

The Failure Archetype

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One of the recurring motifs in mythological and classical literary stories is failure. Every hero has flaws which he or she has to learn to overcome. In doing so the hero undergoes transformation. This principle applies to the story of the Buddha, of Arjuna, to Jesus and St Paul, to Giordano Bruno and to Florence Nightingale, plus many others. Failure is defined as ‘the neglect or omission of expected or required action’. Failure can be both paralysing and soul-stultifying and can lead to depths of despondency and despair.

Contemporary society generally does not encourage a kind attitude towards failure, based as it is on an obsession with results and success. Every individual who fails, in whatever circumstances, is usually stigmatized and shunted aside as a ‘dead failure’. Results and success are the one binary deity worshipped in a world in which failure is its shadow side.

But it has not always been like this. Listen to St Paul exercising a profound level of soul honesty:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. (Romans, 7:18-19)

St Paul gives voice to a profoundly human dilemma: the wish to do good and the compelling inability to do so. Perhaps his description is a good portrayal of how *kama-manas* – the personal mind – works. The intimate liaison between desire and the mind generates a deep-seated sense of self-interest which, being strong, very often prevents the mind from following a direction which seems to be the right one. The result is failure and its corollary, conflict. Can such a failure become a teacher?

Joseph Campbell approaches the subject not from a linear, judgmental way, but from the much wider perspective of the overall human experience:

Whatever your fate is, whatever the hell happens, you say, “This is what I need.” It may look like a wreck, but go at it as though it were an opportunity, a challenge. If you bring love to that moment—not discouragement—you will find the strength there. Any disaster you can survive is an improvement in your character, your stature, and your life. What a privilege!! This is when the spontaneity of your own nature will have a chance to flow.

Then, when looking back at your life, you will see that the moments which seemed to be great failures, followed by wreckage, were the incidents that shaped the life you have now. You’ll see this is really true. Nothing can happen to you that is not positive. Even though it looks and feels at the moment like a negative crisis, it is not. The crisis throws you back, and when you are required to exhibit strength, it comes.

From *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living*¹

Can therefore failure be seen as an archetype in the stream of human evolution? The *Oxford Dictionary* defines an archetype as ‘a recurrent symbol or motif in literature, art, or

mythology: ‘mythological archetypes of good and evil’’. The word originates from the Greek *arkhetypon*, ‘something moulded first as a model’. We can see the presence of this archetype in the many recurring wars for the past millennia, in urban violence, in strained relationships, in different forms of addiction, in soul-destroying ambition and the deep-seated belief in separateness.

The role of failure in evolution

Theosophical teachings seem to suggest that the inevitability of failure in human evolution is balanced out by the Law of Karma and the process of reincarnation. Provided one continues to exercise awareness, every failure carries with it the germ of a new future opportunity to learn to understand more, both about oneself as well as about life’s profound purpose. Does it really matter if this opportunity come in this life or in a future life? When seen it from a purely personal and self-centred way, failure can become a paralysing influence. When seen in a broader perspective it can lead the way towards transformation.

Elaine Pagels in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*ⁱⁱ (Vintage Books: New York, 1989, p. 123), suggests that the Biblical terms translated from New Testament Greek (*αμαρτία* - *amartia*) and from Hebrew as “sin” or “syn” originate in archery and literally refer to missing the “gold” at the centre of a target, but hitting the target, i.e. error. In the Christian tradition, three famous sinners became much loved saints of the Church: St Paul, St Augustin and St Francis. These individuals did not succumb to their failures, whatever they were, but were able to understand their nature and thus rise to a deeper level of awareness within themselves. Before Christ could become their Teacher and Master they were apprentices of their own failures.

Mind as the theatre for failure

Mind is a multifaceted principle within us which can manifest a number of creative powers in our lives. But mind also becomes, inevitably, through the countless ages of human evolution, a theatre in which failure takes place. And it is not difficult to understand why. Mind is the meeting ground between Purusha and Prakriti, Spirit and Matter. This may be one of the quintessential dilemmas of being human. Within the mind meet and engage in battle clearly opposite forces: *buddhi-manas*, the illumined mind, a field of compassionate awareness and insight, and *kama-manas*, the desire-mind, seat of *ahamkāra*, the I-making faculty, which establishes an unidirectional relationship with life, particularly one based on self-interest, self-importance and indifference to the sanctity of all existence.

The Theosophical classic *Light on the Path* states that ‘to work for self is to work for disappointment’. The importance of such a teaching cannot be overestimated. By its very nature self-interest is bound to attract, sooner or later, failure for it reinforces, strengthens and seeks to legitimize separateness against the profound reality of unity, interdependence and wholeness. It runs in the opposite direction to the ever-unfolding movement of life and consciousness. In a universe which is established on the principle of undivided wholeness the attempt to maintain separation at all costs is bound to generate suffering, disappointment and a real sense of failure. Such failure can indeed become one’s teacher if the glimmerings of humility can appear in our mind’s eye.

HPB on failure

Writing on the nature of Elementals, not only as embodied intelligences in the worlds of matter but also as metaphysical realities, HPB suggests that failure is indeed a cosmological necessity in the gradual unfolding of the universal process:

Thus, the first worlds and Cosmic Beings, save the “Self-Existent”—a mystery no one could attempt to touch upon seriously, as it is a mystery perceived by the divine eye of the highest Initiates, but one that no human language could explain to the children of our age—the first worlds and Beings were failures; inasmuch as the former lacked that inherent creative force in them necessary for their further and independent evolution, and that the first orders of Beings lacked the immortal soul. Part and parcel of Anima Mundi in its Prākritic aspect, the Purusha element in them was too weak to allow of any consciousness in the intervals (*entr'actes*) between their existences during the evolutionary period and the cycle of Life. (BCW, VI, 192-193)

The subtle as well complex interactions between Consciousness and Matter are difficult to fathom but the above mentioned quotation seems to suggest that manifestation brings them together for a purpose, one which is so vast, rich and nuanced that cannot be fully understood until one has reached the end of the Path as the *Yogasutras* of Patañjali (Dr Taimni's translation in *The Science of Yoga*) suggest:

The purpose of the coming together of the *Purusa* and *Prakrti* is gaining by the *Purusa* of the awareness of his true nature and the unfoldment of powers inherent in him and *Prakrti*. (II, 23)

Can failure, therefore, be perceived as a mediator in this vast process? Can it, instead of being seen as a dead end, life-denying, negative episode, be perceived as a unique opportunity to understand ourselves, understand others and the world we live? The legend of Parzival, as narrated by Wolfram von Eschenbach, states that the path Parzival's threads towards the Grail includes several failures, each one of them teaching him a valuable lesson.

The Voice of the Silence on failure

The following verses from Fragment III of *The Voice of the Silence* present, in their unique eloquent language, the significant role failure can have on the Path of Compassion as a force that can propel us onwards, even when we stumble and fall:

Have patience, Candidate, as one who fears no failure, courts no success. Fix thy Soul's gaze upon the star whose ray thou art, the flaming star that shines within the lightless depths of ever-being, the boundless fields of the Unknown.

Prepare, and be forewarned in time. If thou hast tried and failed, O dauntless fighter, yet lose not courage: fight on and to the charge return again, and yet again.

The fearless warrior, his precious life-blood oozing from his wide and gaping wounds, will still attack the foe, drive him from out his stronghold, vanquish him, ere he himself expires. Act then, all ye who fail and suffer, act like him; and from the stronghold of your Soul, chase all your foes away — ambition, anger, hatred, e'en to the shadow of desire — when even you have failed. . .

Remember, thou that fightest for man's liberation, each failure is success, and each sincere attempt wins its reward in time. The holy germs that sprout and grow unseen in the disciple's

soul, their stalks wax strong at each new trial, they bend like reeds but never break, nor can they e'er be lost. But when the hour has struck they blossom forth . . .

Annie Besant on failure

In the following passage of her book *The Doctrine of the Heart* Annie Besant points to a profound truth of the inner, spiritual life – the relative unimportance of external happenings. Although experiences are a given in life what matters is not so much the experiences themselves but how we respond to them. When we respond rightly opportunities for further progress present themselves:

Disaster hangs over the head of the man who pins his faith on external paraphernalia rather than on the peace of the inner life, which depends not on the mode of the outer life. In fact, the more untoward the circumstances, and the greater the sacrifice involved by living among them, the nearer does one come to the final goal from the very nature of the trials one has to overcome. It is unwise, therefore, to be attracted too much by any outward manifestation of religious life, for anything that is on the plane of matter is ephemeral and illusive, and must lead to disappointment. Anyone who is drawn powerfully to any external modes of living has to learn sooner or later the comparative insignificance of all outer things. And the sooner one passes through experiences necessitated by past Karma, the better it is for the individual. It is unwelcome indeed to be suddenly thrown off one's ground, but the cup which cures folly is every bitter, and must be tasted if the disease is to be eradicated. When the gentle breeze coming from Their Lotus Feet blows over the soul, then you know that the worst external surroundings are not powerful enough to mar the music that charms within.

Karma as Teacher

As mentioned earlier, failure is 'the neglect or omission of expected or required action'. The consequences of failure can be indeed devastating: despondency, broken-heartedness, sadness, guilt, depression, among others. In its most difficult moments it generates a profound sense of meaninglessness and disconnect which leads to an experience of stark isolation and estrangement of oneself. This being so, the Wisdom Tradition suggests that in this deep and dark despair there is a lesson to be learned:

Oh night that was my guide!
Oh darkness dearer than the morning's pride,
Oh night that joined the lover
To the beloved bride
Transfiguring them each into the other.

(From St John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul*)

When the personal nature is thus bludgeoned by the process of experience it finds itself pliable enough to begin to learn about life and its significance. The blows of Karma are only perceived as 'blows' when the mind is still acting from a reactive centre. The depths of failure may reveal that such 'blows' are indeed the hand of Karma showing us that self-importance and self-conceit are not a true direction of inner, spiritual progress. Whatever Karma presents to us, in any circumstance, is always an opportunity for growth in self-knowledge, humility and inner peace, necessary conditions the realization of the unity of all life.

Boundless Compassion

In an article published in *The Theosophist* (March, 1946), Clara Codd reveals, in a passage of the *Bhagavadgītā* (*The Song Celestial* by Sir Edwin Arnold, Twelfth Discourse) the depths of the compassionate response to failure from Sri Krishna, an incarnation of universal love and compassion. It is a consciousness that excludes no one from its boundless field of ineffable sympathy and understanding. For it there is no ultimate failure:

Cling thou to me!
Clasp me with heart and mind! But if thy thought
Droops from such height; if thou be'st weak to set
Body and soul upon Me constantly,
Despair not! Give me lower service! Seek
To reach Me, worshipping with steadfast will;
And, if thou canst not worship steadfastly,
Work for Me, toil in works pleasing to Me!
For he that laboreth right for love of Me
Shall finally attain. But if in this
Thy faint heart fails, bring Me thy failure!
Find refuge in Me.

Endnotes:

¹ Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2003, San Anselmo, CA, USA

² Vintage Books New York, 1989, p. 123