

*“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again.
Fail better.” – Samuel Beckett*

Flunking Sainthood
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One of my greatest pleasures in visiting Kripalu, the divine center for yoga and health in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, is the gift shop. The seductive scents of ginger and lavender, sage and patchouli waft into the hallway, veritably grabbing me by the scruff of the neck and dragging me in to this wondrous arcade of Kirtan chant CDs, books and bells, mats and mandala coloring books; meditation cushions, organic chocolates, chakra jewelry, and the cutest darn yoga outfits this side of Mumbai.

After many excursions to the shop and other such emporia from here to Timbuktu and back, I am now surrounded at my desk by a treasure trove of spiritual tchotchkes (that’s a Yiddish knick knack, by the way). Here’s a sampling from my stash – a finger labyrinth, smudge sticks and Zentangle pens, angel cards, a handmade mala of prayer beads, a blessing stone, scribbled in journals with more blank pages than full, a trio of quartz crystals, a stolen lava nugget from Mt Etna, and a re-glued mini statue of the goddess of compassion, Quan Yin. She is a bodhisattva (an enlightened being that chooses to stay on earth to help us stumbling humans), so I’m fairly certain she won’t mind the glue.

To be sure, my ephemera is lovely to behold (as I write sermons or surf Facebook when I should be writing sermons – see how regular I am?); but so far, none it has made me more *saintly*. The tchotchkes do remind me, however, that I sincerely *want* to grow spiritually, and that I may even be able to do that without all of these slightly pretentious props taunting my over-expectant soul.

Given that, you can understand how I found myself giggling and nodding my way through Jana Reiss’s witty and insightful memoir entitled Flunking Sainthood. Over the course of a year, Reiss, a Christian, commits herself fully to one spiritual practice per month and reports on the results, which are sometimes hilarious, sometimes profound, and often quite relatable.

I doubt this would have been a very appealing book if Reiss had *not* been flummoxed by sustaining such saintly endeavors as: observing an Orthodox Sabbath, fasting, offering hospitality, or voluntary simplicity. She is our modern-day Everywoman in the muddy trenches of spiritual growth.

Yesterday was my birthday, and like Reiss, as I get older, my list of ways to excel gets *less*, not more specific. I’m no longer interested in running the equivalent

of a 3- minute mile as I go about my daily rounds. Rather, I'd prefer to just briskly walk the race as a decent human being. Undoubtedly, I'll poop out along the way occasionally, too, and thumb a ride on the sag wagon.

And unless I'm striving for sainthood, my goal reflects not only reality, but self care. I want to be kinder to myself and to others. More clear headed and healthy. I want to sustain something sturdier than thin or easily broken ties; to cultivate eulogy virtues rather than accumulate resume achievements. I'd like to accept more and gripe less.

And in getting there, I suppose I want to flunk or fail better...which is just what Reiss discovers along the way, too. How about you? Would you be willing to reframe your own personal growth not as a contest to win, but as an exercise in failing better; in flunking sainthood on purpose?

Reiss is prepared to thrust herself into some challenging and unfamiliar terrain over the course of her experiment. Even so, as she embarks in January, she declares that she is "not planning to join a convent, wheedle a pope, or contract tuberculosis," which apparently are some methods others have utilized to achieve sainthood in the past.

She goes on to clarify that she will not climb to the top of a pole and live there. Simeon the Stylite did this for 37 years, actually strapping himself to the pole so he wouldn't topple over. Reiss writes: "I have zero interest in doing this. My bed is just fine." Likewise, she will not allow herself to be devoured by lions, like the early Christian martyr Felicitas. To be on the safe side, she plans to avoid zoos and safaris. Reiss adamantly refuses to pluck out her own eyes for God, as St Lucia did. Nor will she strip naked and parade around the town square in the spirit of St. Francis. Reiss astutely notes that this took place in Europe, after all, where they also have nude beaches.

However, she is game for trying some worthwhile disciplines like those I mentioned earlier, along with centering prayer, vegetarianism, generosity, Scripture reading, gratitude, and the spirituality of housekeeping.

Because Reiss is your average human, she shamelessly chooses February as the month for fasting because it has the fewest days! Attempting to abstain from food between sunup and sundown, in the spirit of Ramadan, proves to be difficult and confusing. The spiritual bang of getting closer to God through fasting is trumped by her glee about losing weight even though she is, in her words, eating whatever she wants (including Girl Scout cookies) for 13 out of every 24 hours. "Fasting is fabulous," she says, as her jeans slip off her now slimmer hips. "I should write a bestselling diet book."

Yet, the hunger pangs during the day remind her to focus within and she can and she does, writing: "there are occasional glimmers of quiet elation and tranquility, and I am more astonished by this than anyone."

During June, her month of dedicated centering prayer practice, Jana has chosen a sacred phrase: “Peace, be still.” But her distracted Monkey Mind and her calmer Spiritual Mind engage in a perpetual smack down for dominance. She concludes: “I am simply not getting along with centering prayer.” In the end, she realizes, though that the only thing wrong you can do is get up and walk out. So she stays and keeps trying and keeps flunking and as she puts it: “Peace, be still, be still, BE STILL! Lord, have mercy, hear my prayer...please!”

Ever onward, Reiss devotes July to observing an orthodox Jewish Sabbath with its 39 prohibitions, such as refraining from being a Creator of any kind, which would include an act as mundane as boiling an egg, because Creation is God’s job (and he rested for a day, too, thank you very much).

In addition to learning how to prepare Cholent, a meat dish that cooks for 24 hours on low, and the importance of pre-ripping a day’s worth of toilet paper, Reiss makes the worthwhile spiritual discovery that complete rest from being a doer is refreshing and joyful and sane.

One particular Saturday, her daughter asks her to play Monopoly and although it’s un-kosher to handle money on the Sabbath, Reiss rationalizes that when the money is pastel pink, blue and yellow, she’s not going to worry about it. After an afternoon of laughter, Reiss recalls: “I flunked sainthood...again! But it was a very good Sabbath.”

In the Gratitude chapter, the saint-in-training realizes that her appreciation of puppies and cupcakes isn’t going to heal sick children or end poverty, racism, or homophobia, but that truly experiencing bone-deep gratitude might move her to take action and make a difference. Then there’s an amusing anecdote from her October romp in Vegetarianism about an Amish Chicken. Ask me about it during our social hour.

Notably, there’s the touching, searing retelling of an encounter during December’s generosity practice, when she wonders whether Jesus might have just shown up in her life as a foul-mouthed reindeer-sweater wearing homeless woman with a crush on Hilary Clinton. Reiss worries about cheap grace – her own. And then, “for a flash, for an instant,” she recalls, “my charity isn’t charity but connection. I’ve made a connection outside of my clean little world.”

As you can imagine, there are more stories and examples in this terrific book than we have time for today. The takeaway is clear enough, though. An authentic life involves us non-saintly humans who are by definition flawed.

Plato put forth the wise philosophy that only the *idea* of something is perfect, but that its realization, its expression in worldly terms is always a mere shadow of that perfection. And yet, we strive towards it, when excellence or even “failing better” would be worthwhile goals.

America has fed on a rags to riches narrative for centuries – the Horatio Alger story, attainable by all who strive hard enough and tug on their bootstraps with the requisite gusto and grit. I'd say this was a uniquely Western phenomenon, but we only need look at what's developed in China, S. Korea and India, for example, to realize it is not. You have to get pretty far off the grid to find a society on this planet not driven by the productivity, achievement, and the accumulation of wealth.

Since last month, when we were all asked to shelter in place and stay home, some of my colleagues and friends on social media have admitted that they don't feel productive enough in their more limited lockdown mode. Even in the midst of a pandemic, they worry about whether they are succeeding, about productivity, about not winning at sainthood.

It's a funhouse mirror version of January 1st – we could call them “pandemic resolutions” – “I will grow as a person, be more spiritual, I will learn a new language, I will knit complex sweaters or bake artisan bread, I will finally write that novel or short story or finish my book. I will paint in the style of O'Keefe. I will homeschool my children like they did on the prairie. I will enroll in the online 21-day quarantine yoga body program (a real thing by the way) and have the abs of a 25 year old. I'll sign up for the “How to become ridiculously self-aware in 20 minutes” course. Spoiler alert! - its about journaling, one of oldest practices on earth

I believe some of this is driven by the uncertainty of our new normal and the attendant fear of what will happen and how it will end, when it will end, sadly – if it will end. It seems we are at sea about how to rewire ourselves in this crisis for a different kind of success, or at least, locate a mooring of peace in the maelstrom?

Pandemic or not, we aren't meant to be saints. Our human fallibility, our physical vulnerability, could not be more pronounced than it is right this moment. What might happen when you row your boat to the island of *that* truth and gently examine what grounds you, what rounds you, and what confounds you?

It's okay to flunk at sainthood. Jana Reiss shows us that through both the humor and the pathos embedded in her wonderfully drawn year of trying. She discovers, as we do, that learning is struggling. But precisely because of this tension, we learn. To avert the struggle is to doom the learning, the groping, the deepening. But that's not to say it's going to be easy.

Shozan Jack Haubner, in his equally witty and revealing book, Zen Confidential: Confessions of an Angry Wayward Monk, reminds us that life in a monastery or any situation in which spiritual growth is pursued is not *meant* to be easy, and flunking monkhood (in his case) by the western standards of winning and losing, grading and ranking, is almost a certainty. He jokes: “let me explain

this all when I come down from my half hour of daily levitation. Not!”

He remembers: “We all know this instinctively. The problem is that as a [“Big Me”] culture, the solution we offer to this suffering is a complex network of interconnected lies – always the lie of “more”: work more, eat more, buy more, as opposed to one or two indisputable truths; truths like the first noble truth of Buddhism – life is suffering because of endless craving (and typically for the wrong things) as we relentlessly pursue a life tailor-made for us. Shozan Haubner reminds us that we if are meant to grow into a true human being, we’ll need to be willing to experience incidences of spiritual failure in the process.

Reiss comes to similar conclusions at the end of her sainthood adventure after unexpectedly finding herself giving comfort to a dying father who had abandoned her and her family 26 years prior. She writes: “All those unsuccessful practices, those attempts at sainthood that felt like dismal failures at the time, actually took hold somehow. They helped to form me into the kind of person [who could go to the bedside of someone who had harmed me and be able to say: “I forgive you, Dad. Go in peace.” Although I didn’t see it while I was doing the practices themselves or even while I was writing the chapters in this book, the power of spiritual practice is that it forges you stealthily, as you entertain angels unawares.”

Shozan Haubner echoes this epiphany when he admits: “In the end, I am really only an expert at my own screw ups. So, I have great sympathy for screw-ups like me. But screwing up isn’t really the problem. It’s how we feel about ourselves when we do.”

So, I ask you all today, here in this virtual Sanctuary: Beyond the pursuit of perfection or sainthood, what steps might you take, what still small voices might quiet your distracted, grasping monkey mind and open the path to liberating yourself from the incessant drive to “not fail” at spiritual practice, at real life?

In our reading earlier, the Rev. Jane Rzepka offers a gentle rallying cry to keep our wings and ditch our halos, when she reassures us that “It’s a help to accept the idiocy of flight, the butterfly flight pattern so firmly implanted in the human mind and heart. Let, the lurching then, be no surprise and know we’re all up there flying every which way together.”

Many people and situations in my own life and ministry have provided ample opportunities to fail at being my highest self, including the realities wrought by this virus. And I am thankful, in that they are helping me to become a more decent, awake, imperfect human being. Just that. Not a saint or a wise monk or a guru or an angel or a bodhisattva.

My spiritual practice, my gratitude practice is not *interrupted* by these people. It *is* these people. My children, brother, congregants, friends, colleagues, clients, that slow guy in front of me at the parking exit, that neighbor with the

spotlight on his garage that shines in my bedroom window, my own pesky internal gremlins.

You know who you are, and I hope I haven't forgotten anyone. But this *is* a sermon about flunking sainthood... so I'm giving myself a pass.* And you should, too.

Blessed be, Blessed we. Amen, and Namaste.

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* paraphrasing Jana Reiss.