

FINDING OUR WAY THROUGH FAILURE  
Worship Service at Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
26 JULY 2009

CALL TO WORSHIP  
By Vanessa Jean Landau

Our humanity blesses us with a capacity for vision, not merely of who we are but also, and just as vital, whom we aspire to be. As we aspire to that vision, the random and ordered chaos of life presents opportunities and obstacles, and we bring our character to bear on the course of events. Given an array of choices, degrees of success and failure transpire and our spiritual work emerges.

A brush with failure, undesirable at first meeting, provides rich material for spiritual work. And if we have shown a moral failing, our responsibility—that is, our ability to respond—calls us to restore the honor in our dealings. We are thus given the spiritual work of transformation; we are called to transform and be transformed by failure. Consider, therefore, the practices of resiliency.

Even as failure poses a price, resiliency assures a profit. According to a theoretical framework that I conceived, the *Resiliency Fitness Paradigm*, the competencies that increase profit over price parallel those of an athlete who increases fitness over physical limitations. The spiritual work of transformation renders us psychosocial athletes, ever developing and refining...

fortitude  
perseverance  
autonomy

adaptability  
stability  
mastery

precision  
efficiency  
virtue

We develop and refine our increasingly dynamic character amid challenging circumstances by exercising our resiliency. How do you exercise your resiliency? What is the nature of your spiritual work? I call us into worship this morning with a commitment to aspire to manifest our vision fearlessly, to practice our resiliency rigorously, and to tend the spiritual work of transformation faithfully.

[We will now sing Hymn 184. Audrey will play it through once and we shall sing it three times through. Please stand in body or spirit and join in singing Be Ye Lamps Unto Yourselves... Hymn 184.]

## SERMON PART 1: A FRAMEWORK FOR FAILURE

By Bruce L. Baker

Failure is a fact of life. We all experience it. Even the most successful among us. Winston Churchill expressed this when he said “success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.”

This morning we will be discussing three types of failure: First, failing to meet our own expectations, second, letting other people down, and, third, moral failure such as when we bring harm to ourselves or others through deceit, dishonesty or destructiveness. We experience all of these

I will use one story from my own life to demonstrate the devastating impact of failure. When I was fifteen, I was part of a church youth group that put on a shortened version of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I had a small but important role that only had three lines, but my third line came at the climax and embodied the central meaning of the whole show. In rehearsal the show was a little rough, but I did fine.

Our performance was part of a larger community celebration attended by a large audience of several hundred people. Unlike the rehearsal, the performance went very well. The energy was high among the cast and audience alike. I delivered my first two lines well, but then came the cue for my third line, at the climax, and suddenly ... I went blank. I stood there in the spotlight and in the panic of the moment, I couldn't bring the words out. For many awkward embarrassing painful seconds, I just stood there. I finally did come up with the lines, but the damage was done, the high energy was deflated and replaced by awkward embarrassment.

The production concluded, and there was a cast party afterwards. I attended but I was miserable. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want to be seen, or even to exist. The experience was so painful that I have avoided any serious dramatic performance since then.

My consolation now is that we all have some similar story. All of us have failed at something, or made some critical mistake and as a consequence we have felt embarrassment, loss of dignity, loss of self confidence, rejection, alienation, anger, and defensiveness.

If it is so common, why does the disappointment register such a blow? What is it that makes failure such a painful, but integral part of human experience? I believe it arises from our great innate creative potential. We are blessed with such imagination and creativity that we can envision possible realities that are better and more desirable than what we currently see and experience. And we desperately want to fulfill these visions. But making these a reality is often quite difficult, and despite intense efforts we often fail to bring them about.

This gap between our vision and our reality is pain.

We feel this pain when we don't meet our own personal standards or expectations. We feel this pain even more when we fail to meet the hopes and legitimate expectations of others. The need for social approval bears heavily on the fear and dread we feel when we do not measure up. Letting down people we love is even more excruciating. When I forgot my lines in my youth

group play it was much more than a personal mistake, I let down the audience, and I let down my friends.

Every religious tradition offers some strategy for bridging the gap between our vision and our reality, and dealing with the consequences of failure. In my life I have used several different strategies from the conservative religious tradition in which I was raised. Early in my life I followed a strategy of strict obedience to a specific set of behaviors. As long as I was “obedient” to the established code, my moral worth was affirmed and my failures in other areas would be forgiven. Later I followed a different strategy of salvation through grace. In this strategy it was not possible for me to succeed or fail, because I had turned my life over to a higher power, and any success or failure was according to the will or for the glory of that higher power. Both of these strategies were effective and helpful to me. But they also had weaknesses.

The strategy I now use is based on a metaphor, well known among, Unitarian Universalists: that life is a journey. This view holds that our joy in life is not primarily derived from achieving success, but from the growth we experience in the process of moving towards well selected goals inspired by a life affirming vision. Our object is not to be perfect or to arrive at a fixed pre-defined destination, but to move along our paths to experience all that life has to offer, and to find as much love, laughter, beauty, understanding, and joy as we can along the way.

Another way to look at it is to see our lives as a story. We live this story each day by the visions we form, the conflicts we experience, the questions we ask, the answers we find, and the actions we take. The quality of our lives can be measured by the quality of the story. A life with a rich plot and many adventures, challenges, and failures is more interesting, rewarding and fulfilling than stories where you already know how it will end.

Seeing life as a journey this way has four advantages. First, and most importantly it allows us to see and accept who we are and what we have done without unnecessary guilt. This is because our worth and value are not dependent on any given standard of success. We all have inherent worth and dignity regardless of who we are and where ever we start or end our life journeys.

Second, the journey approach alleviates fear. To move forward perfection is not expected or required. In fact we can often make more progress and find more enjoyment by doing or trying things imperfectly. It is often true As I once heard Barbara Wells ten Hove say “if something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.” This notion encourages us to see what moves us along our own personal path. This makes us less dependent on social approval and less fearful of social disapproval.

Third, the journey approach leaves us free to make our own choices and define our own path in accordance with our own understanding, within the context of a responsible search for truth and meaning. .

Finally, the journey approach motivates us to change, because we do not have to compromise on our vision, or accept that we cannot change. We can be more than we are. We can enjoy a richer and fuller life. We can continue to learn and grow, despite impediments, obstacles, and handicaps that stand in our way. The value and enjoyment that we derive from life is by moving forward, growing, and making progress on our journey.

The journey is very personal.. But it isn't just a solo performance. Our lives and our journeys are inextricably integrated with and linked to the lives and journeys of others. Whenever people gather together to form a community to achieve a common purpose, a collective journey begins, and each member of that community plays a part in its story. The life of the communities of which we are a part broaden and enrich our individual journeys. In the life of a community success and failure are shared.

With this vision and understanding of life as a personal and collective journey we are not only allowed to try, and allowed to fail, we are compelled to do so. Our happiness and our growth our sense of joy and fulfillment depend on it.

We will now celebrate the journey by singing the first two verses of hymn # 324 Where My Free Spirit Onward Leads. Please rise as you are willing and able.

## SERMON PART 2: RECOVERING FROM MORAL FAILURE

By Bruce L. Baker

Nothing enriches and deepens our journey more than when we share it with another person. Our relationships with others create the context of our life journeys. They magnify, broaden and enhance our experience,

Nothing can do more harm to our journey than when we do harm to ourselves, or to others, especially to those with whom we share a path. Acts of deceit, dishonesty, and destruction put a stop to all progress to our life affirming journeys, and constitute moral failings. A life oriented toward short-sighted and selfish gain at the expense of others leads to misery and unhappiness for all.

Even though we know this, we are often drawn to bad conduct out of fear, stress, or anger, or simply out ignorance or complacency. None of us are immune and we are almost certainly far less aware of the harms that we have done than we are of the harms done against us. This reality endangers our relationships and our happiness, and imperils progress on our individual and collective journeys.

A moral failing requires us to stop our progress, go back, and retake that step. I will illustrate this with a personal story.

Years ago I had a housemate who I will call John. He was a recovering alcoholic and we became friends. After about two years of living together he suffered a tragedy in his life and fell back into alcoholism. His life began to disintegrate quickly. He had a supportive girl friend, who I will call Sharon, who was trying to help him to stop drinking. One day Sharon called him. I answered the phone, She asked for John, but John didn't want to talk to her. He said, "tell her I'm not here." So without any thought I told Sharon "he's not here." She accepted this and began to tell me about some of her concerns, and fears, and I saw that it would be really good for her to talk to him, and I began to feel uncomfortable with the fact that I had just lied to protect and enable him. Sharon sensed this and then asked, if he wasn't actually there. I admitted he was, and she demanded that I get him. I complied over John's objections.

Later Sharon called me back and was angry with me. Why did I lie about his whereabouts? I was defensive and I denied it. “What do you mean I lied. I was the one who told you he was here.” I had forgotten what I had done. I completely blocked it out of my memory,.

Sharon went through our whole conversation and her recollection was accurate, and I realized that in fact I had actually lied not only during our conversation, but also to myself afterwards. I was not immune to denial.

It hurt to acknowledge this failing, but to continue in denial was far worse. It would leave my own character flaw intact and my defensiveness would only further damage my relations with both of them.

When we make such a mistake we have to stop our journey, take a step back, undo the harm, and set a new direction. We must get off the path of moral failing as soon as possible.

Getting off that path requires four steps each starting with an r: recognition, responsibility, restitution, and resolve. The first step is to recognize the moral failing. This is often the most difficult because our ego’s defenses will try to trick us into justifying, or rationalizing actions that we would not accept in others. In my dealings with Sharon it took a careful step by step account of events for me to see my own deceit. I was shocked at how easily I had come to believe a story so different from what had actually happened. But this is not uncommon. We all have this tendency.

The second step is to take responsibility for what we have done. This means acknowledging our mistakes to others, and being willing to bear the cost. In essence this is a step backward into the past. To heal my relationship with Sharon, I acknowledged my error and apologized for deceiving her. It was a painful but a healing act.

The third step is to make some form of restitution to undo the harm. Restoring what has been lost or destroyed rebuilds relationships, and restores trust. My apology to Sharon, was followed by an offer to discuss this deception with John. This I did and it restored some of the lost confidence that Sharon had in me.

Finally, the last step is to resolve to do differently. This requires taking the time to look inside and confront the weakness in ourselves to make it stronger. It requires that we ask ourselves what we could have done differently and then empowering ourselves to behave that way if given the same opportunity. It is like going back to where we were and retaking the step, this time in the right direction.. In reflecting on my actions with Sharon and John, I found that I was not maintaining appropriate boundaries between myself and my housemate. I was so easily sympathetic to John’s immediate demands, that I neglected his real long term interests. I resolved to guard the integrity of my word more carefully, and not let short sighted personal convenience cause me to compromise my honesty.

### Contemplation:

Let me now suggest a moment of contemplation. Let us take a moment to go within ourselves. Go to a caring loving place within, that is kind and accepting of ourselves and others. And in

this kind loving space within, let us reflect on an act or a time when we may have done harm to ourselves or another. And without judgment of ourselves or others let us look at what happened with openness and acceptance. And let that loving healing spirit within us show us what it was within us that caused us to do harm. What were we holding on to that caused us to do harm. And when we see what we were holding on to, whether it be a fear, or an insecurity, or some thing else, let us resolve to let it go. And as we let it go, let us also let go of any shame, guilt, or anger and instead let our hearts be filled with forgiveness, love, and healing, and a determination to move forward with love and kindness.

### SERMON PART 3: THIS MOST NOBLE WORK By Vanessa Jean Landau

Regarding the gap between our vision and our reality, the objective is neither to be exempt from failure nor is it to be immune from pain. The objective is to cultivate self-transformation so that we may adapt and be the finer for it. I find this a beautiful and healing sentiment yet it can be a daunting one. How do we do it? How do we practice the resiliency that allows self-transformation?

The simple answer is we exercise the very resiliency that we wish to build. But how do we exercise resiliency if we lack resiliency? By virtue of our humanity, we are endowed with the instinct to survive and to thrive, the propensity to solve problems, and the basic competencies to do so. Our basic competencies—which comprise our character—and our resiliency—which entails our coping response or practices—reciprocally reinforce one another: We demonstrate our competencies in order to exercise or practice resiliency and, as we practice resiliency, we build our competencies.

Carl C. Bell, MD, University of Illinois, and expert on resiliency through athletics, states it plainly: “The strategy for developing resilience is very similar to how one develops muscular strength. You have to exercise the muscles to make them stronger” and to better equip them to bear increased stress. Charles Carver, PhD, University of Miami, and contributor to the field of health psychology expounds upon this notion, saying, “Muscle development occurs when a muscle is systematically worked *beyond its ability* to respond well. [...beyond its ability to respond well, which may constitute failure.] Without that stress there is no growth and development in strength.”

So, we must exercise our coping response to an OVERLOAD of stress in order to improve resiliency. Carver continues, saying that resiliency transpires “precisely because (our) existing understanding of reality is too limited to handle (our) current experiences.” Thus, an OVERLOAD of stress taxes our systems and actually prepares us to deliver an adaptive response, which we sometimes fail to give.

Bruce’s notions for reflecting on moral failure and correcting our path speak to resiliency as I conceive it in the Resiliency Fitness Paradigm. [As I continue, please refer to the insert in your Order of Service and familiarize yourself with the elements of the Paradigm... PAUSE.]

Bruce suggests that, when we make a mistake, we stop our journey in order to make amends so that we may move forward with greater integrity. The tripartite process before us then is that of **OVERLOAD – RECOVERY – and – ADAPTATION**. This is how we build athleticism and, similarly, resiliency. [Recall, if you will, a moral failure that you have experienced, a mistake that resulted in a notable cost to your serenity or that disrupted a relationship.]

First, facing a failure, we must summon the courage, or FORTITUDE, and the humility, a VIRTUE, to overcome the ego defenses and to recognize that we have, in our own estimation, diverged from an honorable path. STRENGTH and GRACE allow us to admit the nature of our failure to ourselves. Simultaneously, acknowledgment of a mistake requires self-appraisal, a building block of AUTONOMY, or self-governance. Whether in athletics or in resiliency, self-appraisal serves our POWER to learn and mature. It also requires perceptive PRECISION for ACCURACY in understanding the situation. Only then can we begin self-transformation, restore fair dealings, and continue a more honorable journey.

Second, assuming responsibility—that is, the *ability to respond*—is the seat of our POWER. We shoulder the burden of our failure as if bearing a heavy weight, and the exercising of our *ability to respond* is how we experience **OVERLOAD**. Thus, we demonstrate our character so that we may transform the defect that led to the failure. The STRENGTHENING of the character may then facilitate integrity and avert similar failures in the future or at least help us recover from such failures with greater SPEED, thereby minimizing the price that we pay for the failure with EFFICIENCY.

Third, although RESTITUTION is not paralleled in the Resiliency Fitness Paradigm, I consider the amends part of **OVERLOAD**. The amends engage AUTONOMY and VIRTUES, such as humility and benevolence, further exercising our *ability to respond*. Thus, POWER and GRACE predicate **RECOVERY** and a new level of integrity. Having compromised our integrity, we compromised our POWER, BALANCE, and other competencies. With RECOVERY we re-assert AUTONOMY, STABILITY, etc. We develop more PRECISION in word and deed, and an AGILITY of character that coordinates our thoughts, feelings, values, principles, and beliefs. And the integrity reflects improved MASTERY of self and of coping.

Fourth, the re-establishment of integrity and the RESOLUTION to do better bespeak **RECOVERY**. RECOVERY entails a quieting of the muscles or of the character. In the time it takes to heal the gap between our vision of ourselves and the reality of our failure, we learn our lessons and adapt. RESTORATION of fair dealings, then, is part of **ADAPTATION**. We change to accommodate new ways of being so that, at best, we demonstrate integrity and, again, avert similar failures in the future or at least recover from such failures with greater SPEED, thereby minimizing the price we pay for the failure with EFFICIENCY.

In truth sometimes we re-visit old lessons that we thought we had mastered. We are, after all, perpetually human. But failure to adapt or maladaptation poses a serious risk to our character and our relationships. This generally results in repetition of the failure experience, or distress experience, until we “get it right.” Failing that, our character may accommodate the distress pattern, which can become semi-fixed in the personality. Thus, FLEXIBILITY in ADAPTATION assures that we deliver the optimal coping response for each given situation.

A moral failure imposes a considerable strain. It often floods us with uncomfortable feelings—guilt, fear, sorrow, confusion—and ruminant thoughts of “if only,” or easier, softer ways to escape the responsibility. It threatens consequences that we would rather not suffer. Yet more often than not, its lessons are timely and apropos. The strain is as much the work of mending the gap between vision and reality, as it is the work of intimacy with our selves and, in turn, with others. This **most noble work** not only helps us recover from failure but also further clarifies our vision of who we are and whom we aspire to be. Ushering our progress toward that vision, we honor the Divine Source—the Source of All Healing—mend our ways, and cultivate self-transformation, ever evolving fearlessly, rigorously, and faithfully.

## SERMON PART 4: VISIONING OUR WAY

By Bruce L. Baker

What moves us along our journey is a quest: a vision to fulfill or a question to answer. This creates the standard by which we judge our successes and failures. Vision is a double edged sword. It raises our spirits and empowers us to higher thoughts and actions, but it also raises expectations that challenge us. It raises hope for growth and joy, but it also risks disappointment.

If life is a journey our vision guides us. Without a vision of a better reality or a better answer our journeys become aimless and unfulfilled wandering.

Consequently, having a compelling, comprehensive, guiding vision is essential to a meaningful and fulfilling life. Considering our vision carefully is important because if we are seeking things that we don't really want, or that cannot be realized, we set our selves up for failure and disappointment regardless of our best efforts.

To be compelling a vision should resonate deeply with what we really want within. Visions of external rewards like money, power, fame, and light pleasures are not richly compelling. The world is full of rich, famous, powerful people who are miserable and unfulfilled. Similarly, visions imposed by social pressure or accepted by social convention are less than powerful. Rather our vision needs to fit our personal values, and tap our talents, interests, and passions, whether that be social, intellectual, artistic, political, or on some other dimension. A compelling vision is one that feels attainable, taps into a deep seated need or longing, and that excites us to the point that we are happy to let go of other pursuits to obtain it.

We see this in the life of adolescents. Susan (not her real name) is one that I know. She has had a difficult life, getting into various kinds of trouble at school, and showing signs of depression and aggressive anti-social behavior that require therapeutic counseling. She was in full rebellion. But recently things have changed. She has always had a love for music. She auditioned for an elite music program at her high school and she was accepted. She now envisions herself pursuing a career teaching music and using music as therapy. She is now embarking on a rigorous program that starts at 6 am every morning, and working hard at getting along with others and to succeed at school. In her love of music and her need for a purpose Susan has found a compelling vision. The light of that vision has brought her to a healthier and happier path.

In addition to being compelling our vision needs to be comprehensive so that it fills our whole life and is bigger than we are. Dreaming big makes us bigger. Our aspirations should be high enough that we can see them from where ever we are in life.

I once heard an elderly man say that his major regret in life was that he was too cautious in setting his life goals. He was too scared to set goals that he might not be able to achieve. So he limited his goals and guess what: he succeeded. And after achieving success he felt there was nothing left for him to do. He knows that there was much more he could have done, if he had let himself dream big.

So have dreams that are bigger than you are. Can you dream of strong personal communities that support individuals and families? Can you envision a society that offers a fair and equal opportunity for human growth for everyone, regardless of their race, ethnicity, country of origin, or sexual orientation? Can you envision a world where everyone can create and appreciate beauty in all of its manifestations? Can you envision political and economic institutions based on democracy that meet the needs of everyone not just a few. Can you envision institutions that serve people, and not the other way around? Can you envision humans living harmoniously with the earth, respecting all life and the integrity of the planet? Can you envision an end to domination and violence, replaced by interactions based on respect for the worth and dignity of everyone? Can you envision a world organized to end institutional violence both between and within every nation? These dreams are more than any one of us can achieve. But I find them richly compelling. They drive me constantly forward as fast as I can. And though I know I will probably never see their full fruition, my pursuit of them will enliven and enrich all the days of my life.

I am just one person, but I am not alone. The visions that we share with each other bind us together into one people with a common purpose. The individual dreams and shared questions that bring us together are all part of one large universal vision that binds all of humanity and life together. I cannot express completely in words that one vision. It is after all a vision, not words, and it describes an experience or a reality, which is not strictly definable, or may not even be completely knowable. It is something that we feel and experience together. From my perspective the one vision is “the experience of complete love and unity within and with all that is.” To me this vision is manifest among ourselves when we freely and willingly give the gifts that we have so that all needs are filled. It is manifest when we create space where all are free to fulfill their expanding potentials for the creation and enjoyment of beauty and understanding.

For this one vision to become real and alive within us, we must choose to connect with it and make it our path. We do this by seeing what pieces of it are already within us. If we find those pieces and use them to guide our choices they will put us on our path and bring us together. We can help each other find our individual and common paths by supporting each other, telling and listening to each other’s stories, sharing in rituals that connect us to our vision, and modeling our own paths by example.

Not every step is clear or obvious. Sometimes there are multiple paths and choosing may be difficult. There isn’t only one way to get where we want to go. Sometimes people sharing the same vision will see different ways to get there. This is natural and expected and should not diminish our respect for each other.

Nor is every step fun or easy. Some portions of our journey will be steep difficult, long and hard. And there are certain to be obstacles, distractions and deviations. But if we maintain a clear compelling, comprehensive guiding vision, we will find our way through.

With a powerful and compelling vision we can go far. If that vision is powerful enough it guides each and every step we take, and inspires us with the virtues of resiliency to stay true and faithful to our journeys and to each other.

## CLOSING WORDS

BRUCE: Once we have known failure, we can salvage the redeeming pieces of a dashed vision and find our way. And...

VANESSA: We can, through failure, discover a way that serves our vision, accepting failure as a necessary feature of experience.

BRUCE: In both cases, we are called to learn and to heal from defining moments of failure.

VANESSA: Thus, perceiving failure as vital to further vision, we are impelled to bounce back—to resile—and perchance to thrive.

BRUCE: May we move forward on our journey with courage love and acceptance.