

Falling: Recovery, silence, and the church

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Twice in my life I have competed in contact sports. After a childhood spent envying the boys on my block who could play on the football team, I joined my college's rugby team. It was a club sport at my school, more adventure than varsity, but it was one of the few places I had found where women could play a rough-and-tumble game without others trying to protect us. After college I found my way to the local judo dojo where that same truth held. There on the mat we sparred together, a mix of genders and abilities, starting standing face-to-face and ending with throws and pins to the floor.

What struck me about both sports was what I learned at my very first practice. My first night on the rugby pitch I learned how to throw a tackle. But, more importantly, I learned how to be tackled. A friend of mine knelt down on the field and, as I ran, threw a perfect tackle just above my knees. I soared over my friend's shoulder and hit the ground safely. We did this again and again that night until being tackled was second nature.

My first night in the dojo was similar. Before I was allowed anywhere near the other students, I spent an evening sitting on the mat and practicing falling backwards. Each time I fell backwards I would strike the mat with one arm to absorb the blow. Once I mastered the art of falling down from a sitting position, I fell backwards from a standing position. That first night I thought judo must be the most boring athletic endeavor ever, but after I was thrown to the mat the few times I realized the point.

With both sports the idea was this: you're going to fall. You'd might as well learn how to fall safely, with minimal injury, so that you can stand back up.

Last week I slipped on a patch of Vermont black ice while carrying a bag of groceries, but as soon as I had felt myself lose balance I immediately, instinctively, did what I had learned in the dojo: I fell back, didn't panic, and tried to distribute the impact as broadly as possible. In the end the only thing injured was my pride. I stood back up, picked up the groceries, and drove home unscathed.

And that's when I started to think about the church. Recently a clergy friend told me that he had been advised by older clergy mentors to hide the fact that he is in recovery from addiction. I immediately felt sad about that. This is a person with sustained sobriety, and an incredible story of recovery. His testimony could be a powerful witness to God's healing, as well as one of hope to those "still sick and suffering." But his congregation might never hear it.

My friend had been told that clergy shouldn't show weakness. They shouldn't admit to perceived failures. They should allow those around them to live under the impression that, no matter what is going on, everything is fine. And, while I do believe clergy need to be careful not to overshare our personal lives or to preach our own stories more than the gospel, I believe this is the attitude that not only contributes to clergy burnout but hurts our whole church.

The reality for all of us is this: we fall short, we mess up, we lose our traction, and end up on the ground. In short, we live life. Clergy and lay together. But often we don't talk about that in church. Instead we bring ourselves to worship in our Sunday best and hide the truth that sometimes things just aren't that great.

It's no surprise. For too long we've been taught to do just that. We clergy have taught, often by our own example, that appearances are more important than honesty. We've taught that appropriate vulnerability is career suicide. We've taught that falling down defines us no matter whether or not we get back up. And, inadvertently, we've taught a sanitized, powerless gospel.

Somehow we have taught that Christians are people of perfection, and not people of redemption.

This past year, as the Boston mayoral race heated up, eventual winner Marty Walsh ran television ads that briefly mentioned his recovery from alcoholism. I watched the ads and thought, "that's brilliant." He, as Robert Kennedy used to say, hung a lantern on his biggest problem, the thing that might have come out in sneaky attack ads and bombed his candidacy. Instead, his recovery became a part of his story. It showed that he knew how to get back up and rebuild.

But the more I thought about it, the more I felt sad for the church. If an admission of being in recovery can actually help someone in the hardball world of politics, why is it so feared in the very place where redemption should be celebrated? Why aren't we, people who talk about grace and forgiveness and new life, in the business of

teaching people what to do when they fall? Why don't we acknowledge these things so that we can help people know where to turn when they need help to get back up?

In my ministry I've never hidden the fact that I am in recovery. I'm blessed to be able to say that because of that I've been able to be a first call for parishioners and non-parishioners alike when they finally hit rock bottom. But I've also never talked about it in my writing all that much.

This Sunday marks another year of sobriety, one day at a time, for me. It doesn't matter how many years, but I can say that it's far more than a much younger me ever thought I could string together the first time I admitted I needed help. I give thanks every day that I got it.

I also give thanks for the ones who I've met in recovery who have taught me that falling down in life is as inevitable as falling on the rugby pitch or in the judo dojo. Most have had much more dramatic and devastating falls than my own. Most have made far more dramatic and inspiring recoveries. And, though they may not have realized it, and though most have never stepped into a pulpit, they have preached the gospel to me in the most powerful ways I have ever heard it.

I only wish that those of us who did occupy the pulpits could preach the gospel of redemption with such power and transparency and strength.

But then again, maybe we can.

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*