

LIFE'S TOUGH—DEAL WITH IT: THE LESSONS OF FAILURE

This column is going to seem to be very “un-priestly,” but I am going ahead anyway. I read a very interesting commencement address from **Chief Justice John Roberts**, given at his own son’s boarding school in New Hampshire. It contained many typical elements one would expect, but with a twist. The school is for 6th–9th graders, so his target audience was 15-year-olds, making his words that much more powerful and in some ways startling. Here is what caught my eye: “From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don’t take friends for granted... And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you’ll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion.”

Not your typical graduation speech, and yet I was intrigued, even pleased. What? Please hear me out. I haven’t become a total curmudgeon, but I do appreciate that there is still some “tough love” being meted out to our youth. I know that I myself benefited from it. Deep down, not only do they need to hear the hard truths— I think that they appreciate them. Of all the courses I took, and of all the teachers under whom I studied, none did more for my intellectual development than my 9th grade biology teacher, **Mr. Joseph Reymann**. He was smart, competent, tough and appropriately distant (or so it seemed). He never let us take short cuts. Invariably, some student would ask— “Mr. Reymann, what will be on Friday’s exam?” He always had the same response— “Everything we covered since the last exam.” Gee, thanks! I learned the meaning of the phrase “spoon feeding.” Our class would receive none of it. Nor did anyone dare to “goof off” in his class. When I asked how to spell *photosynthesis*, he remained silent and merely pointed to the dictionary. Yes, we had to look up the spelling in a book back in the olden days.

Guess what? If you lose all three games in a weekend baseball tournament comprised of eight teams— you finished dead last. You do not deserve a trophy emblazoned with the inscription “**Consolation Bracket—3rd Place Game—Runner Up.**” There are winners and losers on the baseball diamond as in life, even as I believe with all my heart that God judges us differently than does the world. We do not all receive an “A” as I painfully learned that first semester! And yet, when I received my second semester final grade in the mail, I have never felt as proud of an academic achievement in my entire life. That’s right— my academic pride peaked in 9th grade biology. It made everything worthwhile, all the memorizing (yes, over Christmas break!) my ever-present flash cards for our taxonomy exam.

I conquered my fears and gained a sense of confidence I had never before experienced. But I believe that this was the class that taught me more than any other how to work, how to study, how to prepare for an exam, how to budget my time and yes, it especially taught me how to fail. But we have a tall order in store for us in trying to stem the growing tide of rewarding everyone, of eliminating all pain of losing from the collective consciousness of modern society. Failure is important because we become stronger, wiser and more resilient. Regarding his many attempts at inventing the light bulb, **Thomas Edison** was famous for saying: “I have not failed 10,000 times, I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 10,000 ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work.”

Failure teaches humility, that virtue which keeps us grounded. When I came to the realization that I was not an athlete, I coped by trying to excel in something else. For me, playing a musical instrument was a great alternative, something at which I experienced a modicum of success. But I was not angry over the ending of my sports career; I simply found something else. Playing Varsity-level sports was not to be in my future, and I was okay with that. I did not feel cheated and I never recall my parents complaining about a lack of playing time. My 8th Grade Nativity Baseball team won the Catholic Athletic Association (St. Paul) City championship in 1977. I do not recall playing in that particular game (which we had no real business in beating a superior St. Mark’s club!), but I was active in keeping the scorebook and coaching first base. My

claim to fame— no one got picked off at first base by the pitcher! I contributed in a different way.

St. Theresa of Avila said that humility is “living in the truth.” Too often, we try to manipulate the truth, exaggerate it, capitalizing upon our best performances and passing them off as routine. Let us live in the truth of our God-given gifts, praying for the grace to discover them. Sometimes we only discover them through failure, through a re-calibration of our energy and efforts towards something else. Failure in the spiritual life cuts across all walks of life. Sin is the great equalizer, as all have sinned, and all are equally in need of God’s grace to live a life of virtue.

- I was delighted to welcome 80 high-school age Catholics from **Cross Lake, MN** on a mission trip. They came for a Mass and tour of the Cathedral on Monday. But 15 of them returned on Thursday to do some service work— three hours of weeding, sweeping, etc. Their trip combined solid spiritual food, service and of course plenty of fun. I was deeply impressed and see great reasons for hope.
- Last Tuesday’s **All-Star Game** provided entertainment for baseball fans, with several high profile rookies who have taken the league by storm. Host-city Miami provided a needed respite for several **Venezuelan** all-stars whose home country continues to sink into political chaos and the specter of dictatorship. Nearly two million have left their homeland, fearful for its future. Major League Baseball counted 77 Venezuelans on this year’s opening day rosters, second only to Dominican Republic amongst foreign-born players.
- The heart-wrenching story of British infant **Charlie Gard** continues to capture the attention of the world. Pope Francis even chimed in through a tweet: “To defend human life, above all when it is wounded by illness, is a duty of love that God entrusts to all.” The boy’s rare diagnosis of mitochondrial depletion syndrome is not covered by insurance in England, and the country’s high court will not allow him to be taken abroad for experimental treatment.
- While many Americans might name D-Day as the most important battle of WW II, and for good reason, the costliest battle in terms of human life was the **Battle of Stalingrad** (today’s Volgograd). It began 75 years ago tomorrow— July 17, 1942. Stretching until the following February when the Germans surrendered, nearly 2 million lost their lives. Unfathomable. Let us never forget the horrible costs of war, and our need to pray daily for our men and women who serve in harm’s way, defending our freedom.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector