

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
“Living with Failure”  
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 2, 2008

Reading

Edited selection from DEATH OF A SALESMAN by ARTHUR MILLER that was performed by Tom Mercer and David MacLeod.

*Willy is working in the garden at night where the apparition of his successful older brother appears to him*

WILLY: A man can't go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something. You can't, you can't—You gotta consider, now. Don't answer so quick. Remember, the insurance policy is a guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition. Now look, Ben, I want you to go through the ins and outs of this thing with me. I've got nobody to talk to, Ben.

BEN: What's the proposition?

WILLY: It's twenty thousand dollars on the barrelhead. Guaranteed, gilt-edged, you understand?

BEN: You don't want to make a fool of yourself. They might not honor the policy.

WILLY: How can they dare refuse? Didn't I work like a coolie to meet every premium on the nose? And now they don't pay off? Impossible!

BEN: It's called a cowardly thing, William.

WILLY: Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up a zero?

BEN: That's a point, William. And twenty thousand—that is something one can feel with the hand, it is there.

WILLY: Oh, Ben, that's the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand. Not like—like an appointment! This would not be another damned-fool appointment, Ben, and it changes all the aspects. Because Biff thinks I'm nothing, see, and so he spites me. But the funeral—Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! All the old-timers with the strange license plates—that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized—I am known! Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey— I am known, Ben, and he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben! He's in for a shock, that boy!

*BIFF Enters*

**WILLY:** Where the hell is that seed? You can't see nothing out here! They boxed in the whole goddam neighborhood!

**BIFF:** There are people all around here. Don't you realize that?

**WILLY:** I'm busy. Don't bother me.

**BIFF:** I'm saying good-bye to you. Pop. I'm not coming back any more.

**WILLY:** You're not going to see Oliver tomorrow?

**BIFF:** I've got no appointment, Dad.

**WILLY:** He put his arm around you, and you've got no appointment?

**BIFF:** Pop, get this now, will you? Every time I've left it's been a fight that sent me out of here. Today I realized something about myself and I tried to explain it to you and I—I think I'm just not smart enough to make any sense out of it for you. To hell with whose fault it is or anything like that. Let's just wrap it up, heh? Come on in, we'll tell Mom.

**WILLY:** No, I don't want to see her.

**BIFF:** Come on!

**WILLY:** No, no, I don't want to see her.

**BIFF:** Why don't you want to see her?

**WILLY:** Don't bother me, will you?

**BIFF:** What do you mean, you don't want to see her? You don't want them calling you yellow, do you? This isn't your fault it's me, I'm a bum. Now come inside. Did you hear what I said to you?

**BIFF:** People ask where I am and what I'm doing, you don't know, and you don't care. That way it'll be off your mind and you can start brightening up again. All right? That clears it, doesn't it? You gonna wish me luck, scout? Dad, you're never going to see what I am, so what's the use of arguing? If I strike oil I'll send you a check. Meantime forget I'm alive.

**WILLY:** Spite, see?

**BIFF:** Shake hands, Dad.

WILLY: Not my hand.

BIFF: I was hoping not to go this way.

WILLY: Well, this is the way you're going. Good-by.

WILLY: May you rot in hell if you leave this house!

BIFF: Exactly what is it that you want from me?

WILLY: I want you to know, on the train, in the mountains, in the valleys, wherever you go, that you cut down your life for spite!

BIFF: No, no.

WILLY: Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing! And when you're down and out, remember what did it. When you're rotting somewhere beside the railroad tracks, remember, and don't you dare blame it on me!

BIFF: I'm not blaming it on you!

WILLY: I won't take the rap for this, you hear?

BIFF: That's just what I'm telling you!

WILLY: You're trying to put a knife in me—don't think I don't know what you're doing!

BIFF: No, you're going to hear the truth—what you are and what I am! We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house! Now hear this, Willy, this is me.

WILLY: I know you!

BIFF: You know why I had no address for three months? I stole a suit in Kansas City and I was in jail.

WILLY: I suppose that's my fault!

BIFF: I stole myself out of every good job since high school!

WILLY: And whose fault is that?

BIFF: And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! That's whose fault it is!

WILLY: I hear that!

**BIFF:** It's goddam time you heard that! I had to be boss big shot in two weeks, and I'm through with it!

**WILLY:** Then hang yourself! For spite, hang yourself!

**BIFF:** No! Nobody's hanging himself, Willy! I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw—the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! Why can't I say that, Willy?

**WILLY:** The door of your life is wide open!

**BIFF:** Pop! I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!

**WILLY:** I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!

**BIFF:** I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!

**WILLY:** You vengeful, spiteful mutt!

**BIFF:** Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all.

**WILLY:** What're you doing? What're you doing?

**BIFF:** Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? I'll go in the morning.

## Sermon

Levels and nuances of failure suffuse Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman." In the center of the narrative, the favorite son, Biff, wrestles with his failure to be able to communicate with his father, Willy, as we just saw so beautifully portrayed by David and Tom. Willy's failure to remain faithful to his wife Linda poisons his relationship with Biff. Linda's dependence on Willy for survival, and Willy's disrespect of her and unwillingness to listen to her lead to a breakdown in their communication. Linda fails to influence her son's behavior and bring reconciliation

with her husband. The other son, Happy, follows in his father's footsteps but fails to grow up, settle down, get married and start a family, satisfied to revel in wine, women and song. Biff can't hold a job or make commitments and aimlessly drifts through life. Now Willy is losing his grip on reality as he becomes overtaken by the dream world he has lived in his whole life. Everyone is failing in this play and no one has figured out how to live with it, or even live through it.

Willy and Biff deal with failure differently. When Willy starts out in life, he isn't sure if being a salesman is right for him or not. What persuades him is hearing about the life of a master salesman named David Singleman. Listen to Willy talk about him from the play:

...he was eighty-four years old, and he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers—I'll never forget—and pick up the phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. 'Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people? Do you know? When he died—and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going to Boston—when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral.

Like Dave Singleman, In Willy's eyes, a meaningful and successful life is achieved by being well known and well liked. *Who he really is* doesn't matter, only *the impression he makes* really matters. The job of the salesman is to skillfully manage the impressions of his customers and leverage his personality to close the deal.

This doesn't work for Biff, after he discovers his father is having an affair. Biff wants nothing of this kind of fakery if being well known and well liked means betrayal of our personal loves. He has no stomach for tolerating the indignities of being a shipping clerk, climbing his way up through deferred gratification. The hot air Willy pumps into his sons to inflate their egos inhibits their ability to stay in their place. It curses the boys with a sense of entitlement. If I want it, I can just take it since I deserve it. But the world doesn't play by those rules and Biff loses job after job, even spending time in jail for stealing.

Willy is perfectly willing to sacrifice himself for the sale. Biff can't get past himself to even make a sale. Willy sees potentials everywhere he turns, even though they are often wildly unrealistic. Biff, mired in his dissatisfaction with reality, can't imagine a way to create what he wants, and is unwilling to make the self-sacrifices to get what he wants. Biff resigns himself to being a dollar-an-hour bum.

So where are you on the Loman scale from Willy to Biff? I know I'm squarely on the Willy side. I let go of a good paying, successful position as an engineering manager in the computer industry to pursue the dream of ministry. Today, a vision of the future for this congregation inspires my work with you. I have to admit that I'm very

attracted to being well known and well liked. Every Sunday I'm selling my ideas and inspiration about beauty, truth, and goodness, love, faith and hope to you hoping at the end of the service you'll be buying them.

Yet sometimes I slide down the scale toward Biff. Working for social change in the city and county of Albany and with the New York State Legislature can be a study in dissatisfaction with reality. Wrestling with multi-generational poverty, disempowering governmental structures, egotistical leaders caught up in their own self-aggrandizement, and myopic do-gooders who ineptly encourage the dependence of the vulnerable, can lead me to feelings of resignation. And when Willys appear in the community to rally my hope, within a short time they are co-opted, marginalized, or driven out of town. I've been around this block several times in the last eight and a half years here.

The Loman scale can apply to religion too. On the Willy side we have the religions that put all their eggs in the basket of future justification and redemption. By saying and believing these words or performing these acts on these days, I secure my eternal future. This world of tears, terror and tempest is but a brief way station on the road to glory. This world of woe is but a launching pad to the hereafter. Satisfaction is waiting in the sweet by-and-by.

On the Biff side are the grizzled materialists who reject supernaturalism. Death is final and there is nothing beyond it to hope for. What is real is what you can see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Life is ultimately tragic. We are born into a world of wonder and, at best, leave it a little better than we found it. Given the state of the world today, that possibility looks pretty doubtful. Doesn't matter if you are known or even liked. Millions of years will easily erase all marks of your existence. The future death of the sun, the source of all life, makes any hope for the future futile. Any ultimate, enduring meaning is reduced to enjoying the fresh air, sunshine and blue sky as Biff does, and living for today.

There is more going on though, in this play, than the struggle over the Loman scale. The play is also the drama of the failure of a family's love for each other. Biff is the transformational character. He wants to rescue his beloved mother from his father's betrayal. Linda's love of and commitment to Willy moves Biff toward trying to reconcile with his father, even to make an attempt to borrow money and try to sell sporting goods. Willy is cold and critical of Biff until Biff moves toward the selling vision that Willy understands and appreciates. With just this slender thread of hope, Willy moves toward Biff, restoring Willy's image of Biff as the football team captain, the only self-reflected vision of his son he can really embrace.

What Biff really wants from his father is to be loved for who-he-is, the very thing that doesn't matter to Willy. What matters to Willy is being known for who he can be because who-he-is, is hollow and empty. This lack of mutual appreciation dramatically limits their ability to communicate. What Biff offers Willy is self-recognition. Willy can only experience that self-recognition as spite. Biff's unwillingness to make something of himself Willy can only interpret as revenge for

Willy's betrayal of his mother. Biff cannot forgive him and Willy cannot forgive himself. Adultery stands in the middle of the family holding everyone apart.

Yet how much unexpressed love of Biff pours out of Willy as he returns to the past again and again to relive the boys childhood; two Adonis' with the world at their feet. How Willy yearns to see the fulfillment of everything he hasn't been able to achieve with his own life, to be well known and well liked.

Children make wonderful beasts of burden to carry our unfulfilled dreams into the future. When they buck off or buckle under those dreams, we can experience another layer of our own feelings of failure. Our immortality projects tend to resist our attempts to saddle them with our unfinished business. Yet, they do tend to pick up our relationship failures, the very things we want to protect them from, and inflict them on their future partners. If we want to unburden our children of our failures, we need to learn how to live with them and not pass them on.

No matter how much success we have in life, the years still take their toll on us. Miller's play powerfully speaks to those of us moving through middle age. Whether we succeed or fail, by middle age reminders of mortality start creeping into our joints. Body parts aren't functioning like they once did. The bloom is certainly off the rose as the middle-aged battle the lines and wrinkles that come with experience, the cost of the battle for those dreams and ideals. The lucky may have never encountered a failed love affair, a rejection letter or being passed over for a promotion or an honor. But the rest of us have known the pain of failure and must figure out how to deal with it.

Of course the problem with making peace with failure is facing the sorrow. Failure often brings with it a heavy load of self-judgment. If only I had done this or done that. If only the world had provided me this resource or that. Philomena and I watched the people voted off American Idol this week struggle with their failure to capture the hearts of the television audience. I liked Paula Abdul's words of comfort to one of the women voted out. To get into the top 24 was a wonderful success, she said, that will open all kinds of doors for each contestant. Indeed, sometimes failures can set up future success. Some of the contestants not selected have become successful on their own having won an audience through the show's exposure of their talent. Failures can move us in new directions that lead to success we hadn't considered possible.

The biggest mistake is to over-generalize failure. Failures are always discrete events in time that may not be predictive of the future. Consider this story of failure:

At the age of seven, he was forced to work to support his family. At nine, his mother died. At twenty-two, he lost his job as a store clerk. At twenty-three, as partner in a small store, he went into debt, ran for the state legislature, and was promptly defeated. At twenty-six, his partner died leaving him with a large debt. The next year he had a nervous breakdown...

At twenty-nine he was defeated in his bid to become house speaker. Two years later he lost a bid for elector. By thirty-five, he had been defeated twice while running for Congress. At thirty-nine (after a brief term in Congress) he lost his reelection bid.

At forty-one, his four-year-old son died. At forty-two, he was rejected as a prospective land officer. At forty-five, he ran for the Senate and lost. At forty-seven, he lost the vice presidential nomination. At forty-nine, he ran for Senate again - and lost again...

The man in question? Abraham Lincoln.

- from <http://www.anecdote.com/>

If we live long enough, if we reach for our greatest potential, we'll know failure. The longer one lives, the more failure one must accept as the mind, body and senses gradually weaken. Resistance is futile but acceptance is hardly inevitable. The result can be a retreat from life even before it comes to an end. At any age, failure un-faced and unacknowledged, and lessons unlearned and unaccepted can limit the ability of the Spirit of Life and Love to move through us.

To be fully alive is to live with and through failure, learning, moving through the pain and heartache, and moving on again and again. Thankfully, the enduring joy of being part of this religious community is not having to do it alone. And that can make all the difference.

## Benediction

George Bernard Shaw wisely observed that “a life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable but more useful than a life spent in doing nothing.”

If we are to attempt to bring good things to life, we are going to fail. And if we attempt to learn from our failures and move through the disappointment and regret and try again, the possibility for success is increased. Samuel Smiles put it this way: It is a mistake to suppose that men succeed through success; they much oftener succeed through failures. Precept, study, advice, and example could never have taught them so well as failure has done.

But the value of our lives cannot be totaled up comparing our successes and failures. The ultimate lesson came to me from the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, one of my favorite movies, “Remember, no one is a failure who has friends.”

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