

trudged on down the sidewalk, hurting. This was long before cell phones, when you could call someone and get immediate support.

I passed a house with a yard sign promoting my candidate. I went right up to their door and knocked. As I hoped, my arrival here was answered warmly. I told this person about the last door I'd knocked on. She said, "Ouch! That's not very nice." We talked and laughed a bit. We affirmed our enthusiasm for Ann.

I needed reassurance after a setback—I was reaching out to be reminded that I wasn't alone. I wasn't working alone, wasn't hoping alone. Then I got back on the job. Ann lost anyway.

I don't know if she ran for office again. I don't know how she chose to fail forward. Yet for me, the success of her campaign was learning how to canvass neighborhoods. I learned that I could do it. The embodiment of democracy is talking to people about the future of their community and their power to change it. Though it lost, her campaign taught me that. I learned that I was not alone in working to make things better, not alone in hoping. Sometimes hidden in an apparent failure is a gift, an unseen legacy for the benefit of others. That's failing forward.

Every summer when I go home to Indianapolis, I make a pilgrimage to a small museum and library known as the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library. It promotes continued engagement with the life and work of that great Indiana-born writer of the late twentieth century. Years after his death, Vonnegut's novels, articles and short stories continue to be popular and important. Among other artifacts of his life you can view and read at the library is a framed item on the wall. Rotating every quarter, it shows one of the many rejection letters the author received from publishers and magazines. Like so many creative people, he kept failing forward. In the Second World War, he'd been through a horrible experience, which put his minor defeats in perspective.

It is not fair to write off anyone as a failure, including yourself or anyone else. No matter how defeated we might feel, how disappointed in our hopes or frustrated in our goals. It is not reasonable to make such a conclusion. Our single perspective

~~is too limited. You know those ads for investment funds, touting their success? They must always make note: "Past fund performance fund is no guarantee of future success." Turning that upside down, we could say, "Current setbacks are no prediction of future performance." This picture projected (and on your order of service) is The Red Vineyard at Arles, by the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh. You may be more familiar with his painting Starry Night which appears on coffee mugs, mouse pads and Christmas cards. In 1890 he painted the Portrait of Dr. Gachet, a homeopathic physician with whom he stayed after a mental health hospitalization. One hundred years later it sold for \$82 million, at the time the highest price for any painting sold. Yet of all his great works, the painting you see, The Red Vineyard at Arles, is the only painting Van Gogh sold in his lifetime. It is not fair to write off anyone as a failure. As we endure setbacks and then choose to go forward into life again, we can be mindful and intentional about way we live and contribute to the world. We can be mindful that we will create a legacy. Yet we are not able to predict the course it will take.~~

Most of us, in our development as babies, commit failure after failure. After crawling, a baby stands up, only to fall down. Yet that is how they learn how to stand. After standing, the baby is making steps, only to fall down. A good cry and then another attempt. Failure after failure. Later in life some of us become afraid of those failures and let them keep us from trying new things. I've done that—talked myself out of many activities, endeavors, hobbies, new skills. Yet when I do, it makes my comfort zone feel smaller and smaller. When I learned to downhill ski in my early 30s, I fell down a lot. But I got very good... at pulling myself back up. Much more practiced at it than actually getting down the hill. In spite of my success at getting up, my falls were too frequent and not very fun, so I gave it up. I preferred to finding safer ways to feel continually humbled.

Recently I saw a play entitled "Sweat" by Lynn Nottage. All scenes take place around a neighborhood bar in Reading, Pennsylvania. Scenes take place in the years 2000 and 2008, with brief TV news reports noting the decline in manufacturing employment in the country, and then the financial collapse of 2008, with widespread

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mortgage defaults, homes lost, savings wiped out, and lives hurt. Regulars in this bar include three women who are coworkers at the local plant and good friends. Their parents had worked at the plant before them, and now their young adult sons do. They are loyal to the company and loyal to one another. Then one friend, a woman of color, gets promoted to management after decades of standing on her feet. She wants to support her pals but white racial resentment poisons their friendship, especially when hard times hit. What seemed like a reliable, solid source of income comes under threat as other companies lock out striking workers. Then their own plant ships machines out of the country. Addiction reaches out its claws. Resentment surges in the next generation; their sons take out their helpless anger in a violent clash. This play is about failure. The shame that seethe in the dialogue and the pain that gets numbed with drugs are evidence that the characters feel like failures. Even their union is overwhelmed and unable to provide more than survival support. They want somebody to blame and they blame those nearest to them. Nobody in this drama can see that every life there is at the mercy of powerful forces and people much larger than their own efforts. We in the audience know from the TV in the corner as it spins brief reports of the larger catastrophes that befell the country and the world in the years while these folks got up for work every morning and had a beer with friends in the evening.

Since defeat and hurt are inevitable in human life, one of the keys to getting through them/ is not to go it alone. Reach out. And when others need it, reach out to them. Last Monday night I was able to participate in an local interfaith service at Congregation B'Nai Israel in the Land Park neighborhood. of solidarity Three days after with these anti-Semitic massacre Jewish victims and survivors of the massaere in Pittsburgh, it was a show of condolence and solidarity.

Joining together at B'Nai Israel in the Land Park neighborhood, rabbis Rabbis and cantors from various congregations spoke and led songs and prayers. Public officials gave stirring and heartfelt remarks to a large crowd- s, the including Mayor of Sacramento, Steinberg, Police Chief, two, Hanh, and

Members of Congress Ami Bera and Doris Matsui and a State Senator. She recounted violent events of the past, including when two white young men firebombed three Sacramento synagogues; they also firebombed a clinic that provided abortion services and murdered a gay couple. The community came together then, she said, and at other times of assault on people and human values. And here we are again, she said.

One could think of those killings and fire bombings as examples of a failure—not only a failure of our system and communities to cultivate respect among people and peaceful disagreement. It also was a failure of our hopes that U.S. Americans had moved beyond anti-Semitic terrorism, a failure of the hope that ordinary people could worship in peace, live in freedom, and express disagreement through the political process not violence. Yet here we are again, Congresswoman Matsui said. Before that service began, Rabbi Mona Alfi, our host, invited e escorted all of the guest members of the clergy to a room behind the sanctuary. As 20 or 30 of us stood in that quiet space She, other Rabbis and, the Rabbi, cantors thanked us for attending. She thanked us, and for the cards, flowers, and phone calls of support their people they had received since the Pittsburg shootings. Rabbis and cantors from other congregations spoke of their deep thanks also.

Then she told a story nearly She recalled two decades old, the 1999 fire bombings of hers and two other temples. In 1999, two young white men firebombed three Jewish houses of worship in the Sacramento area. They also firebombed a clinic that provided abortion services; later they murdered a gay couple in a rural town. It would be understandable to think of those killings and fire bombings as failures—not only the chosen failure of hateful men to threaten or take others' lives and ruin their own lives. But also, those crimes reflected a failure of our belief that Americans had moved beyond anti-Semitic terrorism, a failure of our confidence that ordinary people could worship in peace and express disagreement without violence. Failure is a way to describe it.

Yet the Rabbi told us this; Yet out of those terrorizing events had at event, she said, arisen a shared response that changed the Sacramento area's interfaith community for the better. It brought us

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together in an enduring spirit of support and common effort. In 1999, thousands of Sacramento residents had come together to support our Jewish neighbors in a large service at the Community Center Theater. It brought us together in a spirit of support across religious differences, a spirit that lives on today. If those 1999 crimes were evidence the sign of a failure of hope or a failure of the system or a setback in our confidence, the community's response became a springboard for moving forward.

It was only two years later, in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, that Jewish and other faith communities rallied in defense of our Muslim neighbors, as anti-Muslim suspicions and hostility arose in this area and across the country. In addition, in those days local Sikh neighbors were fearing xenophobic violence as they grieved the murders of Sikhs who were targeted in other parts of the country. The community came together in condolence and in support. Rabbi Alfi cited the interfaith community's response as a turning point, the point of moving forward by reaching out. Perhaps, had all of Sacramento not been called together in solidarity with the Jewish community, we would not have been quick or strong enough to defend our neighbors of Muslim, Sikh and other faiths from the Islamophobic suspicions and xenophobic violence that emerged after the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. Indeed, two years ago the largest mosque in Sacramento honored Rabbi Alfi with recognition for leading the Jewish community in support of interfaith neighbors.

U.S. American culture is drenched with stories of personal success and personal defeat, images of heroic individuals and individual failures. How often have we heard another person condemned as a "failure," end of story? How often has that word been a self-condemnation? Not experiencing failure, but feeling like one? Such a condemnation is unreasonable and it's isolating. It keeps us apart from one another.

Without learning or gaining a wider perspective on our experiences, our defeats can become toxic. This reminds me of a play I saw recently at Capital Stage in Sacramento. It's called *Sweat*, by Lynn Nottage. It's set in a cozy tavern in the manufacturing town of Reading, Pennsylvania.

Scenes alternate between the years 2000 and 2008. On the television over the bar, brief TV news reports tell us the date and year of the scene, and illustrate the decline in manufacturing employment in the United States and then the financial collapse.

The regulars in this bar include good friends—women who are coworkers at a large local factory. Their parents had worked at the plant before them, and now two of their young adult sons do so as well. The sons also frequent the bar. The father of one of the young men comes in, begging his estranged wife and son for money. He's addicted to drugs. But as he pesters them, he also tries to warn them of looming failures, from forces bigger than all of them. The dad's company locked out his union two years ago. And he's gone from defiance, to desperation, to resignation. Yet the friends in the tavern are loyal to their company and loyal to one another. Then one woman gets invited to apply for promotion to a management office, after decades of standing on the shop floor. She's African American, as is her son. Her friends are white. She gets the promotion. As rumors of layoffs rise, suspicion of her loyalty grows, and white racial resentment poisons the friendship.

Their company ships machines out of the country in the middle of the night and closes part of its operation. What seemed like a solid source of work—for life—is coming under threat. As the union fights against the company's plan to reduce wages and cut more jobs, helplessness grows among the friends. So does resentment and anger. The young men take out their anger in a physical fight, which has a tragic result. There's much more to this wonderful play, including enjoyable scenes and funny characters. "Sweat" is a compassionate and relevant play. It's about failure.

The characters want somebody to blame, and they blame those nearest to them. Nobody in this drama can see that every one of them is at the mercy of powerful forces much greater than any one of them is. They desperately need—and lack—a social analysis of their predicament, or an economic analysis of their painful experience. Lacking a larger perspective, they look only at each other to explain the failure going on around them. In their sense of personal failure, they need a wider view of what's going on. The tragedy is that only those of

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us in the audience have this view, while they are at each other's throats. We all need a larger perspective.

One way of describing failure in the words of Buddhist teacher and nun Pema Chodron, is "when things fall apart." That's the title of one of her books. When we find that our well-worn defense mechanisms aren't working, when we're on the edge of our fears, when we can't talk our way out of a situation or blame our way out of the discomfort or anxiety we feel, that's what she means by "when things fall apart." Those moments in life, or those moments in one day, are opportunities to see ourselves as we are, with honesty but also with tenderness. She writes: "When the bottom falls out, and we can't find anything to grasp, it hurts/ a lot." Yet if we have the courage to stay present through the hurt or fear, we can learn about ourselves. We can learn to be good friends with ourselves. Pema Chodron recalls when things fell apart for her after she became a monastery's new abbot. She found support by the words of a visiting teacher: "When you have made good friends with yourself, your situation will be more friendly too." (7)

If we have the courage to do stay present when things fall apart, she says, "we are going to be continually humbled." We are going to let go of our assumptions, defenses, and the arrogance of holding on to our ideas, over and over. This has to do with the courage to fail over and over. She calls it "the courage to die completely."

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When failure, defeat or bad fortune afflicts, befall us, what can give us comfort? When ill fortune or failure befalls a person someone we care about, what should we do? When failure, defeat or bad fortune befall ourselves, what could be someone else's caring is a helpful way to respond? and helpful response for us? Whether giving support or asking for it, it is not very helpful to try to, Not to explain away the sense of loss or pain, or to numb the pain. Rather than avoiding the

discomfort of loss, we can strive honestly to failure, not to avoid it, but to be present and open, gentle and compassionate, gentle and open. More useful than having a magic answer or a plan of escape, to be open to listening is this to be friendly open and kind thing to do.



photo: Jason Blackeye, unsplash.com

The little everyday version of failure is called frustration. This is failure's every-day manifestation. If we did not learn, adjust, and move again in a forward direction every day, we wouldn't get anything done.

The relentless and irrational oversized version of failure is, of failure, the sense that we have not had a failure, but we are a failure. That's called, that's called shame. Shame is hard to be talked out of. It's not reasonable, but it's real. Healing It might call for professional therapy—it's which has been helpful for me in my life, I know. It certainly calls for might call for the self-reflection that comes from a spiritual practice or some another kind of disciplined discipline of reflection on our attitudes, assumptions and our ways of reacting. To be sure, it And it calls for patience—showing to ourselves, patience to another person. Receiving patient acknowledgment from another, and kindness—to ourselves and to others.

A close friend of mine lives across the country, and we talk often by phone. It seems that she and I take turns in rescuing each other from the unreasonable sense that we have become, once and for all, a failure. Sometimes for me this happens on a Friday, sermon-writing day, when a blank page is taunting me to write. We talk it out.

On other occasions, one of us might remind the other what we appreciate about them. My friend, for example, has Pema Okun, a writer and

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anti-racism activist, says this is a reflection of white supremacy culture in the United States. She means the toxic trait of perfectionism, the hyper-critical attitude toward human imperfections in one another and ourselves. Too often we treat mistakes not as occasions for improving but as reason for shaming another. In a culture and a country where whiteness has been the norm, it's easy to think of these traits as ordinary for us, rather than as the pain caused by social structures of longstanding.

Several years ago a close friend was neck deep in the waters of shame and failure, treading water but not getting anywhere and feeling pretty bad. It seemed unreasonable to me — she had many professional talents — personal and professional ones. Also, she is ~~was the devoted mother of two~~ admirable children. ~~She's and had gone through~~ faced some scary life changes with courage and ~~gone through them with~~ integrity. ~~Returning the kindness,~~ she tells me things I need to hear as well.

Sometimes a kind reminder might involve humor. ~~Yet at this point she was feeling down again, like a failure. Once when I was feeling down,~~ she reminded me of a card I had sent her in the mail, and how much it helped. ~~I sent a her a card. All these years later, s~~She still keeps it handy ~~has it!~~. I don't remember what I wrote inside the note card, but on the cover it has the headline: Mistakes, over the word Mistakes, and a picture of a sinking ship on the horizon of the sea. The caption under the picture ~~it~~ says: "It could be that the purpose of your life ~~is~~ only to serve as a warning to others."

~~Perhaps this is the ultimate way to fail forward — not merely learning from your mistakes, or maybe not even learning from your mistakes, but letting others take their own lessons. Sometimes humor is what we need to put our defeats in perspective, and try out a wider view, and keep going. Laughter can be a relief, opening us toward being able to say yes again, and go forward into life once more. If we feel as if we are a sinking ship, maybe we should lighten up a little.~~

~~Many years ago while in Business School I had a summer internship with an office of the U.S. Small Business Administration. One of my varied projects brought me in contact with an old guy who'd worked in business and now staffed the Small~~

~~Business Help Line. He gave me some advice: If you want to start your own business, try working for a larger business first. Save money. Make your early mistakes at somebody else's expense. Learn your lessons on somebody else's dime.~~

~~Living and reacting out of fear may not increase the odds for future success. Escaping our pain won't change whatever didn't work out. When things fall apart, Pema Chodron advises, rushing and racing ahead isn't a good workaround. It's not a healing way forward.~~

~~Being present is key to failing forward. Whether suffering setbacks or painful defeats, moving forward into life is not about shiny success, but about intention, presence, compassion and curiosity, and an openness to fear. Pema Chodron says mindfulness means being honest with our feelings and present with ourselves in our incompleteness. We can't be a complete failure, for as individual human beings, we are never complete.~~

~~Amid the hundreds of election-related emails I've received in the past several weeks was an inspiring one from Lin Manuel Miranda. The creator and Broadway star of Hamilton didn't write about any one candidate but about moving forward in courage. He writes: "When we tell our children (and grandchildren) the story of this moment, what will we be able to say? Can we say, 'I did all I could... to turn us toward love, toward justice, toward dignity?'"~~

~~When I was 25 I volunteered on the city council campaign in Springfield, Illinois. My candidate was a younger white woman who co-owned a soup and sandwich restaurant popular with state workers. Ann was challenging an older white man, who was the incumbent. She inspired me, but she lost. It was a non-party election, but Ann was an independent running against a local machine in a conservative town, so it was important to go door-to-door telling folks in that ward about her. At one white wooden house I rang the doorbell. The door opened and I said Good Afternoon through the screen door. "I'm a volunteer for..." And as soon as I said her name I got that proverbial slam of the~~

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He didn't live to see the results of his efforts. He didn't know how moved and inspired we would feel by his work and by his personal struggles. Amid his hardships, Van Gogh was blessed with support from a few other people in his life. And he was blessed with the courage to keep moving forward. In addition to his works of art, Van Gogh's legacy includes the reminder that we dare not give up hope.

None of us is able to define the full meaning of our lives or to know impact of our intentions and efforts. We are not able to predict the full importance of the commitments and choices we make.

It is not fair to write off anyone as a failure. As we endure failures in life, as we setbacks feel the pain of inevitable setbacks, let us reach out for kindness, both to receive kindness and to offer it. Let us remain open to learning, open to gaining a wider perspective, and open to going forward into life. Let us continue to affirm the mystery of life and celebrate the gift of life. Amen, and then choose to go forward into life again, we can be mindful and intentional about way we live and contribute to the world. We can be mindful that we will create a legacy. Yet we are not able to predict the course it will take.

Personal Reflection by Worship Associate Larry Boles
Sunday, November 4, 2018

I have this great gig for a job. Last summer I went for the fifth time to Flagstaff, Arizona, where I taught a summer class at Northern Arizona University. I used to go with the whole family, but our lives lately have taken us down different paths. Mimi now works year-round, and the girls were doing their own travels, so I went to the mountains of Flagstaff alone again.

I taught two classes every day until 7:30 PM. On a Tuesday I stopped at Whole Foods to get some dinner. It was rainy, as it often is in Flagstaff in the summer.

On my way out of the store I wondered if I should go left or right out of the parking lot. I chose right. I don't honestly know what happened next,

except that I started going east, and then bam, I was faced to the west. A car had hit me. I never saw it. I breathed really hard, and I remember taking toll of myself to see if I was injured. I didn't think I was. I started to get out, but some guy who witnessed it said, "I don't think you should get out of your car." I was confused but did as I was told.

But then I just had to leave. I don't know why. But I got out of the car and walked to the curb and sat. The driver of the other car was sitting beside me. She and her boyfriend were not hurt. Both our cars were hurt. It turned out it was my fault. I couldn't remember what happened, but I signed the paper that said it was my fault. I'm paying more for insurance but am otherwise unscathed.

I am not the same person I was before the accident. I mean, I'm fine, but I think about mortality a bit more. I appreciate life a bit more too. I don't know if that's a product of the accident or some odd coincidence, but then again, maybe this is all in my head. I'm really not sure.

I think in some ways I failed. I failed to pay attention at an important time. But who hasn't done that? I failed to be present. We've all done that. But this showed me what important consequences not being mindful could have. I think about the what ifs. What if I had turned left? What if I had injured someone or worse. And this is not helpful, but it somehow matters. I think about what I could have done had I not failed that day. What I do now is breathe more. When I'm feeling stressed I breathe. When I feel confused, I breathe. And when I just don't know what to do, I breathe.

This election season is fraught with anxiety and acrimony. The activism and activity seems unprecedented, especially by women and by people who hadn't run for public office before. I have my own hopes and fears, and I am thankful to all those volunteers, donors and workers devoted to serving democracy and saving it. One of my hopes and my deepest prayer is that there will be no I am thankful to all those volunteers, donors and workers devoted to serving democracy and saving it.

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¹Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston, 1997: Shambhala), p. 8.

²Tema Okun, "Traits of White Supremacy Culture," PDF downloadable at DRWORKSBOOKS,

<http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>