

Failure and the Second Half of Life

Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI

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“During the second-half of life, success no longer teaches us anything. It still feels good, but we don’t learn from it. Now we learn more from failure.”

Richard Rohr says that. What’s meant by it?

Some years, I was preaching in a church. The Gospel that day was the famous Martha-Mary incident, where Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, doing nothing, while her sister, Martha, is busy with all the necessary tasks of hospitality and serving. Martha asks Jesus to reprimand Mary for her inactivity, but Jesus, in a now-famous phrase, tells her: “Mary has chosen the better part!”

Homilizing on this, I quoted some pretty credible sources: Mother Teresa, Henri Nouwen, and Jean Vanier, all of whom point out that we need to develop our sense of self-worth not from what we do, but from what we are, namely, from our innate dignity as human beings. What we are is more important than what we do, and it’s dangerous to rely on achievement and success in order to feel good about ourselves.

A man approached me afterwards and asked: “Have you ever noticed that the people who tell us that it isn’t important to achieve anything are mostly great achievers? Mother Teresa has won a Nobel prize and Henri Nouwen has written more than fifty books and receives invitations from all around the world. It’s easy, I suspect, to feel good about yourself after you’ve done something, but how am I supposed to feel good about myself when I’ve never done anything that’s impressed anyone?”

He makes an important point, namely, that there’s a season for everything, including achievement and success. That season is the first- half of life. A healthy self-image isn’t just handed to us on a platter. Part of the task of our youth is to do the kinds of things that not only build up the world, but also help us build up ourselves. One of the lessons in the parable of the talents is that there are penalties too for not being successful.

Thus there’s a time in life when doing things is mandated, even by the Gospels. That time is the first-half of life (all those years when we’re active in the work-force, caring for family, paying a mortgage, giving ourselves over to the service of others, and trying to build up the world and find meaning for ourselves). It isn’t our time then to simply sit at the feet of Jesus.

But, as James Hillman says, "Early years must focus on getting things done, while later years consider what was done and how." During the second-half of life, success loses its importance. Why?

First, because to rely on success to feel good about ourselves becomes, at a point, a cancer: If we only feel important when we've achieved something of importance then we need to continue, over and over again, to achieve something of importance, an impossible task.

More importantly, while success builds self-image it doesn't necessarily build character or soul. Bluntly put, too often success inflates rather than mellows the soul. Failure, while always containing the danger of hardening the soul, is more naturally suited to deflate the ego and mellow the heart. The major task of aging is that of mellowing — grieving, forgiving, letting go, accepting vulnerability, and moving beyond the greed, ambition, competitiveness, and perpetual disappointment of youth. Like a good wine, the soul needs to be mellowed in cracked old barrels (an apt image for aging bodies) to bring out its warm, rich character. After a certain age, failure more than success is more likely to help us do that.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when we're young and success still teaches us something, too often even our best work is motivated more by our need to prove something (ourselves, our talents, our goodness) than by any genuine altruism and concern for others. Our successes may actually be helping others and doing a lot of good, but, in the end, we're trying to prove ourselves. We're still not, in essence, making love to the world, to art, to education, to technology, to church, to a cause, or even to another person. We're making a statement: "I count, I'm worthwhile, I'm talented, I'm good, I'm loveable, notice me, love me." There's nothing wrong with that, up to a certain age, it's how we grow, and the taste of some success is often useful precisely in moving us along towards a purer motivation. But there comes a point when life is no longer about proving ourselves, or anything else. The task now is to become selfless, beyond proving anything, least of all our own worth. A healthy dose of failure is often quite useful in teaching us this.

Success always feels good, but at a certain age it no longer works its magic. That doesn't make it wrong to continue to be successful, it only makes it wrong to need to succeed in order to feel good about ourselves.