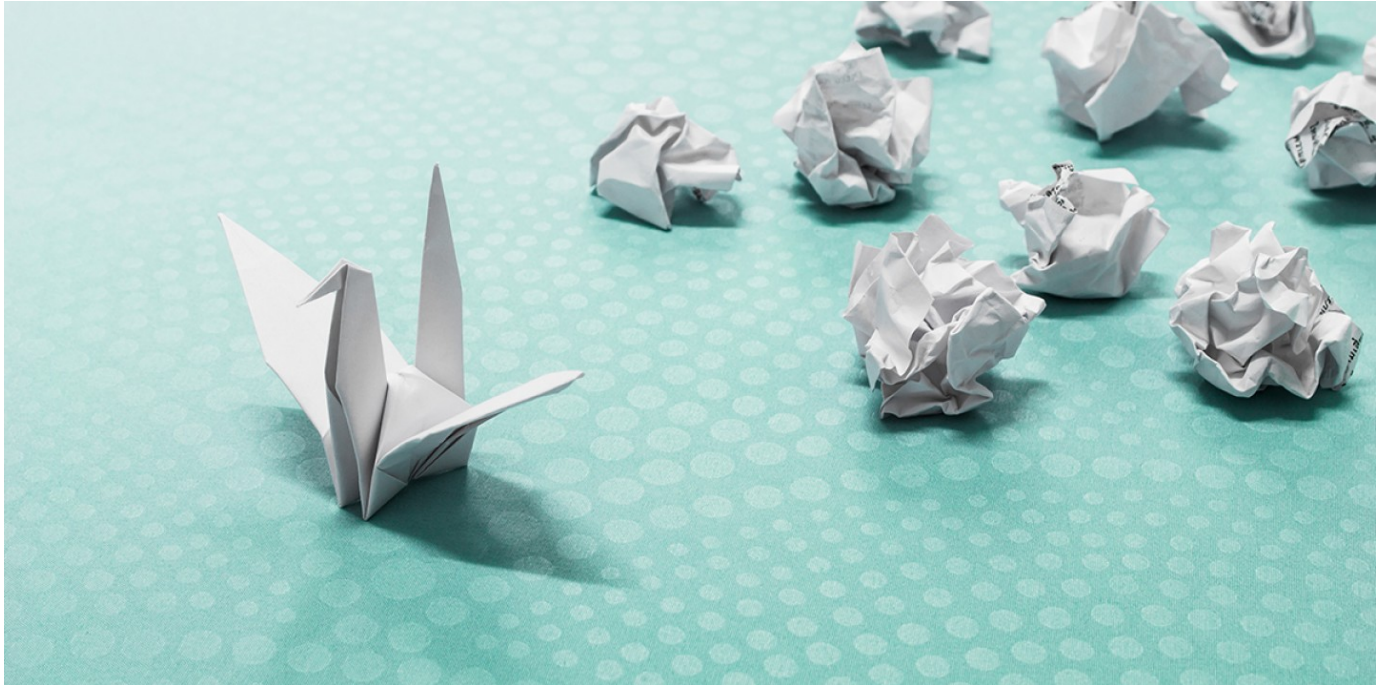


Failing and falling

At a workshop, I was asked to list my failures. The experience has stayed with me.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



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I recently attended a dynamic workshop for administrators in higher education, facilitated by a psychologist. I confess that I went reluctantly, exhausted by a full academic year during a global pandemic, which is changing and shifting everything in the postsecondary education world. Spending a full day in an enclosed space, filled with strangers, while wearing a mask for eight hours felt like a grueling end to what was already a very hard year. But God often shows up in our weary spaces.

Each workshop participant had to do an exercise in which we listed the things that we had failed at over the course of our careers. The failures among this group were numerous: failed classes and failed relationships; failed bar exams and failed businesses; failed comprehensive exams and failed dissertation defenses. And yet, an outsider looking at this group would have considered each one of us a success

story. Most of us were excelling in our careers as administrators, professors, and educators. Many were thriving parents, spouses, and partners—achieving some measure of work-life balance and personal success in the midst of very demanding careers. We were the mentors and the advisers, the people with answers to questions from students and colleagues. And we all had long lists of failures to share with each other.

Of all the things we did that day, this one exercise of listing my failures has stayed with me. I know myself to be a person who is haunted by her failures, who does not let go of them easily, and I struggle not to judge myself solely by what I haven't achieved. Enumerating my list of failings, naming them one by one, was a stark reminder that I have failed at many things—including some very important things. I failed to win that highly coveted fellowship or to earn that once-in-a-lifetime job appointment. I failed to check in regularly on my friend who is battling severe depression or to visit our elderly family matriarch each time I traveled to her city. I failed at getting the grant, failed at negotiating for what I'm worth, failed at securing the bag when making a deal. I've failed to burn some bridges that needed to be burned, and I've failed to give a second chance when a heartfelt apology was offered.

When I do the math, when I am brutally honest, my failures easily outnumber my wins. I confess to spending no small amount of time lamenting where I could be in life, *who* I could be, if I had not failed at some pivotal moments. It is humbling to accept that perhaps whoever we are, right at this very moment, is a reflection of the sum total of our failures and not just our successes.

But this is where God's grace enters the picture. It tears up my list of failings and messes and reminds me how all things can work together so I may know the fullness of life. Each failure has been a learning experience and a building block in my spiritual journey. Each failure has led to a new discovery about myself and others. I am learning about genuine friendship, loyalty, and trust because of failed friendships, failed loyalty, and failed trust. I am learning to bloom where I am planted, even in the midst of closed doors and missed opportunities. I am learning to extend grace when others fail me, even as I need grace for my own broken promises and unkind acts. I am learning that while I have failed and will fail, again and again, I am still a beloved child of God. Not even my mistakes and missteps can separate me from God's love.

I also admit that there have been seasons where my faith has failed, when I've railed against God's seeming absence and indifference. There are moments when the sacred scripture and familiar hymns are unable to provide comfort or give me hope that justice will ever prevail. In these moments of doubt, when my very faith fails to support me, I don't run away from the brutal truth that is revealed: failing, like doubt, is inevitable, so I have to focus my energy not on the number of times I've fallen but on those occasions in which I've gotten up, again and again. Even while still feeling the sting of rejection and failure, I must choose to apply again, or to love again, or to trust again.

That is why the song currently stuck in my head is Donnie McClurkin's "We Fall Down," with its simple reminder that "a saint is just a sinner who fell down and got up." The gospel singer keeps repeating the same charge: "Get back up again." These words have been a balm to my soul. It is my nature to want to explain and dissect each failure, to figure out what went wrong and why. Like everyone, I want to know why I failed when it seemed like I tried my hardest, did my very best, or loved the most. But there are often no answers forthcoming to these questions.

Faith is choosing to get back up again even if you may never know why life knocked you down. Failing and falling are unavoidable. My hope is in a God who gives me the grace and desire to get up and try again.