

A few years ago I was traveling through Iowa to preach, and spent the night at a Best Western adjacent to a cornfield. I like to run through my sermons before taking the pulpit, and in a hotel room that's hard. I **believe** in witnessing to the good news of Unitarian Universalism, but something tells me that no message, however saving, is likely to be welcome from an adjacent room at 7:30 a.m.

So, I found myself at the far edge of the hotel parking lot, standing on a strip of green lawn facing the tall late-summer corn. And as humidity rose to shimmer in the air and my shoes grew damp and my hair frizzy, I inflected. I intoned. I gestured with an enthusiasm I could only have learned from Bill Schultz, my preaching professor at Meadville Lombard.

And, finally satisfied, I turned around. And I nearly tripped, and then I nearly cried, because not two feet behind me was a lawn chair, occupied by a man, maybe in his 70s. He was wearing a plaid shirt, chinos, a ball cap, and a big smile.

We stared at each other—I was speechless with mortification—and then he said,

I reckon you persuaded that corn to stand upright.

I ran away. And I filed that moment under “random embarrassing things that happened during seminary.” The time I preached an entire sermon to a field of grain, back turned to my actual audience.

And yet, it is what I remembered as I began to think hard about perfectionism, and the fear of being not-enough that can make it so hard to be present to what is.

If you've ever tried to play an instrument or learn a language or throw a baseball, you've probably heard that practice makes perfect. Bestselling social science writer Malcolm Gladwell explained in his book *Outliers* that it takes 10,000 hours of targeted practice to perfect a skill set, and that more often than not, it is this extra practice, beginning from a young age, that holds the key to expert-level mastery. This idea—that there might be something you could do, or in the case of parents of would-be star athletes, something you can buy, that might lead to success, captivated upper middle class Americans. People took to calling it the 10,000 hour rule, and in less than a decade, it took on the force of law. And the idea isn't simply to **practice**. As the late motivational speaker Zig Ziglar used to say, practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect.

Thus, kids for half a generation have been encouraged to get in the game early, specialize, forego other sports or even family activities. Soccer. Tae kwon do. Ballet. Also academics.

A team of sports psychologists recently asserted that our collective internalization of the 10,000 hour rule has contributed massively harder faster earlier mentality of so much of our parenting culture . . . and the cost is play.

Our kindergartners can't play because they're busy learning to read a full year sooner than children a generation ago. Our older kids can't play for the love of the game, because skill development now means targeted practice. And the goal isn't even creating mastery across the boards. Like finding God's elect among the Puritans here in Massachusetts, the goal here is providing the conditions so that the chosen few can rise out of the many. This was never about the 99% of kids who won't

compete professionally, much less at an elite level. It's about the 1% who might.

But is this working? Is the 10,000 rule what anybody wants? And even if it's not, is it possible to set aside the realities of our bodies and create perfection?

Maybe not. It turns out the 10,000 hour rule was based on a single study of musicians, and the author of that study has disclaimed Gladwell's conclusions and nearly everything they've been used for. Subsequent studies indicate—go figure—that different activities require different investments of time. So do different people.

And the bigger thing is, it actually doesn't matter if it's right, because for the vast majority of us, neither perfect practice nor elite outcomes envisioned by the 10,000 hour rule fits our lives. Our needs. Our goals.

That line, from the book of Mark: people were not made for the Sabbath. It was created for the people. Because the point of the gift was never rule-mongering. It was rest.

We need space to learn. On our own, and together. And I want to be clear that practice is part of what allows us to make mistakes and improve. Practicing is vitally important for skill development. But know this: practicing only for perfection does NOT make perfect. It makes pathology.

In fact, a significant and growing amount of educational and psychological research suggests a perfection orientation actually damages our ability to connect. It dampens our impulses toward creativity. And it can stifle our ability to learn, *before we even learn to read.*

Psychologist Carol Dweck—she’s a researcher at Stanford, has spent two decades studying what she calls “growth mindset.” There is actually a spectrum, with growth mindset on one side, and something called the fixed mindset on the other. An orientation toward one side or the other often manifests from early childhood. And like a muscle, that way of being in the world becomes strong with repeated use -with practice.

The hallmarks of a growth mindset are embracing challenges rather than avoiding them, persisting in the face of obstacles, believing that effort—some good old fashioned elbow grease—is the path to mastery, learning from criticism, and finally, finding encouragement in the successes of others. In a growth mindset, success is never a zero sum game. Instead, it’s a level of mastery to which we can inspire one another.

On the other side of the spectrum, in the “fixed mindset”—every moment is a test of your innate talent, a watermark of whether or not you’re good enough to cut it. If this is our mental model, failure is not a chance to grow, but a revelation of our immutable, shameful inadequacies.

And growth mindset isn’t just about our relationships with ourselves. It profoundly affects how we relate our communities.

Because one thing researchers have noticed is that the fixed mindset model calls us to feel **ashamed** of those who mess up and **threatened** by those who succeed.

Think about that.

Other people's successes—and also their failures-- they threaten to expose our own weaknesses. Success in others causes us to look badly in comparison, and failure evokes our deepest fears that we, too, might be inadequate.

And this manifests clearly in both children and adults.

Children in one experiment—since replicated—completed an easy puzzle, and were offered a single line of praise. You worked hard to solve that. Or, *I can tell that you're especially smart.*

Then they were given a hard puzzle—one that they had basically no chance of being able to solve. The kids praised for smarts requested an easier task vs. a challenging one when asked what they'd like to do next, persisted for less time in the face of frustration, and visibly, miserably sweated through the test. Then they returned to the same, easy puzzle—a repetition--and their achievement fell by 20%.

The kids praised for their work, on the other hand—not for perfection, but for doing the work just to hang in—they asked for the harder challenge, visibly enjoyed playing with it, even though they failed, and when returned to the challenge at grade level, they improved by 30%.

This applies to adults, too. Two summers ago, the New York Times released an online puzzle challenge. You had to deduce the rule behind making a four digit number. Respondents were instructed to take their time and be sure they had figured out the answer before submitting a response in the text box. And the game provided immediate feedback to explorations of the rules—it was possible in four attempts to be sure of what the rule was—but you had to be willing to hear no—to get the

problem wrong—at least twice. More than 3 quarters of respondents made none of those attempts. They preferred to guess rather than hear no.

It is hard, even for adults, to put looking good on the line for the sake of discovery. Even when the only audience is ourselves.

This choice is often unexamined and automatic. But it doesn't have to be. Researchers have found that growth mindset “creates a passion for learning rather than a hunger for approval”—and that it can be cultivated through deliberate practice. The end result is people who are not only not discouraged by failure, but who actually don't see themselves as failing when they take a risk to grow. They see themselves as learning.

So how might this relate to our congregation? How does it relate to our work right now as people of faith? How might it inform us as people who show up in the legacy of justice for all that Martin Luther King, Jr gave his life for?

For starters, we need to know that it matters tremendously how we see and respond to learning behaviors. Are questions encouraged here? Do we give people room and rein to try things themselves? And is there a reflective process as learning opportunities happen?

These are important questions, because perfectionism can be collective. And if we are collectively unwilling to fail sometimes, we are also going to be collectively unwilling to try.

And that's not just true here, within our walls. We have work to do in our wider communities, and the stakes are very high. Sometimes we are even unfamiliar with the rules or the vocabulary.

Consider, for example, engaging with the Black Lives Matter. We are called to. Literally. It's our action of immediate witness statement this year, denomination wide. It was passed at General Assembly, which means, as a denomination in which all authority comes of and through our congregations, by US. We called ourselves. And I know it's scary work, in so many way. Thanks for putting that first toe in the water. Thanks for hanging in.

Now consider the even broader calls of this moment. The very scary possibilities, for which we need comfort, and then, when we're ready, action.

And Think back to those children. The ones told, you must be smart rather than, you must have worked hard. What is it that we tell ourselves? What is our Unitarian Universalist, or progressive faith equivalent of, you must be smart?

What keeps us frozen? What encourages us to jump over an easy bar rather than enter into a continuous learning process?

We, so desperately, want to be good at this work.

And our black brothers and sisters—those with whom we want to stand in solidarity, on the side of love, have some things to say about this. Because declining to act until we have it all figured out is a position of privilege, y'all.

We MUST engage, both in here and out there, with this movement. Challenging structural racism isn't black people's job. It's all of our job, and it's gonna take all of us.

In the words of one minister and activist:

At this point, I'm not interested in your listening. I think the danger in this listening posture is, while it seems like the mindful and conscientious thing to do, it can also be far too convenient. It's a great way of doing nothing. For the sake of finding the right action, you take no action instead. We're the most connected and information-overloaded that human beings have ever been. We can transmit entire books to our hand-held devices. White allies, please report for duty. This is your shift.

We're gonna try. You, like so many other congregations—more than 600—did the White Supremacy teach in this spring. You brought your questions and fears and hopes. You brought your wondering. And you listened. You talked. And we all, denomination-wide, started learning together. It's exciting.

We, together, are still at the start of an adventure that will change us. And along the way, we are going to mess up. Guaranteed. Possibly, every day.

Which means we've gotta lean **in** to failure and trust that we're gonna come out the other side knowing something deeper.

Which is why I love improv. It allows me to keep my growth mindset engaged, and it also allows me to meet people where they are.

Being willing to *be present and fail* means that we can meet people where they are.

Success, as it turns out, is highly unapproachable.

And so, we are gonna learn the three rules of improv, together, right here. They are:

Accept the invitation.

Make your scene partner look good.

Lean in to failure.

In fact, we learned to say, I failed!, in a spirit of creative celebration.

Let's try it now.

[I Failed!]

These are words we need. Because we have, right? We have all failed some these past six months. Personally. Professionally. And maybe relationally. And we as a congregation are going to continue to stay engaged, which means failing more. Failing forward, and then saying, one to another, we worked hard on that.

The church goes on, but we form new communities within it with every passing year—communities with passion and mission. These are communities that must find a sense of safety in experimenting with one another.

These are communities that don't have time to give their words to empty cornfields.

What can we achieve, together, as we grow boldly willing to step to the line and try?

There are so many who are hungry for our engagement.

Including, possibly, that man behind me in the grass. My lawnchair congregation of one.

There are things I might have asked him—ways that he and I might have connected—but none of them occurred to me. I was too busy being mortified that someone had heard my practice run. I failed.

But in the larger picture, good news. There is still time. There is, always, this moment.

Who is waiting for your imperfect work?

The corn can grow without our help. Let us not turn our backs to our listeners, to our community, to the gift and opportunity that we have in one another. We have work to do. Imperfectly. Joyfully. Ishfully.

Amen.