

In Gratitude for Failure

Russell Delman November 2012

“Life is one mistake after another”- Zen master Dogen

Each year around Thanksgiving, like so many of us, I join our ancestors throughout history in thankfulness for the harvest, for the food that will see us through the winter. There is hope, humility and a deep sense of interconnectedness with all the forces that sustain our life. This year I want to acknowledge an overlooked source of nourishment- our failures.

Many times everyday I fail to meet my life with care. Often I am so lost in my self-involvement that I miss the beauty that is radiating forth or I miss the opportunities to take care of life. For me, taking care of life simply means to notice and respond to the needs of the moment. These needs might appear as really listening to my wife, making a phone call, doing the dishes, writing an email or sitting down for a restorative moment.

And what of our larger failures? Those errors that permeate our lives, the regrets that haunt our minds? Looking back on the most formative moments of my life I realize how often that a ‘mistake’ became the rich soil for powerful growth. That car accident that almost severed my spine, breaking two cervical vertebrae, resulting in a deep compassion for people experiencing intense pain. The loss of a job that invited a need for more self-reliance and inquiry. Unquestioning support for a loved one’s tragic, life-altering decision which empowered in me a deep questioning of people’s true motivations. Each painful occurrence became an absolutely essential lesson in my unfolding. I do not mean to paint a pretty picture. Each event hurt and can still hurt. Yet, as my teacher Moshe Feldenkrais would emphasize, “it is our resilience, the shock that we can withstand and still recover our stability that determines our health”. If approached with care, our failures are the ground from which compassion, humility and deep questioning can grow.

When I feel harmonious with my self and my life, there is a sense of moving through my day with presence and loving-kindness. The new moment comes and I respond, there is grace and harmony. Yet, after more than 40 years on this path of awakening, I am awed by the tenacity of my unconsciousness, how I can miss the true needs of the situation I am in. By situation I mean everything from the people around me, my inner life, the plant that needs watering, actually everything that makes up the moment.

I am also awed by the unfathomable generosity of life as the new moment, pregnant with opportunity, arises freshly. Freshly means I can start anew, born again. The art of bowing to ‘what is’ is a deep and lifelong practice. Arguing with reality is a losing strategy. When I can freely acknowledge my inadequacies then the failure in the moment becomes the blessing in the moment- we awaken to the light through our darkness. As is said in Zen, *samsara and nirvana are one!* We awaken through and to our unconsciousness, those old habits of self-contraction.

When on a path of awakening, it is our failures that are our best friends. It is through waking up in these moments of being lost that we can learn to bow. This humility opens our heart. When we can uncover warm-hearted acceptance of our own limitations, the hard shell of false identity begins to melt. Then, behind this shell, we sense the tender heart of our authentic Self. For this melting, as painful as it can be, we can be deeply grateful.

This Thanksgiving I wish you many moments of joy, beauty and love along with some failures to help enlighten your heart. Bowing to your mistakes will free your heart to love again.

*“Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt-marvelous error!-
That I had a beehive
Here in my heart.
And the golden bees
Were making white combs
And sweet honey
From my old failures.”*
(from “Time Alone” Antonio Machado)

Happy Thanksgiving