

## Failure as a Community Value

I am a philosopher both by training and by inclination and a few years ago it caused some tensions in my life. I enjoyed the work of testing foundations, theorizing alternatives, and building systems. I still do. But I was becoming more inclined to put philosophy to work at home on local projects requiring practical thinking, patience with democracy, and manual dexterity with power tools.

Besides the anticipated dangers of a theory-happy philosopher using a table saw, there were also moments of uncomfortable choice. I had volunteered my time and energy to help organize a farm and forestry tour for legislators in my rural home county that concluded with an evening harvest festival of local foods, drinks, and entertainment. The project was a year in the making with no end to the small details. About a month before the festival was scheduled to occur I was invited to attend a small conference in Matfield Green, Wes Jackson's center for the study of ecological accounting. The two events were to occur on the same weekend, and it was impossible to do both. I mulled it over a bit, but not for very long. The decision, I confess, was a rather easy one: I went west for the good company, the like minds, and a chance to try out some new ideas. And yes, I went because I thought it would be good for my career. To use Wes Jackson's apt phrases, it was a clear case of upward mobility over homecoming, an admission that at least for some of us, when push comes to shove, thinking is preferable to doing.

There are plenty of reminders where I live that civic energy needs neither the prompting nor directing of thinkers and talkers. In many of the small towns and villages in my region—including my own—there are playgrounds built with donated materials and labor. The fire departments and rescue squads are all-volunteer, and there are

numerous local parades and festivals. My village's Chamber of Commerce raised forty thousand dollars, organized an all volunteer construction crew, and built a gazebo along the Racquette River that runs through our downtown. The gazebo is now a center for a summer music festival and other assorted gatherings.

Community is, and will always be, in our nature; but so too will other impulses, goals, and beliefs, some of which work against our social instincts. Theorizing about community, the common good, and citizenship is as old as Aristotle, and its importance seems to be growing in proportion to the diminishment of our social instincts. Writers from Tocqueville to Robert Bellah to Robert Putnam have chronicled the steady erosion of community and civic participation in America, while others have promoted and advocated for a more civically-engaged lifestyle.

Much of the community infrastructure, for example, that we will need in any future community building: trust, communal labor, civic architecture and planning, neighborly relations, and all of the stories, festivals, parades, that help us to define who we are with others in place are either no longer available or severely weakened. Americans have consumed community capital while doing little to strengthen or preserve it. Two centuries of taking these community structures for granted, with little attention to their maintenance, stability, or invigoration, have placed us in a difficult position. If you think rebuilding infrastructure of any kind is easy, ask New York City officials, who almost monthly are patching the city's underground system of water, gas, and electric lines, as they pull cars out of enormous sink holes and extinguish huge fire balls on Fifth Avenue. (A recent estimate of the cost of repairing this underground urban infrastructure was put

at 90 billion dollars.) There is good reason, then, for talking and thinking before the leaking roof collapses altogether.

Theorizing about community and place is important for other reasons as well. To begin with, there is very little to draw on in either our own personal experiences of community (and it seems to be less so with each American generation) or in the Western, liberal, cultural canon. And what alternatives are there—hierarchical organizations of community, for example—we no longer accept as viable. Even the great voices of Civic assumptions and hierarchies that most of us would now reject, and they made little mention of what we would call relationship to land.

Modern theorists like Michael Sandel, Robert Putnam and Amatai Etzioni defend community against liberal attacks, call into question the modern world's assumptions, and try to fit a new communitarianism into a current political system. Much of it is good work, and should continue. But there is also room for a different approach to the problem, one that doesn't assume that the current social and political structures will always be in place or that continued access to high-energy carbon fuels is a given. We may essentially have to re-work concepts and structures and re-invent old ones that will make sense, work, and take root in the larger world of global competition and climate change, as well as in our own personal worlds of working parents, the internet, material desires and frequent relocation.

To put it another way, we are all children of the Enlightenment and we have come to expect the freedoms of movement, choice, and thought that traditional communities limited either by design or by necessity. Even contemporary communities like the Amish or the Benedictines (see Kathleen Norris' *A Cloister Walk*)—while they may be helpful as

models of what's possible—have rules, hierarchies, restrictions, necessities, and a religious spirit that may not appeal to contemporary Americans who are called to community. Enlightenment science and the fossil fuel economy it feeds have likewise made choosing a life without modern medicines or conveniences difficult, foolish, and unethical. Frankly, many Enlightenment gains are either well worth keeping or damn hard to get rid of, or both. They will certainly inform the communities we are trying to build.

I don't think we fully appreciate just how radical and difficult this call to community is, assuming that we want to move beyond nostalgia of the past, and that we want to create substantial and enduring alternatives. The call is radical because it departs fundamentally from the American experience. While communitarians and agrarians like to quote from Jefferson's writings, it's the works of Madison and Hamilton that have shaped American politics and economics, and that have effectively closed off many of the paths that might lead us back to the ideals of Jefferson and others, financial debt—Hamilton's legacy—among them. There was a historical moment during the American founding when the ideal of community and citizenship first developed in fifth century Athens and that later flourished in fifteenth century Florence might have become a reality. But Thomas Jefferson's call for a traditional republic and a nation of yeoman farmers practicing participatory democracy in Ward Republics was rejected in favor of a republic that James Madison defined as a mere "scheme of representation," a limited, representational government committed—thanks to the efforts of Alexander Hamilton—to the expansion of commerce and manufacturing. Individuality, complete with well-

protected rights and self-interested material desires became the American ideal to which its citizens adhere, and continue to do so today.

The call to community is radical too because, except for the hundreds of experiments in communal living, it has never been tried by non-native Americans before as something larger than a reaction and rebellion against the status quo. That is, there has been no coalescing of these experiments in community into something large enough to challenge the current world view with an equally plausible alternative.

The most difficult challenge in rethinking community and place is how to make sense of them in the American context of individual freedom and choice. Traditional communities formed and were maintained by numerous natural constraints (weather, food scarcity, remoteness) and social necessities (rules and practices concerning marriage, inheritance, care of the elderly and sick, etc.). Such constraints are not always harmful or evil; indeed, given the right circumstance and when borne well they help individuals and communities to flourish.

But because the Enlightenment has vigorously sought to free us from these limitations, communities must now depend for their formation upon people willing to accept constraints and to choose necessities, when all the while the dominant culture tells them otherwise. Social constraints are by and large prohibited by law, and natural constraints are increasingly mitigated by technology: the loss of the Sabbath as a day of rest, for example, or getting away from telephones while on vacation.

If creating and living in a community implies some notion of limiting choice for the common good, the good of particular others (family), or even our own good, and if we allow (as we probably should) that individuals should always be free to opt out of these

choices (about whom to marry, for example, or what profession to pursue, or where to live), then we are left with communities that are held together by the same force of choice that can break them up: choice. Perhaps this is best we can do, and like modern American marriages, while there are more divorces, the marriages that do hold together are often stronger precisely because they are chosen.

In any case, we should be careful what we wish for. The call for community and place as something more than nostalgia or rebellion is new. Revolutions, whether cultural, political, or scientific, sometime take directions unintended and unforeseen by the revolutionaries.

The central paradox of the new community is that what was once a social or natural constraint—the glue—in traditional communities, must now—in a post-Enlightenment world—be consciously chosen or accepted by individuals. The great challenge for contemporary theorists of community is to accept up front the American experience of choice, including the choice to opt out of community. We have to theorize anew about community, citizenship, and place because the community structures that have come before us may not be all that helpful for the community structures that lie ahead of us. We will have to build not rebuild; vitalize not revitalize; discover, not rediscover community.

One approach to a community-based research agenda would seek to identify and understand the building blocks of traditional communities, assess their value in the new community, and, if possible, to recast them as matters of choice and commitment.

In my more pessimistic moments I would say that we haven't the foggiest idea of how to begin or proceed or entice. It too often feels like the vision-impaired leading the

uninterested. "Vision-impaired" because even our best visionaries are profoundly shaped by the culture they are trying to change; and because where we are headed is so different from where we've been. The "uninterested" is the general population influenced by a heavily advertised and subsidized version of the American Dream that, by and large, makes no mention of community and place except to sell products. We should at least not close off any possibilities or obvious paradoxes. Communitarian organizations depend on fossil fuel, fax machines, and corporate donations to do their work. I have renewed old friendships on the internet. Most of what we write gets printed on paper that comes either from old growth forests, tree farms, or the high-tech systems that turn old paper into new.

And there are other paradoxes as well. Here's one: failure is a community value, a glue that holds and supports, a teacher of skills and limits, and not easily disposed of by technological gizmos.

Failure is a keystone of traditional communities, built into the fabric of everyday life, and it will likely be a component of the new community. A philosophy of failure recognizes, expects, accepts, and finds ways to make use of human limits, ignorance, and fallibility. It assumes that we know little about the creator, the world, or even ourselves. Failure, as I will describe it, is not a failing or a defeat, not the dreaded opposite of success, not something to be avoided, feared, despised. And it's a good thing too, because failure is an everyday experience. In the act of failing is an opening to a process of self-awareness that puts us in touch with others: with our families, our communities, our universe, our God. A spirituality of failure is the manifestation of these relationships with others. A psychology of failure takes failure as a given and learns to live with it,

and even to prosper with it. Failure can even be seen as something valuable, as a virtue, as something that we can come to do well, with grace, with joy.

Failure is a community value because it invites the sharing of responsibility, grief, labor, stories, rituals, skills, and humor. Failing well or gracefully keeps communities together and prospering in even the darkest of times. Amidst failure we are encouraged to think of others as well as ourselves. Members of traditional communities are generally conservative/traditional in their outlook, and skeptical of innovations both because they expect them to fail, and because they see themselves as better off with expected and integrated failures (when the barn burns, it is rebuilt by the community), than with unexpected and un-integrated failures (fire insurance will not cover this particular fire because the last payment was late). Most importantly, failure is best learned in a family and a community setting where it can be experienced incrementally and with the necessary support, and where we can learn to laugh not at others, but at ourselves.

If this praise of failure sounds odd and downright unpatriotic, it is, perhaps, because we live in a culture premised on success, not failure; where the standard curricula in the home, sanctuary, classroom, and workplace teaches us that we are limited not by our nature or our inherent ignorance, but by our imaginations. From our youngest days we are taught to believe that nature can be controlled, that choices can be foolproof if they are made carefully enough, that our lives are ours to steer in any direction that we choose.

The lesson continues: we are limited not by our nature or our inherent ignorance, but by our imaginations. We know what we are doing. We can fix our mistakes. Failures of nature can be defeated with technology, money, power, and violence. Human failures, on the other hand, are caused by weakness or laziness. All of this should sound familiar.

The language of our success culture includes phrases like "self-made," "having it all," "a win-win situation," "quality time," "playing God," and "death with dignity."

Our obsession with sports and with winning also reflects a culture of success. I have heard of Olympians who carelessly toss their silver and bronze medals into drawers while the gold medals are prominently displayed. Second place might as well be last place.

In a success culture like ours failure is a vice. Parents, coaches, teachers, guidance councilors, television actors, sports figures, and rock stars teach our children how to succeed, but not how to fail. A success culture takes itself seriously; failure is anything but a laughing matter. A stiff upper lip steels us against catastrophe. Instead, when failure does inevitably come, it is greeted with despair, anger, and resentment. Witness the high suicide rate among teenagers, the high divorce rate, and the ever-present stress that workers feel because their jobs allow little room for failure.

The industrial age tried to make failure obsolete, or to at least give it a bad name: "Failure is not an option." Although it is too early to tell, the information age now appears to be making it possible for success and failure to disappear altogether, along with our communities, our sense of civility, and perhaps even our sense of self. (How can an alias in cyberspace, neither a "who" nor a "where," be said to succeed or fail?) If there is ever a remake of Homer's *Odyssey*, the Cyclops will be played by the one-eyed computer/television monitor "who doesn't care a jot for his neighbors."

The quest for success becomes ultimately the pursuit of self-importance in a disconnected world. Success pits me against the odds, against you, against nature, death, God, the universe, against failure.

Success erodes communities because it highlights our individuality and turns us outward toward those conferring the honors and away from our ordinary neighbors. We are also less inclined to share success with others; like private property, success is ours in a way that shuts out other people. The technological tools of success likewise inhibit our connections with others. We simply don't need each other when our failures are insured or designed out of the system with the newest gadgets. Everything from air conditioning to television, computers, and tinted car windows drives us inside, apart, away.

There are ancient stories that speak to our predicament, though not sympathetically. The story of the biblical Job is still compelling because Job is the modern symbol of success. He's made it! He has a good marriage, grown and prosperous children, material wealth, and status in the community. And he's careful about protecting it; indeed, he's extremely worried that he might lose everything. He worships God and follows all of the rules. He even purifies his children every year whether they need it or not.

Were he alive today Job would worship God no doubt, but he would also have investments, bank accounts, long-term health care insurance, and life insurance. He would jog, eat healthy foods, take vitamins, have his cholesterol checked, have car, smoke, and carbon monoxide alarms. He would also give his children the best of everything: the best schools and neighborhoods, music and dance lessons, t-ball, little league, soccer, gymnastics—you can make your own additions to this list—trips to Disney, and endless holiday gifts. He would probably also take an anti-anxiety/anti-depression medication.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Annually, over \$800 million dollars are spent on "anti-anxiety pills". The U.S. accounts for 5% of the world's population and consumes 33% of the pills.-Neurogen (<http://www.stressless.com/stressinfo.cfm?CFID=835&CFTOKEN=70302035>)

Job would, in short, protect himself against every possible calamity, and plan for the future, leaving nothing to chance. And well he should. But he, and we, ought not to be surprised when these protections and plans fail.

Failure is commonplace, success rare.

In the Book of Job, the Voice from the Whirlwind is clear. The universe is wonderful and complete, filled with predators and prey, life and death. The poet Gary Snyder says "that to acknowledge that each of us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is to allow the sacred to enter and to accept the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporal personal being."<sup>2</sup>

If "death is the mother of beauty," as Wallace Stevens observes, then failure is the operating system of the universe.

The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that all systems tend toward disorder: a clean house will not stay that way for long. Nor will our ordered lives remain ordered. No clock or date book or set of routines will make it thus.

It is only one of nine planets that is possessed of life, a little island of temporary order.

The fossil record is ninety-nine percent failure, life forms coming and going with remorseless regularity.

And isn't failure the better teacher, lifelong lessons that are stronger than memory?

Failure is also the central theme of the West's oldest stories: Adam and Eve are evicted for failure to comply; Odysseus takes nineteen years to get home, and then only for the weekend. The Greek tragedies explore the ignorance of human flaws and the heroic, though pitiful, acceptance of their consequences. The Wisdom Literature of the Bible (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job) states boldly that humans are limited in

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<sup>2</sup> *The Practice of the Wild*, p. 19.

what they can know, control, or judge. God's ways are inscrutable; there is a time for all things, including our deaths; take comfort in knowing that you are dust.

The central messages of the gospels are love and forgiveness. Jesus spends his time with society's losers; the forgiveness of sins is the forgiveness of human failings.

At the end of *Black Elk Speaks*, the Lakota medicine man Black Elk tells the Great Spirit that he has failed: "A mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it....The People's dream died in the bloody snow." Though he weeps, Black Elk does not despair. He says "I have failed, but may you make my people live." Such a comment could be spoken only from a man raised in a culture that experienced, taught, accepted, and even celebrated failure (I am thinking here of the Lakota Heyoka Ceremony where everything is backwards, and where the laughing face of truth replaces the weeping face.

In Buddhism the First Noble Truth is the existence of suffering. Reincarnation assumes failure over many lifetimes. And how is it that the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama, despite his living in exile, and the ongoing destruction of his homeland, has one of the best laughs going? I'll come back to laughter.

The philosopher Aristotle outlines an ethical system that accepts human limitations and temptations. He tells us that it is far easier to miss the moral target than to hit it.

The Stoic philosophers, particularly Epictetus, tell us that happiness comes when we control what we can (the list is very short) and when we accept the rest. Epictetus advises us to experience daily death and decay so that when it occurs to us or to someone we love, we will not be shocked. This advice is not as morose as it sounds: fresh flowers, candles at dinner, or a backyard compost heap will teach these lessons nicely.

Hunter/gatherer societies experience a high rate of failure, one-in-ten at their best. (Imagine being successful at the supermarket only ten percent of the time.) It is not surprising, then, that they invest their landscapes with spirits, and begin their hunts with prayers and offerings. And with so much potential failure, time is best perceived in these societies as a cycle rather than a line: always another chance, another hunt, another spring.

Craft cultures acquire and teach their skills slowly over time; the apprentice system assumes failure, and even the master remembers his own master's superior skills. (I do not think I am alone when I admit to feeling grossly inferior to my most influential teachers).

Family life too is about the slow process of living together, raising children, and running a household. In the hundred daily tasks and interactions there is much room for failure, and how often it is that we do fail; sometimes the house is such a disaster that all we can do is laugh. It's what we do with these failures and how well we integrate them into our larger lives that matter.

Agricultural communities know a good deal about failure. I spent some time working on a dairy farm with my good friend Clark Decker, a fifth generation dairy farmer. It was my first real experience of farm life, and I was surprised first by the number of things that went wrong on any given day: from weather, to animals, to machinery, to employees, to bill collectors; and second, by how calm, even lighthearted, Clark was about it all. When I would ask how things were going, he would say with a chuckle "I'm gaining." He knew, of course, that he isn't catching up and that he never will catch up. There is always something else going on, something else to go wrong.

But mixed in with his eighteen hour, seven day weeks are plenty of conversation, family time, and good humor (Clark has a great laugh). With all the potential for failure on a farm it is ironic, but perfectly explainable, that farmers are usually willing to stop what they are doing to help a stranger. I have had more than one Amishman tell me that he had all day when I have apologized for taking up his time.

I have always known that farming required a large number of skills, but I now think that one of the most important skills is knowing how to fail. (John Berger's *Pig Earth* is an insightful and compassionate look at the ways in which failure is integrated into peasant culture.)<sup>3</sup>

A spirituality of failure recognizes, expects, accepts, and finds ways to make use of human limits, ignorance, and fallibility. It assumes that we know little about the creator, the world, or even ourselves. A spirituality of failure takes failure as a given and learns to live with it, and even to prosper with it. The corollary to Wes Jackson's wonderful phrase about our being a billion times more ignorant than we are knowledgeable is that we are likely to fail about a billion times more often than we are to succeed. I have been keeping an informal count in my life that supports these numbers.

If success is a pursuit, failure is a process, not of self-importance, but of self-awareness that opens outward to the whole world, and to everyone and everything in it.

Failure is a community value. It invites the sharing of responsibility, grief, labor, stories, rituals, skills, and humor.

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3 In terms of decreasing the chances of failure, agricultural domestication was an improvement over hunting and gathering. There was/is still plenty of failure, but also a bit more control and, hence, the feeling of success. But the success of domestication is nothing compared to the control and success brought by the industrial age, and now the information age. Enlightenment science and the technologies and industries it produces try to do away with uncertainty, starvation, sickness, desires, death, and even God; in short, all the usual failures a community comes to expect.

Humor and laughter keep appearing in my examples of failure, though they are strangely absent in our success culture except when aimed at someone else. Laughter is failure's song: light, ironic, accepting, halfway to enlightenment.

I have a friend, Sean Ward, who has coined the phrase "Enlighten Up!" His sense of humor has served him well in his personal struggles: his brother's schizophrenia, the abandonment of his nephew by relatives, and the death to cancer of his sister, mother, and father. (At one point, his mother and sister lay dying in their respective bedrooms.) And Sean can say to himself and to others "Enlighten Up!"

Failing well or gracefully keeps communities together and prospering in even the darkest of times. Amidst failure we are encouraged to think of others as well as ourselves. And failure is best learned in a family and a community setting where it can be experienced incrementally and with the necessary support, and where we can learn to laugh not at others, but with others and at ourselves.

When we allow failure back into our lives there can be less stress and fewer surprises. How can we be surprised by failure when we are expecting it? We can slow down, knowing that we cannot get it all done, whatever "it" is.

Now comes the hard part. If success is one of those ghosts that have eroded community life and that threaten the formation of new communities, how might we choose or commit ourselves to a philosophy of failure rather than to a philosophy of success? If failure is an important part of community, and if the dominant culture—the one we've all been raised in—is hell-bent on failure's extinction, how might we create new communities? It sounds exceedingly odd to say that we will have to choose failure. Although traditional communities accept failure, they do not willingly choose it. Even

the Amish use technology to mitigate against failures, and every farmer I know works hard to prevent the failures he's come to expect. They are simply better prepared than the rest of us to accept failure when it does come.

Nor can we depend on failure-as-a-given to generate new communities.

There are simply too many success stories and examples to block the view and shorten the attention span of the folks who will inhabit these communities.

Efforts to shock the success culture and to weaken its confidence with talk about crisis, doomsday, and the catastrophic failures of the modern world are often blunted by hyperbole, false predictions, and by the fact that much of the modern world appears to be chugging along nicely. For every failure I cite, my engineering friends cite a success.

If failure is a community value we will have to find ways to choose what I call practices of failure: situations, experiences, disciplines whereby we confront the world and ourselves in their most basic forms: natural settings, working with our hands, long-term commitments, direct interaction with others, life and death. It is within such practices, and with others, that failure becomes at first bearable, then accepted, and finally enlightening. I first started to think about failure as a father of four young children, each different, one of whom has autism, and all of them wanting the love and attention they deserve right now. I see failure as a college professor as well: teaching moments lost to my own inattention, students missed in a sea of faces.

Meditations of failure come too on my daily walks around Potsdam; the community of life I observe and in which I participate offers as many lessons of failure as I can absorb.

It is within such practices, and with others, that failure becomes at first bearable, then accepted, and finally enlightening. And if Sean, Clark, and the Dalai Lama are any

indication, laughter of the right sort certainly doesn't hurt one's chances of making sense and good use of failure. At the very least, laughter lightens the load.

As teachers and students we will need to reread and reinterpret the Western canon with an eye toward stories of failure, and to discover and integrate the stories of failure-based cultures. We will need to teach ourselves and our children how to fail well, how to turn failure into character, and how to turn groups of individuals into communities. We will also need to reinterpret failure not as tragic but as comic, and here I use Joseph Meeker's definition of comic: "an image of human adaptation to the world and acceptance of its given conditions without escape, rebellion, or egoistic insistence upon human centrality."<sup>4</sup>

It is through the opening of failure that the divine can enter as well. The Benedictine monk, Thomas Merton, used to tell his students to be anything they wanted—drunks, bastards—to engage in foolishness of all sorts, but at all costs to avoid one thing: success. Kathleen Norris, in her book *The Cloister Walk*, says that it is "through our failings and weaknesses, our ways of imperfection that we find God and God finds us, the God who can turn any mess we have made to the good."

Too much focus on success destroys community, but what amount and type of failure, if any, will be needed for our new communities to prosper? And how will we sell it, teach it, and embrace it ourselves? As I look at the half-filled, one-eyed computer Cyclops-screen in front of me, at all the talking and theorizing ahead of me, and at all of the disinterest in, and active hostility toward, community around me, I am quite certain that we'll fail in our efforts at community building. But this feeling of certainty strikes

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<sup>4</sup> *The Comedy of Survival: In Search of an Environmental Ethics*, Los Angeles: Guild of Tutors Press, 1980, p. 149

me as okay and just a little bit funny. Failure invites community. Maybe there's hope after all.

But enough talk about success and failure. These are human constructs. Beyond words and images is a world without categories, a world larger than us and one that we share with others. It is the world that Job sees and finally understands: the world as it is. It is the world of Lao Tzu's Tao, the Great Mother, "empty yet inexhaustible", giving birth to infinite worlds.

Unlike Job, we are each of us probably a long way off from taking comfort that we are dust. But a soft and knowing smile the next time we fail—probably within the next hour or two—will signal our willingness to consider the possibility of such a comfort.

“Enlighten Up!”