

school often ask how the students feel about the signs on the walls that say: 'Failure is not an option.' They are surprised to hear that the signs are really for the staff." But if failure were not an option, why would one bother saying so? What's hiding here is the acknowledgment that failure is an ever-present option, one that Canada and his staff fight every day. The Harlem Children's Zone aims at breaking the cycle of poverty for Harlem children through a combination of education and social services. Using a "conveyor belt" model, which takes children from infancy up to college, it strives to provide seamless supports so that no child falls through the cracks. Yet failure happens even in the Harlem Children's Zone. In March 2007, Canada announced that he was phasing out the Promise Academy middle school, which he originally had intended to expand into a high school. All the graduating eighth-graders would have to find a high school elsewhere, and there would be no incoming sixth grade. Why? The preliminary test scores weren't high enough, and Canada felt he had to change course.¹⁶ It was a wrenching decision for him, and the question remains: If failure is not an option, what does one do with it when it appears?

In many situations, the stakes demand that one try to prevent failure at all costs. This is the case in surgeries and wars, in high-poverty schools at testing time and earthquake rescue missions. Even in safer places such as concert halls, there is tension and expectation when the moment comes. Laxity in those cases will not do. But even there, failure happens, and one must have a way of reckoning with it. One must have a language for it, a kind of dignity around it. If all one hears about is success, then those who fail are left stumbling and bewildered, and the audience, equally confused, points fingers and makes noises of blame.

If we try to exclude failure, we deny much of existence: we disregard wars, famines, and other disasters; we wish away low test scores, college rejections, romantic rejections, divorce, pov-



The Practice of Solitude

There is only one practice of solitude: to make a choice and carry it out well. The particulars assemble around this simple principle. One may later regret the choice; one may end up reversing or abandoning it. The choice may consist of doing nothing or refraining from a decision until the time is right. But no matter what it entails, one must entrust oneself to it in order to see it clearly. In our hectic lives, we have difficulty making choices; we have even more trouble living them out, as the alternatives flash and jingle around us. Solitude allows for a gathering of the intentions.

The practice of solitude requires education and experience. None of the choices of solitude can be made without insight, if they are to be made well. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is filled with philosophical, religious, and historical references. These are not ornaments; they give dimension and urgency to his argument. They help explain why, in his view, nonviolent protest is the one viable response to the injustice of segregation. This simplicity of view is anything but simplistic; it draws on study and experience, wisdom and anger. One senses the years of thought in it.

On the whole, with variation and exceptions, everyday American culture tends to favor busyness, not action or contemplation. "Work hard. Be nice," goes the motto of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools; this is not

bad advice, but its value depends on the substance of the work. Similarly, many businesses embrace the slogan "work hard, play hard." Hard work is necessary for many endeavors, but we have turned it into an end. Students in school are supposed to be working constantly—that is, visibly doing something, whenever anyone enters or peers in the room. American adults work longer hours and with shorter vacations than many Europeans in similar positions. Our escapes, such as TV or the Internet, may be symptoms of working too much; the tired mind seizes them to relieve the burdens for a little while. This is the inverse of busywork and just as numbing; it prevents contemplation and quiet thought. Susan Jacoby notes that the video and audio media "demand that everyone take his or her place as a member of the audience"; and "the more time people spend before the computer screen or any screen, the less time and desire they have for two human activities critical to a fruitful and demanding intellectual life: reading and conversation."¹⁷ The loss of *desire* for reading and conversation is especially dangerous, for without desire, we do nothing to combat our excesses.

How can schools help students learn

to make choices—between contemplation and action, silence and speech, and more? Giving students many choices is not the answer; students may end up bewildered, as they do not understand the choices yet. Students need first to learn about the nature of these choices—by studying history and literature, discussing ethical questions, working out mathematics problems, learning languages, practicing instruments, and reading about the lives of others. In high school, students may start to take electives, but these should be in addition to a core set of studies, so that they may continue to build a foundation as they start to branch off. Even in college and graduate school, students need the structure of a syllabus; they need to know the field in order to stake out independently in it. There are exceptions: some students may find their interests early on and do substantial work on their own. Yet even the most precocious students need some guidance.

Some argue that students will not be motivated unless schools give them

erty, addiction, death, injustice, car accidents, lost jobs, misspelled words, stutters, misunderstandings, and our daily mistakes and slippages. Those who take on the slogan “failure is not an option” wittingly or unwittingly paint over their lives and the lives of others, and the result is not only false but flat. Such a paint job can’t render anything close to a human life. Hochschild observes that “the ideology of the American dream includes no provision for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss.”¹⁷ Failure happens, yet it isn’t supposed to be there. The contradiction is each person’s private secret; it has driven some to despair.

In rejecting failure, we reject a resource as well. Failure can be inconsequential, crushing, or anything in between, but we need it as much as we need success, and even when we don’t need it, it happens and must be taken into account. Our successes and failures, in combination, teach us about the world and ourselves; they push us beyond ourselves. They help us understand history, literature, science, and the arts; they show us who we are, what we do well, whom we love, what we desire, what our limits are and aren’t, and how our private and public lives meet and part.

When they have no explanation, they stand as stubborn reminders that not all of life bends to our will or understanding. Explained or unexplained, they are not always what they seem.

The narrator of Robert Browning’s poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864) suggests that failures may be successes in disguise and vice versa.¹⁸ The poem is solemn, exuberant, witty, soulful, and jagged—a vigorous call to repose. Its overall meaning is that old age is the mirror opposite of youth; where youth strives, old age rests and contemplates; where youth acts, old age trusts in the action of God. The ideas are somewhat cryptic until one grasps the underlying symmetry of youth and old age, and with it, the ambiguity of success and failure. Near the beginning, the narrator tells us:

For thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i’ the scale.

Toward the end, he repeats the idea, but in stronger, more

opportunities to choose what to read, what to learn, and which topics to pursue. But students will not be motivated unless they know something about the subjects in the first place. Students may find excitement and possibility in specific assignments, as they open up new knowledge and associations. I remember the delight of memorizing the declension of the Latin demonstrative pronoun *hic, haec, hoc*. The sounds were enjoyable; they reminded me of “kuplink, kuplank, kuplunk” in Robert McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*. Later, when taking poetics and linguistics courses, I became interested in the ablaut (the linguistic term for a vowel gradation that distinguishes closely related words, such as *sing, sang, and sung*). Besides awakening new interests, structured study allows students to look more closely at a problem than they might otherwise. Students do need some time for exploration, but much of this will spring from the specifics they learn in class. There is room for a degree of choice (of essay topic, for instance), but choices may be richer when they are fewer and more focused.

Students’ lack of motivation comes not from structured study, but from elsewhere. Many students are distracted by mild or severe despair, overt or concealed: a sense that their studies don’t really matter and are not as important as personal concerns, and that it will soon be over anyway (school or even life itself). Schools try to give students a sense of urgency, but their methods are often misguided. They may try to make the learning superficially relevant

to students’ lives, whip up their enthusiasm through chants and pep rallies, or impress upon them that their studies will help them toward their career or college goals. None of these approaches is sufficient. The “relevance” approach confirms for students that their personal preoccupations come first; the pep rally is off-putting to many; the “goal-oriented” approach ignores the questions: What happens when the goal is met? Does all of this lose its meaning? The

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student gets good grades, passes the courses for the year, goes on to the next grade, graduates, goes on to college or gets a job, and what then? What is the larger point?

Beyond giving students a foundation, schools must teach them what commitment means. Without apology, they should teach students to read, write, and practice without any distractions from the Internet, cell phone, or TV, and to make a daily habit of this. It doesn’t matter if they claim to know how to “multitask”; multitasking amounts to compromise, and they need to learn to offer more of themselves. Schools should make use of technology but should also teach students how to do without it.

Otherwise they will depend on text messages during class, musical practice, lectures, daydreams, and even rest. Over the long run, the setting aside of distractions will give students permission to take the work seriously. Many young people latch onto a casual attitude about their studies; they need to be helped out of this. Many secretly long to be pushed into greater seriousness.

Schools must assign homework that

goes beyond the trivial, that requires persistence and sustained concentration. When asked what he would recommend to readers who had trouble understanding his work after reading it three times, William Faulkner answered: “Read it four times.”² This advice could apply to many endeavors. Students should learn to read closely and carefully, bearing with things they do not immediately understand. Assignments should be designed to combine routine practice with difficult challenges. Teachers should not hesitate to correct students, as students need to strive for accuracy when working alone. Students should learn how to put their full mind into their work, sometimes heartily, sometimes grudgingly, but with regularity and determination.

The psychologist K. Anders Ericsson

resolved language, as he speaks no more of comfort, but of isolation and God:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through
language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God,
whose wheel the pitcher
shaped.

“All I could never be”—what does that mean? There is a sense that his failures are, in God’s eyes, part of his beauty, part of the shape of his life. Yes, the failures themselves—unrecognized, unmitigated, unrepaired.

Our failures may count among our greatest assets; they may show us the outlines of who we are. In her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor writes, “Does one’s

integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be

asked to deepen.”¹⁹ By this she means that our impossibilities and incapacities end up defining what we *can and must* do. A person may try to be someone or something else, but will eventually hit upon an obstacle. That obstacle—which seems to make us fail—ultimately brings us back to ourselves.

This does not mean that failure is always illuminating or redemptive, or that we are always capable of seeing it that way. The shame of

failure drives people to suicide; the fear of failure can overpower the mind. The writer who feels she has passed her peak may not be able to put that thought away; each new work, even each sentence, seems to limp along while the earlier writings surged and sang and

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refers to this kind of work as “deliberate practice”: sustained, analytical, regular, focused practice that makes the difference between an amateur and an expert, or a good expert and a top expert. Students engage in deliberate practice in between lessons; professionals engage in it on their own. According to Ericsson and colleagues, deliberate practice is not inherently enjoyable; individuals practice not because they like doing so, but because they know that such practice improves their performance. Upon conducting several studies of the practice habits of musicians, they found, among other things, that expert performers practice more than others over the years; practice alone, with full attention; practice regularly, for limited periods at a time; and get plenty of rest.³

This idea of deliberate practice is promising, if one recognizes a few caveats. First, practice can be inherently enjoyable. For many it is a private, precise dialogue between the self and instrument (or pen and paper, or other material). It is a time for close listening and watching, for tuning and tinkering. It can be dull or painful at times, but there are also times of insight and amazement. It is possible to conceive of a somewhat warmer version of deliberate practice, with all of the focus and structure but with love of the work as well. Second, there are many principles of practice, but it is still idiosyncratic. One might learn from the example of the Scottish virtuoso percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who as a child persuaded a teacher

(and later the Royal Academy of Music) to take her on even though she was deaf. She showed them that deafness in the ears did not impede her from hearing; she could hear with her body. What fueled and sustained her practice, it seems, was not just pursuit of a goal, not just the belief that she would get better over time, but

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love of the sounds right then and there, and her own forays into them.⁴

Many practices of solitude can be conveyed only through example. Teachers who practice their subjects—who think about them and work on them in their own time—can show students a way of life. They need not “model” for the students in any canned way; their very conduct is a model. When a teacher reads a poem aloud or presents a mathematical proof, her tone conveys whether she has thought about it at length, played with it, argued about it, and more. Students will likewise learn from teachers’ handling of conflicts that arise in class and in school. Problems and dilemmas will arise, and teachers will be put to the test. How does a teacher respond when one student taunts another, when one student seems far more advanced (or less advanced) than the others, or when one of the

students objects to the tenor of discussion or the premises of the lesson? How does the teacher respond to events affecting the whole school—a new principal, a change in the rules, or an emergency? A teacher’s bearing in these situations is complex and influences students enormously. But teachers must also let themselves be

fallible; students will not be harmed by a teacher’s minor mistakes. And when a teacher handles a large mistake with grace, students learn that they, too, will survive mistakes.

There is some truth to the existentialist idea that we give things their meaning and importance. Practice allows for this; through honoring something regularly, we come to value it more.

Students find their way by knocking their heads against a subject, by struggling with ideas, by learning things by heart and then carrying them around. They find themselves on their own, through their wanderings, friendships, and thoughts, but this takes place alongside structured study. Sometimes, when working on an assigned essay, a student sees an unusual phrase wriggle

sparkled. The scientist who has spent decades trying to solve a problem may feel that all the effort went to nothing. The immigrant worker who spent long hours, day after day, year after year, cleaning homes, only to see her children drop out of school, may wonder what all that labor was for. The retired stockbroker who made him-

self a decent living but had longed to do something different all along may ask whether the money was worth it. In these cases, there may be nothing rewarding about the situation except for the questioning itself, which may or may not open the way to more understanding.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* can be regarded as a parable of the ambivalence of success and failure. The old man catches the marlin but loses the flesh; he comes home with the skeleton, proof of both his defeat and his victory. But the skeleton cannot tell the private part of the story: the conversations with a bird, with the fish, with himself. A tourist spots the skeleton tied to his skiff and asks a waiter what it is. He replies, "Tiburón.... Eshark," meaning that the sharks ate it. The tourist misunderstands him and replies that she didn't know sharks had "such handsome, beautifully formed tails."²⁰ Already the history has been lost, through broken telling and misunderstanding. The old man is alone with his experi-

though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters you have now. The question is: is Rinehart interested in publishing this kind of novel?

The "aloneness" of *Wise Blood* is part of its magnificence. O'Connor had the strength and wisdom not to give it up for the sake of a book contract. She would accept criticism, but only if it meshed with what she was doing. This is the practice of solitude: distinguishing what is essential from what is not, and standing firm on the former. It is difficult, if not impossible, to teach aloneness of this kind, but if students see it, if they read *Wise Blood* and take in the language, they may come to love its jagged clarity and understand why it should not be softened for anything in the world.

—D.S.

through, or stumbles on a source that lights up the topic and leads to more sources. That may be the first sign of an individual voice; it grows stronger as the student learns, listens, and writes more. Through such practice, students learn how to be alone; they learn that they will always have something to do in solitude, including nothing at all. For some, solitude becomes the only place where they can do what they truly want. For others, it remains difficult and unpleasant, but they make room for it in some way. The relationships with solitude vary widely, but students learn that it is essential to doing certain things well.

But there is more to the practice of solitude than simply doing something well or working toward good performance. The person who shapes something is also shaped. We think of "character building" as something that takes place outside, in the world, but much of it happens in private. Reading, playing an instrument, memorizing the elements, all of this makes a person just a little different from before. Seeing the world a little differently, he is slightly altered in turn. All he needs to do is

honor this new shape, not apologize for it, not slur its syllables. It is possible, even with abundant foibles, to live up to the way one sees the world. We learn, over time, what we will not and cannot do, what we will not and cannot give up. Sometimes the practice of solitude comes down to a simple "no." That "no" protects all sorts of other possibilities. It guards a life.

In February 1949, Flannery O'Connor wrote⁵ to editor John Selby at Rinehart in response to his comments on the manuscript of *Wise Blood*:

I can only hope that in the finished novel the direction will be clearer, but I can tell you that I would not like at all to work with you as do other writers on your list. I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much connected with the limitations you mention. I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from....

In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not be persuaded to do otherwise. The finished book,

Endnotes

1. Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 247.
2. Jean Stein, "William Faulkner," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking, 1958), 134.
3. K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychological Review* 100, no. 3 (1993): 366–369, 375.
4. TED Talks, "Evelyn Glennie Shows How to Listen," video, filmed February 2003, posted April 2007, accessed May 22, 2011, www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen.html.
5. Excerpt from "Letter to John Selby," from *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald. Copyright © 1979 by Regina O'Connor. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.