Failure Is a Possibility: Or Is It?

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, January 6, 2019

Recently, I was with a group of friends who also happen to be Unitarian Universalists. The conversation turned to how hard it is to be a good UU these days. Granted, it has probably always been hard to be a good UU, that is, to live a principled life that is in integrity with your own deeply held beliefs. While it is always challenging to live one’s faith, it feels particularly hard these days when the planet is more crowded than ever before, when authoritarianism is rising here and around the world, when the consequences of human action are catching up with us in the form of climate change, when it is apparent just how much the deck is stacked against people of color, the LGBTQ community, and those from humble beginnings, it’s hard to know the right thing to do, and then do it.

As UU’s we believe that what we do matters. Deeds, not creeds, as we are fond of saying. For us, faith is not passive but only has meaning when it is put into action. “Let your life preach louder than your lips” is what one of our Unitarian forefathers, William Ellery Channing advised.

It’s hard being a UU these days. Most often, I can barely make it past breakfast without failing to live up to one or more of our principles. It only takes turning on the news or opening the newspaper or social media to find myself disaffirming and disrespecting the inherent worth and dignity of certain people, which is the exact opposite of our first principle. Then there’s the matter of what to eat for breakfast. Did you know that there are two individual choices that are among the top seven actions with the potential to stop or even reverse climate change? – eating a plant-based diet and reducing the amount of food we throw away.

Granted, our seventh principle of respect for the interdependent web of existence, the principle that calls us to environmental stewardship is hard. Our food production and delivery systems make it difficult to make choices that are good for the environment. Most days, failure comes before I even get out of the house. It can be tempting to just go back to bed and pull the covers over my head. But then I remember the words of a favorite poem.

The poet Oriah Mountain Dreamer writes: “It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done to feed the children.” She goes on to say: “I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand at the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, 'Yes.'”

When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke to the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists in 1966, he admonished us to stay awake and to not sleep through the revolution.

It’s hard being awake these days – woke – as they say. It’s hard because being awake brings us face to face with our collective failures. The past couple of years in Unitarian Universalist history have been an awakening of sorts. Not the kind where you push the snooze button on the alarm a few times before easing yourself out of bed, but the kind where you are shaken awake because the house is on fire.

Many of you remember what may come as news to others. A couple of years ago, a hiring decision at the Unitarian Universalist Association set off a controversy – whereby a woman of color was rejected for the position, being told that while highly qualified, she wasn’t a good fit, and a white male was hired. The woman of color went public. Resignations of the president of the UUA, two senior staff members, and the Executive Director of the UUMA quickly followed.

For the first time in my more than a quarter century as a UU, I heard the words white supremacy spoken in the same sentence as my beloved, chosen faith of Unitarian Universalism. Even though we had elected an African American as president and then a president of Hispanic descent, our UU culture was, and is, steeped in unconsciously held racial bias and the perpetuation of white privilege. My transgender and non-binary friends tell me it goes even deeper than that. We have been and still are steeped in hetero-normative, cis-gender normative, white supremacist patriarchy. Ouch. While we have been doing work out in the world for racial justice and LGBTQ justice, we have failed to do the same work within our own walls.

I believe, and I may be wrong, that people of African, Caribbean, Hispanic, Latino/Latina, Arab, Asian, and Native/Indigenous descent find their way to Unitarian Universalism exactly the same way us white folk do – either born or adopted into Unitarian Universalist families or driven by their own sense of reason and logic to question the religious traditions of their culture, be it the Christian gospel and spiritual traditions of the black church, or the Catholicism or Protestant Evangelicalism of Hispanic culture – or by way of rejection due to who they are or who they love. Here they find the freedom of religious exploration – and – are confronted with the reality of having to navigate white, middle class cultural norms. If I’m wrong about any of this, please feel free to come and talk with me. It won’t be the first time I’ve failed to get it right.

The field of psychology tells us that failure builds resilience, that the strength gained in falling down and getting back up holds us in good stead as we navigate the inevitable challenges of life.

The field of education tells us that we learn at least as much from failure as we do from success.

Artists like the prolific author Neil Gaimon tell us that if we aren’t making mistakes, if we aren’t risking failure, that we are missing possibilities for something new and creative.

But what role does failure play in our religious and spiritual lives?

The word failure shares a common root with the word fallible. To be fallible is to be capable of making mistakes. To be human is to be fallible. We all make mistakes. We all fail from time to time.

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists have held an optimistic view of human nature, rejecting the doctrine of original sin, believing in the innocence of new life and the inherent goodness in each of us.

William Ellery Channing preached salvation by character, believing in the perfectibility of the human character, the means by which humankind drew closer to the likeness of God. Channing’s contemporary, Theodore Parker, preached about the moral arc of the universe and how it bends toward justice.

Another Unitarian forbear, James Freeman Clarke, in 1886, laid out 5 tenets of a Unitarian faith. He said: "We believe in The Fatherhood of God, The Brotherhood of Man, The Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, and The Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever."

We can put aside the first three – the fatherhood of god, the brotherhood of man, and the leadership of Jesus for another day and another sermon on the Christian foundations of the Unitarian Universalism of today – and focus on the humanistic proclamations of salvation by character and the progress of humankind, onward and upward forever.

As to the human character of today, we are as broken and imperfect and fallible as ever. If we define progress as movement toward the vision of an earth made fair and all her people one, we are clearly falling short.

When we fail, we have some spiritual resources to draw on.

The first is forgiveness. When we make mistakes, when we fail to live up to our ideals, we forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

Beginning again means making a new start, doing things differently. Being more awake to the realities of how white supremacy is operative in our UU culture is hard. For me it means flipping through our hymnal and rejecting some of my old favorites. Some of them use language that excludes my transgender and non-binary kin. Sometimes it’s easy to change the words brother and sister to sibling and cousin, but not always.

Jason Shelton graciously changed the language of his hymn, Standing on the Side of Love, to Answering the Call of Love, correcting the ableist language, recognizing that the ability to stand isn’t a precondition to taking a moral position. Some other hymns are borrowed – some would say misappropriated from other cultures.

Fair warning. I don’t know what your tradition is here, but I will tell you that we will not be singing We Shall Overcome on the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day. And, at yesterday’s Worship Associates retreat it was decided that even though May 5 falls on a Sunday this year, it won’t be a celebration of Cinco de Mayo. What I have learned from our immigrant neighbors and friends from Mexico is that they don’t feel honored by our recognition of that day. They would rather have us out in the community fighting for worker justice and immigration reform than having us sing Des Colores in our worship service.

Another spiritual resource we have available in the face of failure is our UU principle of acceptance of each other and encouragement to spiritual growth. We can support each other in living our UU principles to the best of our ability, doing the internal work of understanding the ways each of us have internalized the white supremacy that is part of our U.S. American cultural DNA. We have not overcome slavery. It has just changed form. The new form is the for-profit prison system. While we work to change conditions in the world around us, our principle of encouragement to spiritual growth calls us to change on the inside, individually and collectively.

The Unitarian Universalist Association created a Commission on Institutional Change. Their charge is to study how white privilege manifests in our UU culture and to make recommendations for change. We elected a woman as president of the UUA for the first time ever. She has filled the senior staff vacancies with people of color. For the first time ever, the staff at the UUA is beginning to resemble the diversity we say we want.

The UUA Board of Trustees has changed the way it is structured to be less hierarchical and more collaborative with shared leadership.

Which brings me to another spiritual resource for dealing with failure. The power of covenant. A covenant is a sacred promise to live into our highest ideals and principles. We make a covenant knowing that it will inevitably be broken. It’s as UU theologian James Luther Adams said, we are the covenant making, covenant breaking, covenant re-making people. We are fallible, after all. We will fail and we will come back into covenant. Adams tells us that a remade covenant is stronger than what existed before.

A new year stretches out ahead, a blank slate of possibility. To step out boldly into this field of possibility means risking failure. Truth is, we will fail and we will get up after the hard night and do what must be done. We will fail and we will still dare to say YES to life. We will still dare to say YES to our Unitarian Universalist faith – our hard, challenging, and life- affirming faith, knowing that we are held by the ultimate source of life that will not let us go.

May it be so.