

Chapel Talk  
Will Speers  
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During the course of any given day, I pass by the admissions common room outside Mr. Roach's office ten to twelve times, and invariably the School video sparkles on the TV, providing yet another prospective family with a colorful introduction to St. Andrew's. My favorite clip is not the crew van flying over the speed bumps, nor is it Morgan, that shy, socially challenged III Former, boasting about hanging out in the girls' common room. My moment is the interview with Mrs. Mein. With an auspicious, ubiquitous smile on her face, she describes St. Andrew's as a safe community where people can risk and err and recover. Then, that mischievous, matriarchal glint flashing in her eye, she exclaims that the role of the teacher in such a community is to proclaim to such a fallen student, "Yes, that was a mistake, wasn't it?" I was reminded of her insight a few weeks ago when a parent acknowledged to me that her son "never has had the chance to fail." What did this mother mean, "the chance to fail?" Why does Mrs. Mein assert a dozen times a day with that terrifying smile, "Yes, that was a mistake, wasn't it?"

Additionally, I can't count how many times I've been asked by parents of students who are already doing honors work for me, "but how does he get an A?" Two years ago some parents wanted to know if St. Andrew's was furnishing enough moments of fun, because they felt their child was a perfectionist and needed to relax from the constant expectations of success. Once a father told me his son feared taking risks in class, even feigning injuries in sports, because he could not accept failure. In our world today, parents and students too often deny the existence, much less the opportunity of failure.

What is failure? Our society defines it as the opposite of mastery, the lack of achievement, with an accompanying sense of inadequate value or worth. To be avoided at all costs, failure brings with it embarrassment, a certain nakedness of the soul, an isolation because of the thwarted attempt. We obviously don't want to fail, to be failures. However, I'm coming to believe that we put so much emphasis on not being a failure, on not failing, on only succeeding, that we've forgotten the necessary role of failure in that task. We've lost the notion that excellence is the end result of the

voyage; that failure is the tentative first but creative step in that trek; that learning and knowledge and even wisdom are not a polished, perfect performance but rather hours and months and sometimes years of rehearsals and practices and discussions and questions and risks and disappointments and exhaustion and almost giving up. So I want to redefine failure distinct from its negative connotations, and examine it more as the birth of what our diplomas and schools and families should manifest.

The odd aspect about failure is that it's what we encounter daily in our lives and schools, yet what we have the hardest time embracing—and much of the fault, I must admit, lies with adults. Last summer I read an article in *The New York Times* detailing the increasing incidents of violence in Little League baseball--not by children, but by adults. Fathers punching umpires, coaches fighting against opposing coaches, parents heckling and taunting children, their own and those on the opposition. On Christopher's team last spring, I saw fathers and mothers stand behind the backstop, challenging every ball and strike called by the umpire, a fellow father. Sadly, a game which was meant to be fun, intended even to allow parents a fleeting chance to relive their own youth, has been perverted into an adult battlefield, where errors become prisoners and sportsmanship a victim to victory at all costs. We adults are sabotaging Little League because we don't know how to let our children stumble. We try to protect them from their human fallibility, from their own humanity, maybe because we can't manage ours, but more because we see a world where failure appears to bear such dire consequences that these children must be spared it. In reality, we are crippling their comprehension and their ability to handle not only failure, but also life itself.

However, here is one counter example to buttress my faith about failure. T-Ball, as many of you know, is baseball for the 5 and 6 year old, with a "T" on home plate from which the batter hits the ball. The teams are co-ed. There are no walks or strikeouts. Everyone must hit the ball and run. Joyful parents applaud encouragingly; in fact, the atmosphere is more like a Sunday afternoon picnic at a family reunion than a contest, which is also part of the appeal. But the miracle of T-Ball is that innings change when one team either scores five runs or gets three outs, whichever comes first. There are wonderful, admittedly unrealistic yet still vital moments when both teams cheer as the fifth run crosses the plate.

Why is T-Ball a better, healthier world for failure? Because it teaches kids that the game is a game, that winning—supposedly the opposite of failure--isn't really the purpose as much as trying to get the glove somewhere near the rolling ball; or that hitting the ball, feeling the contact, and running to first base is a sacred rite offered to all. To a large degree, baseball promotes failure better than most sports--despite what adults and money have done to it--because it's about home, about trying to be safe in a world where mistakes can be witnessed and shared.

Clearly, none of us decides to fail. Your goal, our goal for you, is success, self-esteem, and preparation for the next stage. But part of our mandate, especially in high school, is to steel your backbones for college, an arena of greater independence, and a domain of more complex choices and decisions. College initially can be lonely, a vast harbor after years in a tight world like St. Andrew's: here are safe atmospheres for students, with teachers eager to help and encourage. However, for many private school graduates the first months at college are difficult because you feel so isolated compared to what you used to have in our nurturing communities. In college, fewer adults notice or care about you. How, then, can you continue to take risks in your intellectual, artistic, emotional and spiritual pursuits and cope with the aftermath of failure, of rejection, if you haven't confronted these moments earlier? Will you have the inner mettle to reflect, to laugh, to assess, to make the fall essential to the journey?

If we don't teach you how failure is not annihilation but process, then you will grow up to be spoiled athletes, short-lived artists, and immoral adults. You will lack resiliency, the strength to persist through the necessary and inevitable hurdles of life. William Carlos Williams has a remarkable poem entitled "The Ivy Crown," an incisive, tough, yet ultimately affirming poem about love, but I think it can also be about living, even about the design of failure in life. He says that

Just as the nature of briars  
is to tear flesh,  
I have proceeded  
through them.  
Keep  
the briars out,  
they say.  
You cannot live

and keep free of  
briars. (l. 49-58)

Our world teems with briars because "You cannot live and keep free of briars." Therefore, healthy schools don't let students "keep free of" failure, because then "you cannot live." You see, there is a pulsing artery joining the briars and existence: we endure not by avoiding briars, but by the briars themselves.

So, how do we battle against a culture and world that seems so fiercely opposed to this providential nature of failure? First, we must construct havens in our families, schools, communities, even in our country, where failure can occur, even thrive. Failure will flourish if we create an environment where genuine risk-taking is possible--remember Mrs. Mein's gleeful, non-sadistic embrace of those great "mistakes." Throughout this year, in the classes I've witnessed, I have been struck by how the work focused not on an answer but on how to get to the answer. In Mr. Kemer's Advanced Physics classes, the problems demanded attention to the steps, to the procedure, but never to the answer. In Ms. LeBlanc's Geometry classes, there were always two or three different ways to arrive at the end of the proof. In Mr. Wang's Calculus sections, students spent the entire period figuring out how, not what. Each of these classes affirmed risks, nourished mistakes, and fostered collaborative explorations. Despite how terrified I was to be in those classes, it was also evident how much excitement and fun the students had, because they had the freedom to fall, because they knew from these sage teachers that learning and understanding is a pilgrimage of twists and false starts and serendipity.

Those of you who were at the most recent Gallery opening, heard John Giordano talk about his artwork, which for him represented a departure from the painting he had been doing. "I found more freedom," he reflected, "when I went to where I didn't know." His creation, still in the Art Gallery for you to experience, happened only when he took the risk, offered himself the liberty, to travel to a new land, to trust and have faith in that expedition into the unknown. Elizabeth Lea affirmed a similar faith last week in the IV Form chapel service, where she asserted that the future failure of her eyes was certainly not a failure in her life. Her clear vision of her own artistry and achievement is both heroic and inspiring.

Secondly, I believe a community that embraces failure is patient. We can't stop time, but we can use it effectively to allow for perspective, for an awareness of the process, for the resiliency that stems from enterprises that by their nature require time. Think back for a moment to September, 1999, a mere nine months ago; yet recall what has happened since: the set-backs, low grades, defeats, the supposedly lost chances are now part of the tapestry which is this year. As much as seniors want to graduate, I can't believe many of them want it to happen tomorrow. There is still too much--perhaps they feel way too much--to be done and enjoyed, starting exuberantly this coming gorgeous evening. You seniors deserve to cherish your final weeks, and even as it slips away, even as the juniors prepare to mount the stage, you still grasp it passionately.

Finally, we must make the world of this school and our families and our communities fun. There can be such myopic seriousness to all our worthwhile tasks. Therefore, how do we laugh? What are the rituals by which we cement the bonds of this institution? As academically driven as St. Andrew's may be, don't forget the jubilation resounding at the opening square dance, at Echo Hill, the Frosty run, the bonfire, the Carol Shout, the split-second you know Mr. Roach is about to announce a free day, Polar Bear jumps in January, birthday announcements at lunch, the euphoric bidding at the Vestry auction, faculty imitations and other skits at the Talent Show, the smiles and tears at the final slide show. These rites of passage are unique to us, and they cleave us to each other during many Februaries of the soul. Such occasions of hilarity consecrate us as a community, letting us laugh together at our collective foibles, yet also granting us the strength and assurance to witness each other's stumbles as a primary component of the endeavor.

What, then, is the gift of failure? Failure grants us a vision, a knowledge of how Life is lived far deeper than what we find when we merely succeed. That's why that mother wanted her son to have "the chance to fail"—because failure bestows insight and a spine that will sustain us years after we have forgotten our study of Macbeth and logarithms and the subjunctive. The experience, not the single moment of failure, but the whole process—the strength to risk, the willingness to fall, the courage to try again—becomes a sacred crusade. In her poem titled "Patience," Kay Ryan discovers a miracle and a treasure and a resolve within patience which I believe equally applies to failure. "Who would/ have guessed/ it possible," she writes,

that waiting (that failure)  
is sustainable—  
a place with  
its own harvest.  
Or that in  
time's fullness  
the diamonds  
of patience (of failure)  
couldn't be  
distinguished  
from the genuine  
in brilliance  
or hardness.