

Practicing

Changing Yourself
to Change the World

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INTRODUCTION

Practice

Prac·tice— *praktəs*

Verb / present participle: **practicing**

1. To participate in an activity or implement a skill repeatedly to develop greater proficiency
2. To intentionally work toward growth through repetition and experience

An ounce of practice is worth more than tons of preaching.

—Mahatma Gandhi

In my life as a pastor, blogger, advocate, and friend, each week I have multiple conversations with people of all shapes, sizes, and experiences about issues of faith. Some are loyal church attenders, deeply dedicated to their local community. Others are what I call *faith-shifters*, people who have deconstructed former beliefs and aren't sure what they believe anymore. Still others fit in the categories of *Nones* and *Dones*, folks who are at a point in their lives where they have no clear spiritual tethering or are

completely done with all things church. Some are young, with an enthusiasm and zest that is contagious, while others are older and genuinely tired after hacking at a life of faith for decades and not quite sure where it got them. Some end up crying in our conversation, feeling lost and disconnected from God, while others feel energized about working in their local community on behalf of justice and equality in these ever-changing times. Some identify as straight, others as LGBTQ+. Some are rich and others are living in poverty. Some have graduate-level education and others barely squeaked through high school. Some are married, and others are single. Some cringe when the word “church” comes up, and others joyfully talk about what they learned last Sunday.

Despite the vast array of differences, there is one consistent thread throughout all these conversations, week after week, month after month, year after year. It’s a guiding story that everyone has in common: *an authentic desire to live out their faith in a tangible way.*

To love their neighbors
To make a difference
To embody the hands and feet of Jesus
To be braver in relationship
To practice faith, not just talk about it
To help make the world a better place

For the people who identify as spiritual refugees or church-burnouts, they have heard enough sermons to last a lifetime; they are completely done with going through the motions of organized religion, and most want nothing to do with the system anymore but have a deep longing to be a force for good in our hurting world. Those who regularly attend church consistently offer comments that describe an itch to cultivate a more practical faith and a less theoretical one. They share stories of a desire to serve and help others and offer Jesus’ love in actions, not just

words. They are realizing that real change in the world starts with their own lives first.

I understand that stirring. While I am a pastor, my work is in a messy and beautiful eclectic Christian community and mission center that is extremely untraditional. The core of our life together is relationship and practice. Really looking inside ourselves at our struggles, strengths, and weaknesses and then trying to live out of a new place with others around us is extremely tough to do! I sometimes miss the ease of my past experience—sitting in church, getting inspired through worship and a good sermon, and going home.

Yet something was deeply missing when life was like that. On the outside, I looked like a “good” Christian wife and mother, faithfully attending church, and following the unwritten rules of what I thought was a faithful life. Inside, I felt lonely, disconnected from my heart, afraid to show up more honestly out of fear. I didn’t have any safe spaces to speak more honestly about some of my true struggles in my relationship with God and my own soul. I wasn’t sure who I could trust and who I couldn’t.

Thankfully, I ended up in a renegade women’s small group in a conservative Baptist church that opened up my heart and head in a way that changed things forever. The group was incredibly unique, tucked out of sight from regular ministry programming in a system built on certainty. It was a brave space to be more honest, to share our real struggles, raw questions, and scary doubts, and to not be met with judgment, advice, or fixing. Instead, I was met with honesty and hope. The women shared some of the same crazy thoughts that were running through my head, and I felt much less alone. We were honest about our fear that maybe our efforts in faith were channeled in the wrong direction, that many of the unsaid Christian rules we were following weren’t going to serve us well in our marriages, parenting, or communities.

I spent three years in that group, and it changed my life forever. I knew I could never go back to a Bible study that

wasn't also talking about real life and honest struggles. I knew I couldn't spend any more time on conversations that remained stuck on picking apart particular Bible verses or who was right and who was wrong. I knew I needed to keep pushing out of my comfort zone and into the mess and muck of my own pain, the pain of others, and the pain of our unjust world. I knew I wanted to live out the ways of Jesus in a tangible way that transformed not only my soul but also my relationships and the wider world around me.

In a nutshell, I discovered the beauty of the word "practice." Real change in ourselves doesn't come through a few minor tweaks in our behavior or from breezing through a book on practice. Practice is centered on deep inner work in our souls that propels us to habitually, intentionally, and repeatedly live out new, healthier ways over the long haul. In God's economy, improvement isn't measured with words like *more*, *bigger*, or *better* but rather by what's *deeper*, *stronger*, and *more integrated*. Deeper, stronger, more integrated people help create deeper, stronger, more integrated systems. This only comes through practice and learning to live out something different over and over again.

Practice is also about engaging even when we are scared. Playing instead of sitting on the sidelines. Showing up in relationship instead of hiding. Sitting in hard places with people instead of avoiding pain. Listening to others who look, think, and believe differently than us instead of always talking. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable as people of faith instead of protecting our hearts, money, and time. Practice is about making mistakes, getting our hands dirty, and giving ourselves and others heaps of grace. It's about getting out of our heads and into our hearts, guts, and souls. It's about putting feet to our faith. It's about loving God, our neighbors, and ourselves through actions not just words.

Practice remains one of my favorite words because the world needs more of it right now. In times of deep division, great change, and never-ending brokenness, we need brave people of practice to help us keep moving forward.

For far too long, our neighborhoods, our cities, our world has been crying out for hope while we Christians have been sitting around in our comfortably protected bubbles talking about theology.

Theology won't heal the world. Sure, theology informs us and is a powerful catalyst and reason why we do what we do. However, let's be honest. For the most part, the world has had enough of our theology. Many are sick and tired of watching Christians circle our wagons, separate from others, and fight against equality and freedom. They are hungry for healing, connection, help, touch, advocates, allies, and people who will sit with them in the dark.

The world is looking for peacemakers, bridge builders, dignity restorers, and people of presence.

Learning to be those kinds of people doesn't happen from going to church every Sunday week after week. It doesn't drop into our living room while we are sitting on the couch scrolling through social media or by listening to the latest, greatest podcast. *It comes through practice.* It comes through learning a better way than we've maybe been taught in the homes we grew up in or the churches we attended. It comes through flesh-and-blood relationships. Through real experience. Through stories. Through pain.

Over the years I have come to believe that faith is a verb. Verbs are action words, and God's spirit flows through people. It makes me think of the timeless words attributed to sixteenth-century mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

When I read this piece aloud to different groups, I always like to change “yours” to “ours.” *Christ has no body now on earth but ours. We are God’s eyes, hands, and feet.*

Faith is not knowledge. It’s not static. It’s not a “thing” we can grasp. Rather, it’s an act, occurrence, mode of being. It’s a mix of actions that reflect God in us and through us. It’s a myriad of *-ing* words that are active, tangible, and always in motion.

Faith is a verb.

It’s meant to be practiced.

I’ve found that most people I know across ages and experiences—agnostics, faith-shifters, faithful followers of Jesus, and even folks from other faith traditions—nod their head in agreement when I say this out loud. Faith is a verb. Whether we’re a millennial, baby boomer, Generation X, Y, Z or whatever new name they come up with next, most everyone’s souls resonate with the idea that faith is meant to be lived out tangibly with other people. It’s an action not an idea. It’s a life of practice, not theory.

And it’s something a lot of us need a little help with.

Many of us weren’t taught a life of courageous practice in church. We know a lot about the Bible, about service to others, about showing up as Christians at church, but many have found that we know little when it comes to healthy relationship skills, social justice advocacy, or even knowing how to truly hold space for differences between people. We need tools, examples, and real-life stories that will help bring our desires to life. We need challenge, encouragement, and ideas. We need inspiration—from the Bible and from other wisdom books and teachers—that will fuel us when we’re tired and desperately want to go back to the comforts of passivity. We need reminding that what we practice at the smallest level flows into the wider world and transforms it.

This is what *practicing* is all about. It's a book centered on practice that changes us so that we can be part of changing the world.

My hope is that as you journey through this book you feel encouraged and challenged and in the company of kindred spirits who are willing to engage in courageous practice, too. People who are done only going to church and want to *be* the church. Men and women who want to learn better ways of relating to themselves, others, and God than we may have been taught in our homes and Sunday school classes. Those who are hungry for a practical faith that connects our hearts and experience in flesh and blood, glory and pain, beauty and the mess.

I wish we could be in the same room together, sharing our failures and triumphs, our humble attempts at practice and our struggles together. Even though that's not possible, I'm going to pretend I'm processing these practices with you all in my living room, one of my favorite places for good conversations. Sometimes you are going to be irritated with me because some of these practices will make you extremely uncomfortable. You will start to wish for a book that doesn't require as much of you, where you can skim the words and gain a quick shot of inspiration instead. I'm just not that kind of person.

My work is about creating brave and safe spaces for transformation. We never change through comfort. We change through challenge, dissonance, disruption, and new stories. Trust me, I often want to flee back to comfort, too. The work of living out an honest, vulnerable, tangible faith requires parts of us we may not want to give.

While this book was in the final stages of production we received the brutal and heart-shattering news that our fifth child, one of our twins, Jared, took his own life in his dorm room just shy of his twentieth birthday. A paradoxical mix of influential outdoor education leader, excellent student and athlete, deep philosophical thinker, and creative inspiration to our family and countless Colorado kids, Jared's

death has rocked not only our world but so many others, too. Crawling through unbearable grief and every parent's worst nightmare, I am now having to practice so much of what is in this book in far more deep, holy, and uncomfortable ways.

As you live into your own individual discomfort and personal stories of life and faith, I hope you can remain open and be challenged to engage and dive in as deeply as you are able. I also encourage you to use this material in your own way. Linger on one chapter for a long time, or work through it all at once. Each of us are in unique spaces in our spiritual journey, and it's important to own what is stirring up in you and what you might be called to consider. What I hope is that as we walk through this book together you practice openness, willingness, and possibility. I'm trying to practice these things right along with you.

Each chapter will be centered on an action or verb. These actions are core to an integrated life of courageous practice and include healing, listening, loving, including, equalizing, advocating, mourning, failing, resting, and celebrating. I've also included options for personal and group reflections at the end of each chapter, along with ideas for practices to experiment with and resources to dig deeper on your own. These are not exhaustive lists, but ideas that come from my own experience; consider other ones you would add as time goes on. If you decide to engage with *practicing* in a group, either online or in real life, I always recommend setting a few ground rules for your conversation before you start. These are possibilities:

Stick with "I" statements and your own story.

Maintain confidentiality.

Go around the room for some of the questions and make space to hear from everyone instead of only hearing the loudest voices. Give everyone freedom to pass.

Don't fix or offer unsolicited advice. Practice listening.

Honor the time with brevity, and keep your sharing to three to five minutes (or whatever time you decide depending on how many people you have in the group) to ensure that everyone has a chance to share. At least do one round of hearing from everyone before opening the conversation up to additional reflections. Otherwise, you may never hear from some participants in the group.

Whether you're engaging with this book alone or with others, the most important thing about *practicing* is to be creative and build on these ten practices in ways that work for you. These actions—applied and expanded differently in everyone's unique context—can bring transformation not only to us but to the wider world, too. Each of us can throw our stones into the water, making ripples that last far beyond what meets the eye.

Practicing is about creating ripples, making waves, catalyzing change.

It's centered on learning for people who want to be challenged in their relationships. It's about forward movement in our faith because looking back no longer holds the same value. It's about finding courage to dive deep and discover ways we can become better listeners, lovers, advocates, and friends.

You were drawn to this book for a reason. You are longing for something different. You are hungry. You are open to possibility. You are tired of talking and want to start doing. You are worn out by the division and fragmentation in faith, politics, and the never-ending news cycle and want to participate in cultivating healing. You are waking up to the deep grooves of racism and sexism that permeate our systems and know you need to do something about it.

Welcome. I am so glad you are here.

Faith is a verb.

Let's get practicing together.

CHAPTER 8

THE PRACTICE OF FAILING

Fail—fāl

Verb / present participle: *failing*

1. To be unsuccessful in meeting the desired outcome
2. To miss the mark
3. To be unable to do something after repeated attempts

Gmorning!

You're gonna make mistakes.

—Lin-Manuel Miranda

The year was 2007 and I was walking the floor of the international Christian book conference preparing for a signing for my second book, which was a spiritual formation tool for evangelical Christian women that offered what a lot of them didn't have—places for honest and vulnerable stories and truth telling. The material is much different than what I'd write today, but I was proud of its unique contribution and that the publisher had hopes for a four-book series. I was checking out the long winding aisles of booths stacked

with shiny new merchandise and books when I got a call from my publisher. She had received a disturbing call from their primary Christian book retailer. When they discovered I was a co-lead pastor, they decided to withdraw their large and lucrative order, refusing to sell it because of theological convictions about female leadership. It was a kick in the gut. For a few minutes I couldn't breathe. Then I caught a gulp of air and immediately started cussing like a sailor (nice, on the floor of a Christian conference), awash with shame and anger, feeling like a failure. Simply for being female.

It's not that I hadn't experienced failures in different ways before, but this particular one had a hard and painful edge. It magnified the risk I had taken to become a female pastor with evangelical roots and the vulnerability of my own story and the stories of others I told in the book. The mix was a bad cocktail that rocked my soul. It made me want to run for the hills and never write another word again. Failing can have that effect on us. Henri Nouwen, in his book *Can You Drink the Cup?*, says, "When we are crushed like grapes, we cannot think of the wine we will become."² In that moment, with happy, energized people buzzing around on the conference floor, buying books and cutting new deals, I wasn't thinking of the wine I would become.

I felt completely crushed.

Failing is part of the human experience, yet, there aren't many places to talk about failure and embrace it as a natural part of life. Failed relationships, faith, dreams, parenting, jobs, and finances are a few in the long list of ways things often come apart in real life, don't work out the way we hoped, and cause us to hang our heads, hide, and beat ourselves up mentally over and over again. *Why couldn't we be better? What if we had only* (fill in the blank)? *What's wrong with us?*

This chapter is about the practice of failing, of learning to embrace failure as a part of being human, cultivating

resilience, and learning to stand back up over and over again. It's about remembering that failing means we are in the game—playing, living, loving, risking, trying. We are sure to *fail* at all of the practices we've talked about so far, and owning our stories instead of hiding or running from them is part of the shared human experience.

We've All Got a Failure Story

Brené Brown, whose voice continues to encourage so many to risk failure in our lives, says,

If we're going to put ourselves out there and love with our whole hearts, we're going to experience heartbreak. If we're going to try new, innovative things, we're going to fail. If we're going to risk caring and engaging, we're going to experience disappointment. . . . When we own our stories, we avoid being trapped as characters in stories someone else is telling.³

Our stories of failure need to be told, but because failing is often deeply connected to shame, it makes them difficult to talk about.

My friend Steve was a single dad who lost his job in a high-profile Christian ministry and was left with deep shame over not being able to provide for his family the way he had been trained to believe was right. Patriarchy doesn't just hurt women. The pressure that men feel to succeed in a way that is socially acceptable can be crushing. As he untangled the damaging messages of the dominant male culture (with an extra measure of Christian male pressure), he entered into therapy and uncovered a web of fear and insecurity he didn't even know existed. He began to talk more freely about what he had been carrying and how deeply embedded the message of being a failure had damaged his soul. He's been doing inner work that started

with more bravely sharing his story and breaking through the ravages of shame. It's not easy, but he's finding healing.

Some of our closest lifelong friends adopted a daughter out of foster care when she was four years old. For her entire childhood, they poured their lives into offering her a life of security and resource, ensuring she had the proper medical and emotional care to help heal some of her deep psychological wounds and provide every possible opportunity for success. After years of sacrifice, suffering, and sleepless nights as parents, she left home and never came back. It's now been several years since she disappeared from their lives. Daily, they wonder if she's alive, if they'll ever hear from her again. After eighteen years of effort, they are seemingly left with nothing but heartache. In our countless conversations about our shared struggles as parents, we always land in the same place—there's nothing they could have done differently but it sucks that this is what they're left with.

Even after all these years of intimate friendship with us, it's not easy for them to tell their story. They are often tired of thinking about it and dwelling on it, tired of the space it's taken in their lives, and tired of replaying all the things they wish could have turned out differently.

I know the “I just don't want to talk about it anymore” feeling well.

For me, I have been healing from the fallout of a failed relationship, a friendship I invested over a decade of blood, sweat, and guts in and that is now irrevocably broken. If I counted the hours I spent agonizing over my anger, sadness, and shame related to it, it would probably add up to years. Then I get mad at myself for spending so much unnecessary time on it, flogging myself for being a failure at healing, too. Do you know this feeling? The energy spent reiterating failures, beating ourselves up because things didn't turn out the way we expected?

These same kinds of failure stories are being played out in all of our lives, usually with a similar thread but

distinctive twists. Marriages that didn't work after countless years of effort and thousands of dollars of therapy, failed business endeavors that left us bankrupt, exposed, or feeling like losers, delinquent children in trouble with the law or struggling in life after we loved them with our whole hearts, bombing out of college, getting fired from a job, or foreclosing on a house and hoping no one will find out. Maybe it's hidden addictions to food, drugs, alcohol, or porn that we keep trying to get free from but just can't seem to or all the mixed-up feelings about failing as a parent over and over again. Like all things related to shame, we usually do whatever we can to manage our response to failure on our own. We push it down, carry on, and try to figure it out alone so that others don't know how devastated we actually feel inside.

Yet, the first, most critical step for each of the practices in this book seems to be the same: Own our stories first. Acknowledge them, embrace them, and use them for good.

Failure is part of being human.

We're Only Human after All

Even though it's easy to say, embracing our humanness is complicated for a lot of us. Many have been taught that with the right kind of effort we can rise above our ordinary humanness and conquer our fears through strength and confidence. A lot of us are also perfectionists, needing to get it right to feel okay about ourselves.

It makes me think of the sage words of one of my all-time favorite writers who always beautifully captures the honest human experience, Anne Lamott. She says,

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully

enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.⁴

Perfectionism is not only exhausting, it's also paralyzing. How many of you haven't done certain things that you really wanted to try out of fear of not getting it right?

Often, most of us aren't taught to honor our humanity, frailty, limitations, or how to embrace failure. This doesn't mean settling or limiting what's possible as people. Humanity is awesome, doing incredible things in the world for generations. But we're still flesh-and-blood humans who make mistakes, screw things up, end up in places we never thought we'd be.

Some of us have an added message that if we prayed and worked hard enough for God we wouldn't fail, that our performance was somehow attached to our faith (or lack of it). Oh, the Bible verses I have in my head that back up that false thinking. I remember years ago when I was a counseling student at seminary and had a very difficult client with a major personality disorder. I shared with the women's group at my church how hard it was, the emotional toll it was taking on me every week to enter into the room as a professional. One of the women's very first responses was: "Well, have you prayed about it?" Really, that's what you've got? My blood rose to boiling, and I shot back, "Are you freaking kidding me? Do you honestly think I haven't tried that a thousand times already? It's *just hard* for goodness sake!" This is also why cross talk in groups is so unhealthy; it usually always leaves people feeling like failures somehow: "Have you tried this? Have you done that?"

We often associate anything that's hard with *something we did wrong*. There are a lot of things in the world that are just plain hard and have nothing to do with what we did or

didn't do, prayed or didn't pray. Embracing that reality in the practice of failing is a good idea.

One time I was speaking at a popular Christian conference and was asked a question that I misinterpreted and completely flubbed the answer. It was related to race and privilege and was horribly humiliating because in that moment I couldn't fix it, steal the microphone back, and make it right. I had to live with the shame and pain of making a huge mistake in front of everyone, with all its churn and *Oh my God, how could I have said that?* tumbling around in my head like laundry in the dryer, cycling over and over again. Some of you know this feeling too.

It's the worst.

That night, alone in my room with that sick feeling rooted deeply in my stomach, I called my husband and some dear friends who understand failing and told them what happened. I wanted to escape, run, change my plane ticket and fly home to safety as quickly as I could. But, alas, that wasn't an option. Instead, I surprised myself and actually applied (in the moment) one of the most important skills I learned in recovery over the years—*embrace my humanness*. Shit happens. Life is not linear, and we screw things up unintentionally. Part of embodying something different is to live with our failures, breathe through them, honor whatever happened as a really hard thing, and carry on. I tossed and turned all night, anxious and fitful, but the next morning I did what I truly didn't want to do—got dressed, held my head high, walked back into the conference, and carried on. It's not that I didn't have big feelings, wasn't on the verge of tears all day, didn't remain keenly aware of how much shame was swirling around in my head and heart. My mantra was what I needed to remember—*I'm just human. I'm just human. I'm just human.*

And humans make mistakes.

A core piece of the practice of failing is embracing our humanity. Owning it, leaning into it, wearing it, and remembering we are in good company with a whole bunch

of other humans who are also struggling with feelings of failure. My insightful friend Joanna, a spiritual director who lived in the slums of India for several years, shared these sage words with me recently, “Self-compassion is embracing our humanity, owning that we are a muddled mix of dust and divinity.”

Dust and divinity.

That’s me, that’s you, that’s all of us.

The *What ifs* and *I Sucks*

My friend Phyllis Mathis is a therapist, life coach, and healer in my life. Every Monday morning—rain, snow, sleet, or sunshine—we walk three and a half miles together; it’s free therapy for both of us, and we’ve integrated it into our schedule for many years. She also facilitates a workshop at The Refuge one Saturday morning a month called School of Life. Centered on personal transformation, she talks about things most of us are thinking and feeling in a safe and brave space. Years ago, she shared a short piece on how all roads in our heads and hearts lead to two primary messages that cause us a lot of trouble—first, shame and the message of “I suck” and, second, fear and the circle of “What ifs?” The big idea is that shame and fear pervade the human experience. There’s a relief that comes from having language for it, that we’re not the only ones struggling.

I suck and *What if* swirl around in a lot of our heads. All. The. Time. Think about what’s going on in your own head. Does it have a circle of critics, lined up reminding you of all your shortcomings, failures, messes, mistakes, stumbles and bumbles, and how stupid you are—or a gentle voice of care and compassion? Most everyone I know, myself included, are more familiar with the critics who usually tell me I suck. The *What ifs* center on a lot of things related to failure—What if I can’t do it? What if I fail? What if they

leave me? What if they don't like me? What if I actually don't have the stuff to pull it off? What if, what if, what if.

The *I suck* and *What if* cul-de-sacs are ones that human beings circle around, wasting a lot of time and energy. Saying "But that's not true—you don't suck and you'll survive any of the *What ifs*" won't make us magically have peace. But greater honesty seems to help.

The way out of the *I sucks* and *What ifs* is to say out loud: "Yep, that's what's going on in my thoughts. This is what I'm afraid of. This is what I'm thinking, feeling, and experiencing." One of our best antidotes for shame and fear loops related to failure is turning on the flood lights, exposing some of our true and vulnerable feelings, and not traveling alone in our minds anymore.

This is also why Twelve Step groups are so effective at changing lives. We learn to stop hiding all our thoughts from others. Mike, who we met in the previous chapter on mourning, also has over a decade of sobriety from sexual addiction. Trapped for over forty years in its shameful grip, he did what so many people are afraid of doing—said it out loud to a group of other people and acknowledged how much he struggled. He started with a group of safe men in his recovery group and then one day was brave enough to tell me personally. He was shaking in his shoes, as I was the first woman he'd shared it with. I can still see his watery blue eyes and shaking hands, and hear his fluttery voice as the words tumbled out. When he was done, I hugged him tightly and shared these simple words: "Thank you for sharing. I am with you." He describes what happened afterward this way, "Something shifted in me when I said it out loud and was met with love and not rejection. I experienced a freedom from the cloud of feeling like a miserable failure and began to believe that maybe I was someone worth loving." When the lights got turned on and he spoke his truth out loud, the *I suck* message he had lived with for years lost some of its power. Shame grows in the dark.

Part of the practice of failure involves acknowledging what's rattling around in our heads and hearts—the *I sucks* and the *What ifs*—instead of trying to manage them on our own.

Cultivating Resilience

I love the word *resilience*. My working definition of *resilience* is the ability to navigate adversity, failure, and change with as much health as possible. It's the ability to absorb pain and struggle but not let it kill us. It's a bounce-back-ness that isn't fake or denying of reality but deep and tangible. It's somehow, in the often-recited words from Alcoholic Anonymous, "meeting calamity with serenity."

Years ago, some of our best friends were adopting two elementary-age boys from Ethiopia and were pouring over resources to prepare. One of the books challenged them to think of ways they could develop *connection, resilience, and identity* in their kids for the transition. These words have stuck with me ever since. The need for connection, resilience, and identity is not unique to African orphans; it's something that needs to be cultivated in all of us as we become healthier human beings. These three things also help us navigate failure. When we have connected relationships and are rooted in a strong identity as a human made in the image of God, loved and worthy, it helps with resilience.

I've known my friend Tami for going on two decades now. A trauma survivor, she struggles with mental illness and sometimes has to be hospitalized to get the care she needs. Years ago, she would remain in dark places not just for months but for years. It was painful to watch but I saw her courage, tenacity, and unwillingness to give in to her illness. She says, "These hard things in life have shown me that I'm stronger than I ever thought before. I am stronger than I seemed, and have become stronger through every storm. It's surprised me and others, too." She is one of the

greatest examples of resilience I can think of. Yes, she still has some bad runs and ends up needing some extra care, but the time for bounce back is now measured in days and weeks instead of years.

That's resilience.

Another way to frame resilience is a term that author Susan David uses: "emotional agility."⁵ It's an ability to navigate emotions in a healthier, more fluid way. I've watched Tami and many others in my life become more emotionally agile, and it's a much-needed skill in the practice of failing.

When we fall, when we fail, we've got to keep learning to stand back up not just with our legs, but in our spirit, our souls.

As a female pastor, I have encountered countless weird moments where I got knocked to my knees—canceling me as a speaker at a community baccalaureate because of pushback from conservative pastors, memorial services I couldn't officiate in particular churches, and being called the pastor's assistant are just a few. Each and every time, I wanted to crawl for the door and find an escape route out of the church, out of feeling so exposed, out of the shame (is this pattern starting to sound familiar?). But each time, I stood back up. I know many of you have been knocked down but keep standing back up, too. It makes me think of this Chinese proverb: "If you get up one more time than you fall, you will make it through."

We have to stand up every time we get knocked down. We have to stand up when we feel like maybe we were meant to crawl. We have to stand up when shame flushes our face.

We have to stand up when we hear a voice in our head that tells us we are supposed to sit. We have to stand up even when our legs become very tired.

The battles we're each fighting look different for all of us, and the issues we care about aren't the same. For me, I have to keep fighting for dignity, equality, and restoration in this world no matter what. I keep learning that there's

no way to do this without adversity, pain, and sometimes feeling chopped at the knees and wondering if it's all really worth it. What are the things you deeply care about, that you stand for, knowing you will still get knocked down?

Part of the practice of failing is learning to stand back up, over and over again. We won't want to. We get tired. We want to quit. We can't bear the thought of risking ourselves again.

But here's the greatest part—we don't have to try to stand up alone. The practice of failing requires help from others. Like Aaron holding his brother Moses' hands up when he became weary in the Old Testament book of Exodus, our friends can lift us back up again and again and stand alongside us, shoulder to shoulder, toe to toe, hearts supporting hearts, hands lifting heads.

Joanna lived in the Kolkata slums for several years. It turned out to be a traumatic experience on many levels, and she had to return to the United States to take care of her mental and physical health. It was devastating. Part of the pain for her was that complete success or complete failure were the only two truths she knew. In her world, coming off the mission field on the verge of a breakdown meant failure, that something was wrong with *her*. As she entered the path of healing, good friends helped expand her thinking. She shares, "They filled in the colors and nuances in my mind that only saw in black and white. They called out the truth in me that I forgot or was painfully distorted." They helped Joanna crawl when she couldn't yet walk. Eventually, through a lot of therapy and support, she's now in a much more stable place. However, it didn't take weeks or months; it took years. Sometimes that's how long it takes to stand again.

My husband and I run a small nonprofit called #waterheals, which is dedicated to water sports empowerment for the soul. It is our life force during the summer. We take people who don't normally have access to a boat on the water to learn to water ski, wake and knee-board, and

surf. It's incredible to watch, the fear that is conquered when people lower themselves into the water and say, "I'll try." Stacy is in her thirties and had never done any water sports until she moved to Colorado. Her goal was to learn to water ski, which isn't the easiest thing to do as an adult. For eight straight seasons, she tried with no avail. We gave her every tip we could think of, and, still, she couldn't get out of the water. Honestly, I thought she'd give up after a couple of seasons, but she was determined. Two years ago—after hundreds of attempts over many years—it finally came together and she got up, fully riding on water skis with the hugest smile on her face you've ever seen. Just thinking about it now brings joy to my heart. Her tenacity is incredibly rare. Most people try a few times, get mad at themselves for not *getting it*, and call it a day.

Yet, this kind of vulnerability and passion that Stacy embodied is the essence of the practice of failing. She learned so much each of those years of trying that wasn't evidenced in reaching a goal. It's annoying, but it's true—life is not just about the end result, it's about the process, too.

Failing at Faith

Often we talk about failures on a personal and relational level and forget about what it feels like to fail spiritually. Not everyone can relate, but much of my work for the past chunk of years has been journeying with people who have experienced a faith unraveling, where everything we once knew about God and faith comes apart and we aren't sure which end is up. When our faith unravels we can feel like we are failing. Read below and see if any of these describe you right now:

- You exited *church as you knew it* and now feel on the outside.
- You no longer know how to pray, read the Bible, or connect with God in a way that feels meaningful.

- You are experiencing anger, sadness, and confusion after years of certainty and clarity about your faith.
- You have broken relationships with friends and family.
- You feel lonely and disconnected where once there was joy, purpose, and a sense of community.
- You feel shame that you just can't *figure it out*.

My Canadian friend and popular author and blogger, Sarah Bessey, describes it this way: “Nothing is quite where it belongs anymore. Everything moved . . . or maybe you moved. Either way, you feel disoriented.”⁶ For a lot of us, clarity has turned to confusion, security to feeling on shaky ground, and our ability to articulate our faith has dissolved into a foreign language we can't speak. As the wider church continues to shift and find its way, more people I intersect with relate to failing at faith.

I met my friend Janet in an online class I co-facilitate called *Walking Wounded: Hope and Healing for Those Hurt by Church and Ministry*. She served in third-world countries for years, working as a Bible translator alongside her husband. Through many twists and turns, her faith crumbled, their marriage dissolved, and she lost her passion for all she had given her life to. Now a divorced, former Christian wife and missionary, she is rebuilding her life as a single, professional woman who is unsure what she believes anymore and considers herself on the bubble between atheism and agnosticism. Other people she used to be in lockstep with are doing just fine in their faith, making it easy for her to wonder: *What's wrong with me?*

The thing that often gives us the most trouble related to failed faith—and really, all types of failure—is comparing ourselves to others. We look at friends and family who are still connected, thriving, doing what we used to do. We see others mastering skills we bombed at. We see people pulling off marriages and successful jobs we failed in. We see the success of other kids while ours are

struggling and wonder if it's our fault. No matter what it is, comparing ourselves to others will always result in shame and pain.

I constantly remind people that there's no such thing as failed faith. It might feel real but it comes from the unhealthy binary, either/or thinking many of us were taught in rigid systems. It becomes embedded in our hearts and experience and will always give us trouble. Thinking we're either in or out, right or wrong, on God's good side or bad side, will always lead to pain and strife. Making peace with an evolving faith—that we will always be changing, growing, morphing our spirituality—is an important practice that isn't readily taught in a lot of churches.

Some of you don't struggle with your faith and maybe cannot relate to this personally, but you can still help others with this practice. In fact, you can be a powerful source of healing for people when it comes to these issues of faith. Here's how: *Learn how to honor others' diverse and uncertain faith stories with tenderness and care.* Let them wrestle and struggle and resist your temptation to try to fix their complex questions and doubts with simple solutions. Don't worry about family and friends when they stop going to church or start saying things about God you don't agree with. Try to trust God's work in their lives and affirm your heart for them through less words and more presence.

The Flogging Machine

Elizabeth Gilbert, in her book *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*, reminds us: "Whatever you do, try not to dwell too long on your failures. You don't need to conduct autopsies on your disasters."⁷ I am so good at these kinds of autopsies, and I usually do them in what I call the flogging machine.

You may have your own word for it, but I consider the *flogging machine* the place we go in our heads to beat ourselves up after we make some kind of mistake (no matter

how small or big), experience uncomfortable conflict, or perceive we are failing.

Each of us is different, but my flogging machine seems to have these pieces of equipment in it:

- a bat, to beat myself up with
- a megaphone to blast the negative messages over and over about myself
- a group of judges; people evaluating and critiquing me
- a tape recorder that keeps replaying and rewinding the conversation, the thing I said or did wrong, over and over again
- special earplugs that tune out anything good

What does your flogging machine look like, the place you go when you fail? Part of embodying something different is dismantling this kind of negative, debilitating power in our lives and traveling lighter. It doesn't mean we don't take a trip into the flogging machine now and then, but it means we stop hiding out there for too long as a way of avoiding our next failure.

You may not relate, but I'm quite sure you're in relationship with someone who is familiar with the flogging machine. We can help people stay out of it by acknowledging its pull. I have a friend who sometimes knows I might be struggling with something I said or did at The Refuge, so he'll text me, "Don't go into the flogging machine tonight. It's not worth it."

Instead of beating ourselves up, let's consider how we can use our perceived failures for good. Regret of any size is a time-waster, a sucker of souls, and robber of our thoughts. Left at just regret, we can get stuck. We can't change the past. No matter how hard we will it, replay it, rethink it, regret it, we cannot and will not ever be able to change the past. Circular regret and replaying failure loops won't get us anywhere new. It won't make our kids be different. Heal

a broken relationship. Bring back someone from the dead. Get us that job back. Erase a memory. Change another person. Make our faith magically reappear.

What we can do, however, is consider using what we've learned to participate in nurturing a different future. A much healthier way is to own what's happened in the past with as honest of eyes as possible and add the most important clause we can to it: _____ *happened, but I can learn _____ from it.*

Yep, I wish I had . . . I could have . . . I tried that and failed . . . but I can learn _____ from it.

This is central to the practice of failing. We can honor our humanity, our ongoing stories that are always unfolding and that we are always learning. We can remember good comes from evil, light from darkness, beauty from ashes. We can honor that everything we've done is an opportunity to grow, and life usually isn't how we imagined.

We can ask better questions related to our alleged failures to help us keep stumbling and bumping our way forward. Here are some to consider:

- How can we offer ourselves compassion?
- How can we learn from the past so we can forge a different future?
- What can we personally practice differently moving forward?
- What are we more clear on now?
- What are we now unwilling to do that once came so easy?
- What are we currently open to that we once resisted?
- What has the pain taught us about ourselves? God? Life?
- What can we put into practice that is healthier, wiser, less codependent or controlling, no matter how tiny the step?
- And because good usually emerges from hard places, what good come out of it? What can you look back to

now and say “Even in the ugliest parts of this story, emerged?”

What are some other questions that help you process through failure in a more healthy way? Whatever they are, keep asking them.

We started this chapter with the words of Broadway producer, singer, and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda, the writer and star of *Hamilton*, who I am guessing knows a thing or two about vulnerability, risk, and failure. His rhymes about mistakes, trials, and failures are true and challenging, but they end with an admonition that will help us persevere: “REST UP.”⁸



That’s where we’re going next together—the practice of resting. Each of these practices are taxing in multiple ways. We definitely won’t last if we don’t take time for self-care, renewal, and rest.

A PRAYER FOR FAILING

God, we admit we’re often afraid to fail.

Remind us of our humanness.

Strengthen our resilience.

Give us courage to stand back up, again and again.

Help us be people who are willing to risk, try, fail.

Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What are failures in your life that are hard to talk about? What prevents you from being more honest about them?
2. What are some ways you've been cultivating resilience in your life, bouncing back faster from hard things?
3. Do you have a *flogging machine* you enter when you fail? What does yours look like, feel like?
4. Consider a recent failure, something that you wished you had done differently. Try to apply some of the questions that are listed on pages 177–78.

FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. If you feel safe enough, share with the group a failure that is hard for you to talk about. What makes it difficult to share freely? How do you feel, saying it out loud? Share these reflections with the group.
2. Create a space to offer any perspectives on feeling like we've failed at faith. Read the list of possible feelings and experiences and share in that section any you relate to. If you don't connect with them personally, try to listen to those who do without fixing in any way.
3. Share what your *flogging machines* are like. What can you learn from one another that will help you spend less time in them?
4. Review the questions we can ask ourselves to reframe perceived failure. Which are most helpful to you? What other ones would you add?

TO PRACTICE

1. Think of something you really want to try but you've been afraid to, no matter how small or big. How can you take a step toward it, letting yourself risk your heart, time, the possibility of failure?
2. Share a painful failure story out loud with someone— at work, church, home, with a friend. It might seem insignificant or feel uncomfortable or unnecessary to rehash but it is part of normalizing failure and bringing it into the light.
3. Practice reframing your thinking around experiences of failure or disappointment. Try this guided prompt and see where it leads:

I consider myself to have failed when

That situation made/makes me feel

But, through this situation, I learned/am learning

I know that, no matter what, God

I know that these good things are still true about me:

The next time I feel as if I have failed, I will remember

DIG DEEPER

Big Magic: Creative Living beyond Fear by Elizabeth Gilbert
Carry On, Warrior: The Power of Embracing Your Messy, Beautiful Life by Glennon Doyle Melton
The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are by Brené Brown
Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself by Kristin Neff

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