



Quest

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Anyone who has never made a mistake
has never tried anything new.

• Albert Einstein •

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When We Fail

BY **FORREST GILMORE**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BEACON, INC. AND AFFILIATED COMMUNITY MINISTER, UNITARIAN
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The fundamental belief in the value of the individual has long held a central place in liberal religion, and finds a modern expression in our faith's first principle, an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Such a conviction comes with specific meaning, serving to counter another ancient religious principle, that of

original sin.

Original sin teaches us that each of us is born in a state of sinfulness, fallen and unclean. Some interpret this as the simple imperfection of humanity, while others decry an inherent wickedness in us all. As both Unitarian and Universalism were forming in America, the utter iniquity of humanity was preached widely. Calvinist Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," serves as a prime example. He wrote:

The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire...looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire....

In many ways, Unitarianism and Universalism gained a strong foothold in American society because of their response to this horrible theology. William Ellery Channing, considered the father of

Unitarianism, delivered a powerful sermon entitled "Likeness to God" in which Channing advised:

Let the minister... hold fast... [to] a faith in the greatness of the human soul.... Let him strive to awaken in [people] a consciousness of the heavenly treasure within them.

Affirming the inherent worth of each and every person serves as our great response to one of the most damaging theologies ever spoken. As Unitarian Universalists and religious liberals, it is something we can be proud of and continue to speak loudly when the times call for it, as they sadly so often do.

Yet, sometimes, I wonder if we misunderstand the fullness of our first principle. In a very success-driven society, I think we sometimes see it as affirming not so much our unconditional worthiness as a complete goodness in ourselves, allowing us to ignore the less savory aspects of our character. Affirming our fundamental goodness has its value, but such an emphasis can also lead us to miss the most essential implication of our inherent worth—that we need not be good to be loved.

To know this truth is to be healed. It is to embrace wholeness over perfection, to honor ourselves not as we might be, but rather as we are. I think interpreting our inherent worth as our inherent goodness can lead us to be very fearful about owning up to our own mistakes, failures, and even at times, cruelty. Without a deep acknowledgement of our capacity for, to use the Christian term, sin, we lack a useful theology of accountability, forgiveness, and even love. And yes, despite our inherent worth, despite our basic goodness, we—each and every one of us—do sin. The power of our first principle is not that we do not sin, but that even in our utter failings, even in our most horrible of mistakes, we are worthy of love.

As a young man of 24, just entering seminary, I suffered deeply from an inability to embrace my failings. I resisted acknowledging all the wounds and weaknesses in myself, feeling the incredible need to be good, to be right, to be perfect in order to be loved. I went through a ministerial career assessment, a required part of the process of becoming a minister, and was very nervous. I was afraid to give the wrong answers on the psychological tests. The therapist asked me what my flaws were and I didn't have the self awareness to answer. It was a painful three days that ended with the group facilitator telling me the therapist had placed a nickel bet with him that I wouldn't be able to handle ministry. As hard as it was, the experience, for me, began a very painful, yet ultimately liberating, path of growing acceptance of myself not as I want to be, but as I am, even when I fail, even when I am not liked.

Life seems to test these insights. And subsequently I found myself challenged more deeply than ever before. While serving my last church in Princeton, New Jersey, I fell in love and married a woman from Bloomington, Indiana. She had two children and the three of them moved out to Princeton to live with me. Over the course of our time, I found myself consistently torn between the needs of my congregation and the needs of my family. My wife desperately wanted to return to Bloomington, but I felt a deep calling to continue to serve the Princeton

congregation. My marriage suffered. My work suffered. I struggled mightily and fiercely and arrogantly to hold on to both, yet never had enough of me to do either well. After three years of struggling, at last I gave in and we moved to Bloomington to raise our family near my wife's parents.

I learned so much about being incomplete from that experience. I was not enough. From the beginning I pressed on, hurting both my family and the church. I so badly wanted to have both, and refused to see the inevitable—that the situation was unworkable. I also had to give up something very precious to me, something that made me feel like I was a good person—not only my work as a minister but also my dream of one day being an *important* minister. These were humbling awakenings.

Letting go of parish ministry was perhaps the most painful experience of my life. But I surrendered to a humbler life—and I found a much deeper love inside, both for myself and for others.

In full disclosure, after four years in Bloomington, my wife and I sadly decided to divorce. Self-acceptance remains an essential aspect of this transition for me. I never thought I'd be someone whose marriage would end in divorce. Yet here I am—incomplete, imperfect... and loved.

There are a variety of things I find difficult with conservative Christianity, yet I believe the Christian story, perhaps better than any religious tradition, addresses our human capacity for failure. As the most obvious example, Jesus failed. Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah. He was supposed to take on the Romans and usher in a new kingdom of peace for the Jewish people. But instead, he died—mission not accomplished. All kinds of beliefs have evolved to turn Jesus' death into a victory, most notably the belief that he died for our sins. But I find Jesus so much more powerful as a failure, as the man who lived and loved, struggled and hurt, succeeded and failed. Jesus, as a metaphor for God, knows us in his humanness, knows us in his weakness, knows us in his failure.

While in seminary, I had a professor, Rosemary Chinicci, who was also a Catholic nun. She told me something fascinating—she believed the resurrection came too soon, that people did not have enough time to sit in the loss, to be present to the failure. I think that's a powerful insight.

When approaching the pain that comes with failure, we tend to find ways to pass over the experience quickly, to not allow ourselves to be present and actually feel what we're feeling. We get busy. We criticize ourselves. We criticize others. We dive into one self-improvement project or another. We try to see "the positive side."

When we fail, any response we make that does not invite in our simple experience of failure removes us from the wholeness of who we are. In so doing, we reject that part of ourselves that does not know success, alienating ourselves from a very real part of our humanity, damaging ourselves by withholding the love that we all deserve.

It is certainly not in our interest to use failures as a means to belittle our worth. Yet, I think it is also not in our immediate interest to take our failures and turn them into something positive—the "lemons to lemonade" approach.

To attempt too soon to turn our failures into something "good" can be another way of avoiding the pain of failure, thus avoiding the healing that comes when we compassionately offer our presence to our hurt.

Twelve step programs are just one example of another way. Countless people have been transformed by openly admitting to their failures in the presence of loving community. This is why Rosemary Chinicci's idea of more time before the resurrection makes such sense. When we fail, we need to allow ourselves the time to simply feel the pain, experience the hurt. In so doing, we allow ourselves to remain open and true to ourselves. For this is ultimately what love is all about. Compassion means to *feel with*. When we feel our failures, when we allow ourselves to be present to them, without trying to change them or alter them, we know compassion. We know love.

And this, I believe, is the true meaning, the greatest gift of our first principle—the inherent worth and dignity of every person. You need not be good to be loved. And I believe this extraordinary gift bequeathed to us by our ancestors compels us to continue to offer this love to each other and our larger world—beginning with ourselves. May we surrender the need to be perfect, set aside the pretense of success, and enter into the humility of our full selves. We succeed and we fail; in the midst of both, let us show love. ■

Embracing Failure

BY **ELIZABETH STEVENS**, MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF THE PALOUSE, MOSCOW, IDAHO

I used to be someone who beat myself up for every fault, even ones that no one else knew about. There was a compulsion to be the best, the brightest, the most admirable person I could be, and when I did something that interfered with that perception, I would dwell on it for years.

When I was about six, we were hiking, and we had a picnic lunch in a hut in the mountains. Part of my lunch was an apple, and after I ate the apple, I threw it away...but in a can that was labelled “recycling: cans and bottles only.” When I realized my mistake, I was horrified, and I realized that I should fish my apple core out and find a better place to put it. But the can was nearly as tall as I was, and it was filled with smelly trash and sharp edges. So I walked away. I am now forty-four years old, and I still remember that moment with perfect clarity. Most especially, I remember the feeling of shame that enveloped me. All over an apple core that I put in the wrong bin.

It was important to me, in that moment, to do the right thing—to put the apple core in the right bin. But it was somehow more important to me that no one know that I had done the wrong thing. So I kept this fault secret. If I had been able to embrace the fault, I would have been able to go to my parents, or to one of the people who worked at the hut. I’m certain that I could have explained my mistake, they would have said, ‘no big deal,’ and I would have skipped on my merry way.

Embracing our faults means admitting to them, telling people about them. To do this, we have to know in our bones that this evidence of our imperfection won’t keep people from loving and respecting us. We have to trust that we won’t be judged harshly. And when we are judged harshly, which we might be, we have to be able to keep that judgment from lodging in our deep sense of self. This is tricky stuff.

A common response to failure is to make excuses—blame the failure on other people’s actions, or circumstances beyond your control. The dog ate my homework. My idiot boss kept talking about golf and the potential client was so irritated, she didn’t really even see my fantastic proposal.

This is counter-productive, though it’s very human. When we tell ourselves, “Well, I would have succeeded, but all this other stuff got in my way,” we give away our power.

Another common response is to over-react. “I can’t do anything right. I always mess up when it really counts.” So we give up our power again, and stop trying. We give in to a sense of learned helplessness.

A healthy response to failure is to find a balance between these extremes—to accept that we’re supposed to fail. It’s a normal part of life.

In reality, we fail for a variety of reasons, some internal, some external. When there is no fear or shame associated with failure, it’s easier to figure out which mistakes we might have made, and what we might want to do differently the next time. We accept the things we have no control over, and focus on the things that we can change.

My first truly spectacular failure occurred in my first paid ministry job. I had a newborn and a two-year-old, and to

be frank, I was terrified by the prospect of staying home with them. So I took a job as the assistant minister to families. The congregation hadn't done their homework. The job wasn't well-defined or well-thought-out; I didn't even have an office or a desk. Meanwhile, I had no real experience in religious education ministry, and yet I was supposed to completely reimagine and redesign their program, all in twenty hours a week.

The longer I was there, the more out of my depth I felt. I did some really crappy ministry. Also some good stuff. But the best thing that I did in that job was to decide to resign. Suddenly, the growing sense of anxiety and overwhelm melted away, and I was able to be present to myself and the congregation in a much healthier way.

I learned what it felt like to fail spectacularly—which made me better able to minister to folks who had lost their jobs or who were struggling with failures of their own. I learned how important it was to look for a good fit, and not assume that smart people of good will can make anything work. I learned a lot about myself, my strengths and weaknesses. And I faced my fear of stay-at-home-mothering and went on to three and a half years of being there for my kids when they were little.

Embracing failure as a natural part of life helps us weather the inevitable ups and downs. When we reject the “success at all costs” model and embrace a more realistic, “you win some, you lose some” outlook, we don't waste precious time and energy on situations or challenges that aren't really ours to fix or face. When we embrace failure, it allows us to find ourselves at the end of the day, happy to be alive, secure in the knowledge that whatever our track record, we are successful human beings, worthy of love and able to love others in all their faults and failures. ■

Splendid Failures

BY LAURIE BUSHBAUM, INTERIM MINISTER, CARBONDALE, COLORADO

This past summer my husband and I celebrated our 30th anniversary by going hiking in the mountains. Being in the mountains always reminds me of an incident on our very first backpacking trip. One morning in 1990 while my husband, Michael, was building a fire to cook breakfast, we swapped stories about childhood camping trips. I told him about my favorite camping breakfast: stick biscuits. Biscuit dough wrapped around a stick and toasted over a fire, then cut open and smothered with jam.

By the time the fire was crackling, I was mixing the dough and my mouth was watering. We hunted up a few good sticks and put on the dough. But before we'd hardly gotten our sticks over the fire, dough was starting to fall off in heavy biscuit blobs. It seemed as though I had put too much milk in the batter; the dough was too thin.

We were now out of flour, so our next idea was to add a little *more* milk and make the dough into pancake batter. Which we did. But then we realized that we didn't have a frying pan in which to cook the pancakes. All we had were the metal camping pots that doubled as bowls. Our last ditch attempt, and we were getting pretty hungry by this time, was to dump the batter in a pan, add some fresh blueberries, cover it up and see what happened.

The result? The most incredible blueberry muffins I've ever had. Granted, we had to eat them with a spoon, but, oh, they were good. The first time these muffins were a mistake, but now I know how to make muffins over an open fire. A splendid failure.

That cooking experiment was a good spiritual lesson for me. You see, 30 years ago, I had much more absolute ideas about what constituted a success or failure. And sometimes I made the judgment call too soon. My husband, being the scientist and the experimenter, brought a different perspective. In a situation like the “stick biscuit disaster,” I could have too easily given up, thrown away the batter, gotten out the granola and milk, and started the day off a

little crabby. I hadn't really learned on a gut level that, in the words of Lewis Thomas describing DNA, "the capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel." I wasn't always able to hear the unexpected music formed out of the moment. But that morning in the Rocky Mountains I started learning the lesson of "splendid failures," the lesson that even though situations don't turn out as I had planned, they may be salvageable. So what is it that turns plain old mistakes into splendid failures?

First of all, it helps to stay in the present. I have a neighbor who works with at-risk youth. One of the tools she gives them is yoga. She teaches them yoga so that they can learn to stay focused on their breath. Because if they can learn to really pay attention to their breathing, it begins to affect every other part of their lives. They can manage their anger and their other impulses. They can learn to take time making decisions. If they can learn to stay present to their own life-giving breath, they can better handle the stress and complexities of life. They can see ways to repair some mistakes and learn to avoid others. And if they can learn to be with their own breath, they can learn compassion, for themselves as well as others. With compassion comes forgiveness.

A second spiritual quality that seems to turn failure into success is keeping an open and flexible mind. About 15 years ago we took possession of our current family home in Minneapolis. During the years of slow renovations I splurged on some beautiful but expensive fabric roller shades for our bedroom. The problem was, I made a mistake, and the fabric I chose was too sheer and didn't block the light. Over the years it has become harder and harder for us to sleep in a too-bright room. While doing some other house projects these past few weeks I took down an old plastic roller shade that had some cracks in the material. I was going to throw it away, but then it occurred to me that I could sew sections of that "black out" fabric to the backs of my bedroom shades. Bingo! We finally have shades that darken our room. A splendid failure.

Finally, in the case of failure, perspective matters a great deal. How we label our experiences and ourselves can either diminish us or empower us. In the wake of a failure, we can get stuck in our despair or shame. Or we can go through the natural stages of failure, which are similar to the stages of grief, and then use our new wisdom to step more wisely into the future. A failure is really nothing other than our own judgment about an event. It's not a deep truth about our character or worth as a person. It is not a permanent state, unless we make it so. Choose a compassionate frame for your failures.

When we can approach our failures with awareness, honesty, compassion, and a willingness to learn, then they reveal small miracles to us: greater clarity about our gifts and weaknesses, and our options for the future; paths that perhaps we didn't see before; ideas that didn't work in one time or place, but that may work in another.

When we are able to stay in the present; keep an open and flexible mind, and choose a compassionate frame to put around our failures, then we are able to truly enjoy the muffins we never meant to make. ■

Oops, I Did It Again

BY **JORDINN NELSON LONG**, MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF FAIRHAVEN, MASSACHUSETTS

So far, I suck at this vegetarian thing.

The problem is pretty simple: I keep finding myself with a chorizo burrito in my hand, and oops, I did it again. In the first seven days of 2020, I've eaten far less meat, and probably more vegetables, than usual, but I am definitely failing any purity test out there. And not intentionally; it's just that 40 years of habit is hard to break, and my

specific commitment to the not-eating of meat is at the moment a shallow one.

So, deal off, right?

Not at all.

Do you at least feel like a failure?

Ha. No.

And I also don't feel like a vegetarian, exactly. What I feel like is a work in progress, and I trust that. I trust my ability to learn and grow. I trust myself to lean toward my commitments, and I trust my body to build the muscle to do it better day by day.

I have a shallow commitment to not eating meat, at least at the moment. But I have a very deep commitment to trying to live in fuller concert with my values and with the earth. I'm also profoundly interested in exploring the question of what can be leveraged by consumer-level choices. There's a lot holding me here in this experiment. None of which dies of imperfection.

And I'm going to level with you: the above is a true story, but I'm not telling it to you as confessional. I don't need a witness or arbiter for my eating practices.

I'm here (and, secret: you are too) for the metaphor.

Because sometimes we suck at things at first, even when we care about the larger implications. And you know what? Sometimes your friend or neighbor or colleague does, too.

And a thing that American culture, and Unitarian Universalist theology (interesting overlap there, for sure) are both averse to grasping is that we as people *can* commit to a thing, *and* suck at doing what we committed to, *and* still keep going in the service of our commitment.

We are averse to grasping that it's possible, and it is frankly alien to us to consider that this kind of try and then try better is in fact what integrity looks like where gravity is applied.

Amid this backdrop, I was recently charged with overuse of the word covenant. I pled guilty; it's an occupational hazard. And I said that I would try to find another word; but the truth is, I don't have one. Because where relationship is concerned, covenant is the only word I know that means that we—you and I—are going to try, and mess it up, and then we are going to try again.

Covenant is one of the most powerful tools I know in growing toward the person I want to be, because that so often means building toward—not discovering ready-made, but co-creating, month by month—the relationships I hope to have.

And I need that word, because what's left otherwise, namely some brittle and therefore broken promises, seems unlikely to allow our best care for one another. Insufficient to facilitate the best of what I have experienced between us. Unworthy of the complexities of human love, including its concerning capacity for hate and the mystifying and magical and sometimes highly uncomfortable realms of discovery of self and other.

Without covenant, a conversational and relational right of return, what we have when we mess up is cutoff. That's effective, in the most surface-level sense, at removing discomfort, but its ask, or our ask of it, is that we be left where it found us. It's the opposite, in short, of change through growth.

I have pretty strong muscles for that particular process; I know it better than I wish. But it's a limited-value tool. Walls are ok for separation, but if it's connection we seek, we are going to need strategies for when it's hard. For when people are, well, human. For when we ourselves are in-progress more than we wish.

Trying, and failing, and trying again.

And this is where covenant makes asks different from what our culture is used to. Where we might learn to say, “Oops, that didn’t work” and to follow that with a considered, “Let’s try this instead.”

I might, someday, be an actual vegetarian. What I am, right now, is someone willing to learn out loud, a person with tools better than shame, and a believer in the power of relationship in the pursuit of personal and relational growth.

I am not yet good at this year’s resolution, but I’m not worried. I know through long experience that my grit is made out of my practices.

And guess what: yours is, too. ■

Dare to Try

BY **TIMOTHY**, CLF MEMBER, INCARCERATED IN NEW YORK

I make no mistakes. I do not err.

A charge of fault is so unfair.

While others protest in despair

I shift the blame with great fanfare,

then put on an innocent air.

I do not try, so mistakes are rare.

Mistakes are made by those who try,

those who work and question why.

They take their lumps, do not deny,

make no excuse, no alibi.

“I know more now” is their reply,

then move on without tear or sigh. ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**, SENIOR MINISTER, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

A funny thing happened on the way to this *Quest* issue. We switched our topics from one month to another, and I neglected to notice it when I reached out to colleagues for submissions. I recruited great material for an issue on spiritual practice (which you’ll see next month), happily left for a wonderful two week-break, and thought I was prepared for our editorial meeting the day I returned.

Then, the night before I was coming back, I saw an email from Lynn Ungar, *Quest*’s editor, reminding the team that we’d be meeting the next day on the theme of ... what!?!?!? MISTAKES!!! I had recruited nothing. I had prepared nothing. I had done...you guessed it...nothing! Except that I had lived out the theme, by making a colossal mistake! Hastily, I reached out via social media to my colleagues to explain this ironic situation...could they please, immediately, without hesitation, send me stuff they’d written about mistakes? With love and humor and willingness, a record number of submissions were in my mailbox within a couple of hours.

My experience, and many other experiences just like it, show to me over and over that when I make mistakes, other people are ready to lean in and support me, to pick up what I dropped, to help me out. In fact, the mistake I made

encouraged my colleagues to be quicker with sharing what they had written than if I had asked them far in advance to do so. My own imperfection, I suspect, invited them to send in pieces which, given time, they might judge too imperfect to share.

Of course, I recognize that part of my privilege as a white middle class person is that I am allowed to make mistakes that other people—immigrants, people of color, people who defy gender binaries, poor people—are not allowed to make without punishment. We need only look at who is incarcerated, for how long, for what charge, in order to know that not all mistakes are treated equally. And not everyone has a community ready and willing to support them in times of vulnerability.

Which is one of the main reasons I have spent my life's work in spiritual communities. We exist, first and foremost, to provide support for one another's essential nature, which is vulnerability. In spiritual community, mistakes aren't graded. We aren't ranked and valued in order of our ability to perform, to act perfect, to measure up to one another's expectations.

Some years ago I was practicing Vipassana meditation at a retreat with the teacher Sharon Salzberg. Salzberg has brought the practice of Metta, or lovingkindness, meditation to many of us in the west. At this retreat, she said that she has come to define the act of meditation as the lovingkindness we show to ourselves when we notice that, once again, our attention has wandered. This definition brought delight to me because my attention wanders over and over and over. "Oh!" I said, "That means, the more our attention wanders, the more chances we have to be kind to ourselves about it!" She beamed at me. "Yes," she said.

What if our communities were centered in this same way, that we understood that we were at our strongest and finest when we showed kindness to those who make mistakes? Even bad mistakes? Instead, in the United States, we have become increasingly intolerant, cruel, and judgmental about others' mistakes, or even perceived mistakes. Too often, social media has become a platform for judgment, indictment, contempt. This is why CLF often says that we like to bring grace to the internet: we affirm people, just as the vulnerable messes of contradictions and spectacular beauty and pain and failure that we are, from birth to death and every day in between.

Can you imagine a time when everyone's mistakes are the wake up call to lovingkindness, the type of

The CLF's beloved senior minister, Rev. Meg Riley, has announced her retirement, effective August 2020. The leadership search team of the CLF Board of Trustees has been soliciting and reviewing innovative proposals from individuals and teams describing how they would meet the needs of CLF's global and diverse congregation in this extraordinary period of both promise and challenge. We are seeking candidates who will continue our leadership and legacy in anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism at both a congregational and denominational level. An announcement of exciting new leadership for the CLF is expected this summer.

For more information go to

<https://www.questformeaning.org/clfuu/minister-search/> ■

lovingkindness that my colleagues showed to me?

Can you imagine a world in which every breath is an opportunity to love again, no matter how far astray our mind has wandered again? Do you, like me, long for a world in which every one of us believes that despite all of our mistakes, we are still worthy of love? As far as I'm concerned, that's what we're doing here now, in our own radically imperfect way: Trying to build that world in which love is the constant through all our wandering and our wobbling. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Our theme for this month is Mistakes and Failures—which I think of as two very different things. Failures have emotional weight, and consequences. Mistakes, on the other hand, are just things that don't go as you expected, or as you intended. They...just happen. I realized the other day that the attitude towards mistakes forms a crucial difference between two of the little sub-cultures I participate in. I love both English country dancing—think what you would see at a ball in a Jane Austen movie—and contra dancing, which is the more energetic American version of country dancing.

I recommend them both. English country dance has a lovely flow, as people strive to keep everything exactly with the phrasing of the beautiful music. Contra is a bit wilder, with a style that encourages extra flourishes and spins. There is a beauty to English dance that comes from everyone really trying to get it right, to create patterns that proceed so smoothly that it feels like the dance emerges from the music itself. But sometimes that desire to get it right can turn into trying to get other people to do it right, and all the joy can get squeezed out if someone in the line sees you make a mistake and then feels the need to instruct you for the rest of the dance.

Contra dance, on the other hand seems to exist with the assumption that everyone will dance at the level at which they are likely to make some mistakes. New dancers are often confused about which way to go, and depend on those they are dancing with to get them pointed in the right direction. But as people become more used to the figures and calls and more likely to be in the right place at the right time, they start to add in layers of difficulty. There is the challenge of figuring out how to add in extra twirls and flourishes, while still ending up at the right place at the right time. And then you can add to the challenge by learning the “gents” role if you are used to dancing as a “lady” or vice versa. And then you can try swapping roles with your partner at various points during the dance. And then, if you have a group that likes to play, you can really transgress against the rules by finding ways to switch around partners during the course of the dance.

And sure, it is certainly possible for the mistakes that are inevitably caused by these shenanigans to be annoying. Nobody wants the line of dancers to become hopelessly muddled. But it turns out that there is a lot of joy and laughter to be found living at that edge where mistakes will happen, and then get fixed, and the flow of the dance—or life—continues. It turns out that the mark of a really advanced contra dancer is not a person who never makes mistakes, but rather a person who is able to fix mistakes so smoothly that you might never even know that things had ever gone awry.

Mistakes happen when we push to the edge of our comfort zone. They are a sign that we are growing, trying to learn, to improve our skills. And so I try to preserve a contra dance state of mind in other areas of my life, including those with more emotional weight. My dance friend Les used to use the pronoun “she,” but now uses “they.” It's taken me a while to adjust, and I have been known, in the midst of a dance, to tell someone “go swing her” rather than “go swing them.”

It's a mistake. It doesn't mean I'm bad or ill-intentioned. It also doesn't mean that Les is doing something wrong by expecting me to use different pronouns than the ones I was used to. It means I say sorry and we move on. It's not Les's job to arrange their life to keep me from feeling uncomfortable or bad—but then, it's also not my job to feel bad. It's my job to keep practicing until what was once awkward becomes easy.

Mistakes are bound to happen when we engage with people whose life experience is different from ours because of

gender or race or ability or sexual orientation or class or whatever. We are all ignorant about the lives of other people in profound ways. The only way to avoid mistakes is to stick with people who are as much like us as possible—and miss out on the amazing, complex dance of diversity.

What makes it possible for us to dance together is the understanding that while mistakes will happen, mistakes can also be fixed, and we can move on with more grace in the future. Sometimes we will be in the wrong place. And the most helpful response to someone being in the wrong place is to tell them where you want them to be instead. Not to shame them, but to help them be right. And then the most helpful response to that instruction is to move where you were asked to go. Not to make a production of how bad or wrong you are, but also not to argue. Just to shift to a place that allows the dance to go on.

Make mistakes. Fix them. Make new mistakes. Follow the two essential rules of contra dance: Don't stop. Have fun. ■

There are plenty of places in the world where folks are more than ready to point out your mistakes, and to tell you that what you are doing is not good enough. There are fewer places that are ready to tell you *Your mistakes do not define you*. For our incarcerated members, the CLF might be the one and only source for that message of hope and possibility. Please give as generously as you can, either online at clfuu.org/give or by mailing a check in the enclosed envelope. ■

Managing Mistakes

BY MEG BARNHOUSE, SENIOR MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF AUSTIN, TEXAS

What do you do when you make a mistake? You see what part of it was yours. You take responsibility and let go of the self-defense.

Then you say you're sorry.

Then you try to learn about and heal that part of yourself that led to the mistake. And you try to make amends.

"I'm sorry. I love you." Repeat. To the universe. As you heal yourself, you heal others.

I made a mistake this week. I know better. I said things that hurt someone I like and respect a good deal. I realized I'd caused hurt, and I apologized. I was laughing about something just because it made me uncomfortable, I said, which was the truth. I was understood and forgiven on the spot. I didn't forgive myself, though. That takes longer.

Looking at what happened, I made a plan to get more comfortable with that issue. In order to say fewer hurtful things, some people try to watch what they say. That never works.

The beauty of working on yourself, at the thoughts and love level, is that you don't have to watch what you say if you see more clearly, if you judge less and understand more. ■

You can listen to audio recordings of *Quest Monthly*, read back issues or get electronic versions of the text to share with friends (and much more) at questformeaning.org

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