

A dragon was pulling a bear into its terrible mouth.

A courageous man went and rescued the bear.

There are such helpers in the world, who rush to save anyone who cries out.

Like Mercy itself, they run toward the screaming.

And they can't be bought off.

If you were to ask one of those, “Why did you come so quickly?”

He or she would say, “Because I heard your helplessness.”

Where the lowland is, that's where the water goes.

All medicine wants is pain to cure.

And don't just ask for one mercy.

Let them flood in. Let the sky open under your feet.

Take the cotton out of your ears,

The cotton of consolations, so you can hear the sphere-music.

Push the hair out of your eyes.

Blow the phlegm from your nose,

And from your brain.

Let the wind breeze through.

Leave no residue in yourself from that bilious fever.

Take the cure for impotence,

That your manhood may shoot forth,

And a hundred new beings come of your coming.

Tear the binding from around the foot of your soul,

And let it race around the track in front of the crowd.

Loosen the knot of greed so tight on your neck

Accept your new good luck.

Give your weakness to one who helps.

Crying out loud and weeping are great resources.

A nursing mother, all she does is wait to hear her child.

Just a little beginning whimper, and she's there.

God created the child, that is, your wanting,
so that it might cry out, so that milk might come.

Cry out! Don't be stolid and silent with your pain.
Lament! And let the milk of loving flow into you.

The hard rain and wind are ways the cloud has to take care of us.

Be patient.
Respond to every call that excites your spirit.

Ignore those that make you fearful and sad,
That degrade you back toward disease and death.

Embrace Your Weakness, Embrace Your Failure

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On March 12, 2013, I traveled to Boston to meet with the UUAs ministerial committee for a preliminary credentialing review. All UU ministerial aspirants must get approval from this preliminary committee before they can meet with the UUA's final Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

Although I was a bit nervous, I was actually a bit excited and eager to meet with this six person committee. I was eager to discuss with them my call to ministry. I was eager to share with them my passion for Unitarian Universalism and what it has meant for me and for my four children that I've raised UU. I was learning and growing. I was enjoying my seminary experience.

I felt that I was on the correct path regarding my ministerial formation and development. All signs seemed to be pointing in the right direction. Unfortunately, this committee felt otherwise. They believed that I was not pursuing my spiritual development as I had been advised to do previously by other UUA advisors. Although prior to this meeting, I had reconnected with some spiritual practices that I had let lapse, that didn't seem to satisfy this committee. I was what they call "Postponed" ...meaning I had to come back and see them again after a year's time.

At first I was shocked – and it bit outraged. It just wasn't fair! I was doing the things I was advised to do yet maybe not in the most traditional way. Not fair!

Later, I just felt hurt – “crushed” would be a good word to describe it. Damaged.

I was thrust into the fire and burning coals of rejection and failure. I was shown my weaknesses and flaws and shown the door. Now that's tough for anyone to take...and something I haven't had to face too often in my life. For the most part, I've been blessed with fortune rather than misfortune.

I work hard. I do my best. I'm very dedicated. I'm generally "all in" with the passions that I pursue...and I'm generally rewarded with the results I seek...except when I don't. Sometimes life doesn't seem to care. Fate, or bad luck gets in the way and blocks my path. I'm the only one who experiences this right? It's just me, right?

So you've failed. You've crashed and burned.

I lost my job. My business failed. I had to drop out of school. My marriage fell apart. I don't know how to be a parent. I don't know how to be a good son. I'm in way over my head. I don't know what I'm doing.

Writer Thomas Moore talks about failure and inferiority. He writes:

In the context of the universe and all of nature, we are in fact quite inferior. We make mistakes, misspeak and misjudge, fail, fall down and fall apart. If we habitually disown this natural inferiority of the soul, then we will be condemned to bounce back and forth between pride and self-effacement. It makes psychological sense to affirm our inferiority, thus grounding our confidence in an accurate view of ourselves. Inferiority is only part of the picture, but to deny it is to set ourselves up for a lifetime of trying not to make mistakes and denying our faults.

Trying to live a life without failure; trying to live a mistake-free life; there is something kind of sad about that. It's a denial of who we are.

Russian folklore analyst Vladimir Propp observed that many folktales have set motifs and follow familiar patterns. For instance, take a typical hero story. Propp noted that most hero folktales involve four basic elements.

1. The hero goes on a journey of some sort
2. The hero faces an opponent who seeks to thwart them
3. The hero is aided by helpers
4. The hero, after battling the opponent, is usually left with a brand or scar that they must live with for the rest of their lives.

Sound familiar? I mean this is Harry Potter 101. Harry leaves the Dursley's home and journeys off to wizarding school at Hogwarts. At every turn, he is confronted by Lord Voldemort (i.e. "he who shall not be named"). Harry has his helpers, Ron, Hermione and the rest of the Gryffindors....and of course, from his initial encounter with Voldemort, he is left with a scar on his forehead.

I think Mr. Propp is onto something here.

Let's look at the Biblical story of Jacob. He flees his brother, from whom he stole his father Isaac's inheritance, and is helped by his mother Rebecca and later by his wife Rachel when he is running away from his father-in-law. On his journey, he is visited by an angel or demon, we're not sure just who, who wrestles with Jacob. Jacob ends up victorious but not without injury. As a result of the confrontation, Jacob's hip is thrown out of joint indicating that he must walk with a limp for the remainder of his life. That's Jacob's scar.

We can be our own heroes. We can be the heroes to our own stories by trying to do our best to lead happy, healthy, fulfilling lives. But simply trying to be heroic in this way doesn't mean that it is simply going to happen without bumps in the road – without brokenness. Being heroic comes at a price.

You must go on a journey. It could be a metaphorical journey. A journey could simply be a risk that you take; or it could be simply getting out of your comfort zone – exploring parts of yourself that are unknown to you – your growing edges. (It could begin by going to the May 20 Leadership Development workshop.)

Regardless of what journey you take, you will eventually face opponents who will confront you.... block your way. There will be people who will reject the new you – people who simply want you to be the person you've always been – and they'll block your growth at every turn. And you may battle them. And sometimes you'll lose. Sometimes you'll be hurt. Sometimes you'll be thrust into the fire and burning coals of rejection and failure. And you'll have scars that no one can see because you'll be cut and bleeding on the inside.

Since March 2013, not a day goes by when I don't think about that preliminary interview. Not a day goes by. I have carried that failure, pain and rejection with me every single day. But I did something about it too. I "Cried Out In My Weakness." I reached out to a formal spiritual advisor and to my former minister at my home congregation who has coached and guided me. And I reached out to my internship supervisor.

They all have been invaluable to me. They've been my helpers. Holding me up at times, guiding me, inspiring me to keep my eyes on the prize and that although I'd lost a battle, I needn't lose the war.

On Nov 4, 2014, a year and a half after my initial visit with the UUA's preliminary credentialing committee, I was given the thumbs-up by that same committee. Regardless of how just or unjust I feel that particular committee to be, regardless of whether or not I feel that they were right or wrong, regardless of the pain that it caused me, their initial rejection of me and the hurt that followed, has helped make me a better minister. Since that failure, there has been a focus, an edge, that I wouldn't have otherwise.

This is one of my scars. Maybe it was meant to be this way though. Artist Agnes Martin writes:

Of all the pitfalls in our paths and the tremendous delays and wanderings off the track I want to say that they are not what they seem to be. I want to say that all that seems like fantastic mistakes are not mistakes, all that seems like error is not error; and it all has to be done. That which seems like a false step is the next step.

Yes! That which seems like a false step is the next step.

I am not unique however. We all must carry our failures and pain; but what is it that makes us think that we must carry them alone? During my ministerial search process last year, I was looking for a congregation that, among other things, could embrace its weakness; that wasn't afraid to fail at times; whose members named and embraced their failures and brokenness – a heroic congregation. I was looking for a congregation that will willing to take the journey, take some risks and be comfortable with the accompanying scars. During the interview process I heard about the bumpy ride the congregation had had regarding the Black Lives Matter

movement. I heard about the conflict as to whether to even hire an interim minister. And based upon some past experiences you had with interim ministers, I heard about your resultant suspicions of the UUA. Your search committee admitted these struggles, failures and disappointments to me. And I embraced that!

I like to think of UUMAN as a place of mercy, compassion and care. But how can we help if you can't cry out in your weakness? When you get right down to it, is this really why we're here each Sunday – because there just might be something missing in your life that you can't fulfill on your own. As UU theologian Thankeka says, "Human salvation is not a solo act." Let us be your helpers while you're on your journey.

Name your weakness. Think about it this way. Do it for the person sitting next to you. Do it for me. Why? Because if we can help you in your vulnerability, if we can help you up when you fall down, you'll be standing there to pick us up, pick me up, when we fall.

Think of it. By "affirming our inferiority thus grounding our confidence in an accurate view of ourselves," just imagine what we could build here at UUMAN. The path of fearlessness is also the path that must affirm our inferiority.

I heard a quote somewhere once, a quote that I haven't forgotten, "Anything worth doing, is worth failing at."

So, allow yourself the gift of embracing your own failure; embracing your own vulnerability. Cry out in your weakness. Let us help you...so you can help us; so you can help me. Allow your failure and disappointment to chisel your resolve. Let it be the fiery furnace and burning coals to forge your true being and push you deeper toward your true calling. To the person you were born to be.