
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

June 29, 2014

What to Do With Failure

*“So then let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us,
since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us.”*

Hebrews 12:1 (Common English Bible)

The best treatment of failure I have ever read is [Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success](#) by John Maxwell. It may be one of the most important books I have read in my twenty-seven years of ministry. I am familiar with failure. In fact, my first course of study for ministry – New Testament Greek – ended in failure. I gave considerable effort to my studies, studying late into the night several times a week and memorizing hundreds of Greek words. But with all the effort I could summon I simply could not master the language. I did eventually pass this course requirement after working with a tutor and four years later I completed my theology degree. A glance at my academic transcript will show that I did well with my graduate studies – except for one letter grade of “F” that can never be removed.

It is very likely that you have fallen short somewhere in your life. Failure may be one of the most shared experiences that bind us together. Celebrities on the screen and the stage, larger than life athletes and political leaders speak to the common experience of failure. Watch any Olympic Games and every success by one athlete is tempered with the devastating failure of another. Abraham Lincoln lost nearly every political race he entered until he won the presidency of the United States. There seems to be no shortage of failure.

What are we to do with failure? According to John Maxwell the difference between average people and those who achieve great success is their perception of and response to failure. Either we are utterly defeated by failure or we gather the pieces of our disappointment and look carefully at them to learn how to move forward. I have found Maxwell’s advice to sustain me through many professional and personal challenges and disappointments.

The Apostle Paul also has a word for failure – stay in the race! Life is strenuous and the course laid-out before us can be difficult. Most of us will fall down. Yet, Paul inspires every one of us to get back in the race by pointing to those who have gone before us, have completed the course and now cheer us on. The “great cloud of witnesses” Paul speaks of are more than people who can give applause, they are people who offer their own lives as evidence that the course can be completed. Their lives serve as a template for how to prepare for the race, how to spiritually care for ourselves and maintain strength during the race and inspiration to complete the journey well. Failure may be a common experience but our response to failure can be an uncommon determination to join those who have gone before us.

Protect me from defeating thoughts when I fail, O Lord. Strengthen me by a great cloud of witnesses who have traveled before me and help me to finish well for Christ’s glory. Amen.

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Reprinted from Dr. Hood’s June 19, 2014 blog.