

On Being a Failure

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Lately I've done a few Internet searches on some of the friends I knew in high school or college, whom I've lost track of over the years. Others I read about in alumni magazines or even hear about in other ways. And many of them are very successful: doctors, lawyers, professors, leaders of businesses. They have written books, are quoted in magazines, and have run for public office. When I compare myself with these notables with whom I share some roots—me, an obscure low-level manager at a struggling software company, would-be teacher who never could establish an academic career—I look pretty bad. I can't see too much to be proud of, nothing to boast of in the pages of the alumni magazines. I am even embarrassed to say I attended Andover, not because of any shame with respect to a school that offered me an excellent education, but because with such opportunities, I should have made much more of myself.

Nor does a failed seven-year marriage make my personal life look too good. To blame anyone but myself would be dishonest. There is a good reason I could not get married until I was 37, and why it didn't last. If I look at myself honestly, I realize that I never did have anything to offer any woman who wasn't totally desperate, and I don't now. I am nothing but a boring, obese, flabby, middle-aged man with high blood pressure, sleep apnea, and a fatal passivity of character—and a hypocrite to boot.

It is no consolation when people tell me what great gifts I have. I do not doubt them; I know I have been given much. But it's not the gifts that count, it's the use you make of them. It is a wonderful thing to be a promising young man. It is a terrible thing to have been a promising young man who has failed to keep his promises.

Jesus told a terrifying parable that has given an ancient unit of money a new meaning in modern languages. A king gives sums of money to his servants and goes away. One servant invests his ten talents and makes ten more; another invests his five and make five more. The third takes the one given to him and hides it, returning it intact to his royal master. The king commends the first two, but condemns the third to loss of all he has and imprisonment in outer darkness.

When I come to stand before the dread judgment-seat of God, He will not ask me what I was given: being Himself the Giver, He knows it well enough. He will ask what return I have brought Him from His generous gifts. When He sees the poor return I have made in my obscure life, will He say, "Away from Me, you worthless servant"? It is not the esteem of the world I miss when I think of the paucity of my accomplishments, but the knowledge of the poor return I have made to Almighty God from the many gifts He has given to me. The thought of headlines and adulation to not move me, but rather the hunger for the one real commendation: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." But will I ever hear it?

I turn for consolation to John Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness," which deals with the same parable. Finding himself blind at 43, in mid-career, the

scholar, writer, and public servant could neither read nor write, and it seemed that his gifts would remain useless.

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

The king doesn't need the money, Milton is saying, he just wants to make sure his servants are working obediently. Accomplishment is not the goal, but following the will of God. The need for accomplishment is a heavy load, but Jesus said, "Come all who are heavily laden, take my yoke. For my yoke is easy and my burden light" His burden is to do the will of the Father, simply to accept it and go forward in faith is the labor required.

In Milton's case it was blindness (not "mild" to most people, I would expect); in mine, a meaningless job and raising a daughter mostly on my own. If I deserted these responsibilities to do something that looks greater, I would be like an angel assigned to wait in the divine court who thought he could only serve by joining the thousands who carry messages from God to the furthest reaches of the universe. They know what their jobs are; mine might not be so obvious, but the same faithfulness is required of me: faithfulness only, not fame or great accomplishments. Maybe it's not the job I would have picked, but if I got to pick the job, I would not get to be obedient to a will not my own.

Of course, Milton went on to write *Paradise Lost*, dictating every word of that great work without ever seeing a single one. And so as I was tempted to compare myself with my classmates, I could compare myself with the poet. I've never written a great poem, nor will I likely be hailed as one of the great figures in literature. But it is not my role to judge myself. I am not my own servant. My opinion of my accomplishment or lack of it does not matter. The One Who put me here will judge if I have stood in my place or not.

They also serve who only stand and wait.