose and sand in your mouth.”<sup>iv</sup>

Yes, it hurts. When I was a student minister, I met a wise old minister, now deceased. He told me that every worship service at a Unitarian Universalist congregation should include words of pardon, forgiveness and acceptance. People need that reassurance, he said.

I was young. “What do you mean?” I asked him. He said: Most of us carry burdens. Most of us of worry that we are not a good enough person—not a good enough son or daughter, or good enough parent, or partner, citizen or neighbor, or whatever. We have doubts about ourselves. Most of us are haunted by our mistakes and oversights and failures. We regret that our fears kept us from trying things. We keep stories in our heads that reinforce those doubts, finding every shred of evidence to bolster the case against ourselves. We fear this evidence, but we also collect it, if it fits the story in our heads.

This is another type of failure. It’s a failure of perspective. It’s making the wrong interpretation of what happens to you or happens to another person. It’s making judgments quickly, instead of making space... for compassion, reflection, learning, healing. It’s the failure to give people space and give people a break, starting with yourself.

How appealing that sounds—give some space. Take a break. Don’t rush to judgment.

In this congregation, the past several months have been busy, exciting and stressful. (At least that is my impression. I could be wrong.) We’ve had lots of work, made so much progress, and weathered a few setbacks. We’ve experienced confusion and felt our patience wearing down. Our volunteers and staff have been whittling away at task after task, and they moved us back after 13 months at another location. All of this was for a good cause, for the dream and the goal of renewing our mission in a renewed and larger home.

Victory! Success!

At the same time as we were moving in, we were starting a new church year—worship services, a new session of Religious Education, Soup Sunday, Salad Sunday, another round of adult education classes and Spiritual Deepening Circles, choir practice, Sunday morning spiritual practices, monthly orientations, and a theater production with a large cast and set right here. It’s a busy time even without a building program. We planned our first service here, then our annual ingathering service, plus our dedication ceremony, and we pulled them off.

During this time, nearly every night for weeks I would go home after dark, eat a late meal, and collapse into bed. Then my mind would race over all the things I didn’t get done that day. Or I’d wake up at 3:00 with my mind racing. Things to write and read, people to contact. The phone calls and emails not returned. And of course the stacks of paper on my desk!

There are so many examples to use in thinking yourself inadequate, or a failure, if you are one to practice such a bad habit, as I can be.

But the work was worth it. Our opening weeks and building dedication were a high point in our history, weren’t they? After our ceremony and reception, I went out for a meal with several ministers who had come to the ceremony that Sunday afternoon, so they could spend time with the Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley, our denominational vice president who came from Boston to give the sermon for the dedication.

She was my guest for that full weekend of celebration. Back at my home after dinner, we shared wine and conversation. “I’m so happy that things are going so well for you and your congregation,” she said. I said thank you. A bit later, I mentioned a meeting I would have at church the next day. “What?” she said; “You’re not working tomorrow, too, are you?”

She urged me not to “over function.” What? I felt as if I’d been under-functioning! Barely keeping up.

I thought to myself: “You are such a failure, you can’t even practice ministerial self-care!” Thus

have I shown you my ability to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. In the midst of so much good that was going on, I had a failure—a failure of judgment, of interpretation, of perspective, of faith.

What can renew our faith in ourselves, when the waves knock us over? Maybe we can trust others with our vulnerable sides, our shyness, fears, doubts? For me, it is learning to accept that there is a community that restores my perspective and my faith.

I did go in to the office that Monday, but on Tuesday I took time away. I got up early to go to Berkeley for a breakfast gathering with a few minister friends who are like a support group. I made the mistake of driving, instead of taking the train. Traffic was terrible; I'd left home too late. I would miss most of the gathering. I resigned myself to this as I watched the other slow cars around me, feeling—of course—inadequate.

After a long while, I somehow found myself in a lane with few cars, suddenly moving along fast. "What's happening? Is this the *carpool* lane? I don't see any sign!" I looked for one, I looked at the pavement for the diamond marks. But before I saw a sign, I saw the flashing lights of the Highway Patrol, who pulled me over. I tried to explain that I hadn't seen a sign, but I was nearly speechless.

While I waited for him to write the ticket (this ticket), I sent a text alerting my friends of yet another delay. To prolong the misery of my mistake, the fine didn't come in the mail for three weeks: \$490.

I arrived at the restaurant, quite shaken. Hugs all around. I told my story and ordered my breakfast. I lamented. I vented. They didn't rush me, even though they'd been there for over an hour.

*They didn't rush me.* Each of us gave a complete "check in" of our lives. They asked me to tell about our building and the highlights of our building dedication ceremony.

By asking questions, they helped me see the bright moments. And they bought me breakfast. Had I known the amount of the ticket, I would have skipped eating and just asked them for cash.

Pema Chodron recounts the advice from Trungpa Rinpoche when she told him she had hit bottom. He said:

A big wave comes and knocks you over. And you find yourself lying on the bottom with sand in your nose and in your mouth. [Lying] there is what a lot of us choose to do at that point. But you can choose to stand up and start walking, and after a while another big wave comes and knocks you down. You find yourself at the bottom of the ocean with sand in your nose and sand in your mouth, and again you have the choice to lie there or to stand up and start walking forward.

So the waves keep coming, [he said]. And you keep cultivating your courage and bravery and sense of humor to relate to this situation of the waves, and you keep getting up and going forward.

.... After a while, it will begin to seem to you that the waves are getting smaller and smaller. It isn't that the waves stop coming. It's that because you train in holding the rawness of vulnerability in your heart, the waves just appear to be getting smaller...<sup>v</sup>

Their training, their practice, is mindfulness meditation. There are other ways to practice. Could be Yoga or prayer or keeping a journal or exercise. Whatever disciplines that give us perspective, whatever can ground us in honesty about ourselves and others, can be our own training for surviving those waves, and moving forward. It does help to take time in reflection, in quiet, in prayer, and in reaching out for a listening ear.

What is worth trying even if you know you might fail? Perhaps one spiritual practice is to write our answers to this question.

What have you attempted for which success was not a sure thing, and you knew you might fail?

Which things didn't work out? Do you still think it was worth trying? Which risky attempts did work out? Think on these things, write them down, and listen to others for their own answers.

I don't think we can cultivate our courage alone. If somebody asks you why you are part of a spiritual community, what will you say? Will you tell them how you find encouragement and affirmation? This is what I would say: "It's not easy to practice being vulnerable and brave with one another. It's hard to remember our courage, our sense of worth and our sense of humor without reaching out. This is where I can practice reaching out."

How can we be a faith community, a real community, if we can't make room for those of us whose lives are not going well? How can we be a community if we can't be real?

We need to open up to others who know how to listen with empathy. When we are doubting, hurting, or needing to start over or pick ourselves up, we need space to say that.

When shame threatens to keep us isolated, are we willing to open the door? Can we risk asking for encouragement?

The fear of failure keeps us from talking about it. Talking about things, and listening, takes vulnerability. But Trungpa Rinpoche says practicing courage and vulnerability are how we shrink the waves, and shrink the power of the waves, that life flings at us.

The dominant culture of this nation says: Pursue success with passion, and then celebrate and be proud of it. But when things go wrong, when things are hard, hide – hide behind a mask.

This is a not only a painful and a cruel way to be together, but it's the true meaning of failure. A failure to accept ourselves and each other as whole human beings, *real ones*, with our vulnerability, our need for help, care, and affirmation. We need one another, more than we realize. We need one another to be authentic, real, and whole. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> From *Shine and Shadow: Meditations*, by Kathleen McTigue (Boston, 2011, [Skinner House Books](#)) pp. 57-9.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://goinswriter.com/couldnt-fail/>

<sup>iii</sup> Essay by Sean Parker Dennison for the Ministerial Conference at Berry Street, June 24, 2015. <http://www.uuma.org/?berrystreet>

<sup>iv</sup> Excerpt from *Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better: Wise Advice for Leaning into the Unknown*, by Pema Chodron, accessed October 24, 2015, at Spirituality and Practice:

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/27996>

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*