A Teaching Moment: Failure and the Humility It Gives Rise To

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Nobody likes to feel embarrassed. Indeed, our most painful and vivid memories are often of experiences in which we were humiliated by or in front of others. Embarrassment can lead to shame and self-loathing. It can diminish our confidence, shake us from our sense of certainty, and cause the kind of repression that expresses itself in all types of neuroses. When we feel embarrassed, we want to avoid others and conceal that of which we are ashamed. More than this, we want to escape our embarrassment and ensure that whatever gave rise to it in the first place does not happen again. We tend to view embarrassment as an unqualified evil. To be embarrassed, we think, is a fate that must be avoided at all costs. And yet, there are times when embarrassment has salutary effects. In some circumstances, feeling embarrassed is not only necessary but good. It helps us to see where we have gone wrong and teaches us to want to do otherwise. It is a corrective for behavior that needs correcting and reminds us of the fact that we are not infallible, but vulnerable, broken creatures who need one another's mercy, forgiveness, and love.

The idea that distressing and even painful experiences might serve as aids in the development of virtue and the cultivation of a rich and prosperous life may seem odd in the "therapeutic" culture in which we find ourselves (see Rieff, 1987; Arthur *et al*, 2024). Indeed, at a time when the *hedonic* (pleasure, comfort) elements of flourishing are emphasized to the exclusion of the *eudaimonic* (meaning and purpose) components, when the proliferation of digital technologies and the prominence of shallow, morally anaemic forms of psychotherapy seem to conspire to impede our search for meaning and undermine our capacity to flourish (Clemente & Goodman, 2026; Goodman & Clemente, 2024), it is downright startling to find that classical thinkers held that it is better to suffer misfortune than to get what one desires:

> What I want to tell you is something wonderful, which makes it very difficult for me to put it into words. For I think that ill fortune is better for men than good. Fortune always cheats when she seems to smile, with the appearance of happiness, but is always truthful when she shows herself to be inconstant by changing. The first kind of fortune deceives, the second instructs; the one binds the minds of those who enjoy goods that cheatingly only seem to be good, the other frees them with knowledge of the fragility of mortal happiness. So you can see that the one is inconstant, always running hither and thither, uncertain of herself; and the other is steady, well prepared and—with the practice of adversity itself—wise (Boethius, 1918, p. 225).

Alien as this perspective may seem to a modern readership, there was a time when the heuristic nature of pain was not only recognized but recommended. Aristotle, for instance, likened punishment to “a kind of medical treatment,” observing: “it is the nature of medical treatments to take effect through the introduction of the opposite of the disease” (NE, 1104b). If, that is, one is infected with the malady of gluttony, then the natural consequences of such overindulgence—dyspepsia, poor health, and the other attendant ailments—will act as correctives, persuading the malefactor to become more temperate. (Should such desirable outcomes fail to induce the requisite change, Aristotle insists, then society must invent educative punishments meant to incite the wrongdoer to reform—another notion that has lost favour today.)

This insight—that pain can incite moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth—has had a major influence on the history of education, as Nietzsche (1989) first persuasively argued (and Foucault (1985) later derivatively expounded upon). Consider, for instance, Augustine's reflections on the penal approach employed by his boyhood tutors in Book I of the *Confessions*. Noting that "free curiosity has greater power to stimulate learning than rigorous coercion" (p. 17) and that, as a child, he "hated being forced to study" (p. 14), the future bishop and saint nevertheless admits that the pressure put on him by his teachers "was good for me" and that "I learnt nothing unless compelled" (p. 14). It was the fear of punishment, notes Augustine, that first inspired in him an insatiable love of learning. Fear and the desire for praise from his classmates and instructors.

Such self-interested motives might seem ignoble, but in her 1942 essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," the French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil (2021) tells us otherwise. For, she says, it is the fear of being embarrassed, of having one's pride wounded and one's conceit unhorsed, that motivates one to strive for perfection. And it is realization that one is not and never will be perfect, that one is fallible and bound to make mistakes, that helps one cultivate the "virtue of humility," a treasure "far more precious than all academic progress" (p. 64). Humility, Weil writes, is not fostered when one gets good grades, passes one's exams, and wins the plaudits of one's teachers and peers—though this, as Augustine rightly understood, is what drives most of us. Rather, it is only when we take "great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second-rate it is, without seeking any excuse or overlooking any mistake or any of our tutor's corrections, trying to get down to the origin of each fault" that we begin to appreciate the truth of our own ineptitude and our need for the wisdom and assistance of others (p. 64). Spending time contemplating the "sheer stupidity" that led us to fail enables us to examine, without pretext or defense, our own "mediocrity," allowing us to acknowledge and assess our limitations (p. 65). "No knowledge," Weil asserts, "is more to be desired. If we can arrive at knowing this truth with all our souls we shall be well established on the right foundation" (p. 65).

Let us consider an example from a little remarked upon scene in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (2002) to see how the pain of humiliation can produce the virtue of humility in those willing to learn the lessons taught by embarrassment. Dmitri, the oldest of the Karamazov brothers, is a drunkard and a rogue. He is notorious for throwing lavish parties, typically funded with other people's money, and gorging himself on sweets, champaign, vodka, and women. He flies into fits of anger and lashes out at anyone unfortunate enough to be in his vicinity at the time. He wallows in depravity. His debauched lifestyle knows no limits. After beating his father and stealing a fistful of the old man's money, he blows every cent of it on a carnivalesque night of partying and excess. In the early hours of the next morning, as he makes plans to run off with one of his mistresses, the police arrive and arrest him for his father's murder. The patriarch of the Karamazov family, it seems, had not simply been beaten but was eventually killed, and Dmitri is the prime suspect.

At first, Dmitri is obstinate, refusing to go along with the investigation. He is proud and even condescending in his self-defense. But then the arresting officers ask him to strip so they can search his clothes for clues and weapons, and Dmitri's demeanor undergoes a profound change. He feels disgraced to have to sit undressed in a room full of people who are wearing clothes and is even more embarrassed when he is asked to remove his socks; for, “they were not very clean, nor were his underclothes, and now everyone could see it” (p. 484). How, one might ask, could such a degrading circumstance be considered good? In what way can so humiliating a situation be beneficial?

And yet there is no doubt that Dmitri benefits from it. Sitting undressed before the men investigating him for murder reveals his vulnerability. More than that, it shows him how disorderly his life has become. His dirty undergarments attest to the disgraceful way he has been conducting himself. Confronted with his own weakness, mortified by the uncleanliness in which he has chosen to live, Dmitri lets go of his conceit and expresses remorse for his boorish behavior. His embarrassment has helped him to become self-aware and provided him with the opportunity to reform his ways. Throughout the rest of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri is confronted with countless hardships, including being put on trial for a murder he did not commit. And yet, from the time of his arrest on, he remains one of the most honest, faithful characters in the book. His embarrassment has changed him. He has grown in the face of it, grown by becoming small.

The same can undoubtedly be said of all men of virtue who have had to suffer through life’s humiliations and indignities in order to learn that self-discovery comes as much by way of failure and disillusionment as it does by means of success. Take the story of another moral and intellectual luminary, Plato, who failed so spectacularly as a poet that he had no choice but to become a philosopher (see Barrett, 2011, p. 80). There is a somewhat dubious tale from the ancient world that claims that after his death, Plato was found to be in possession of a rough draft of the *Republic* in which he had written the opening lines dozens of times, rearranging the first few words again and again in every possible combination. Often used to illustrate the fastidious nature of genius, the story, however, fails to reckon with Plato's failure. For, while it is true that he went on to have an outsized influence on western philosophy, to say nothing of civilization more broadly, it is equally true that Plato first aspired to be, like his idol Aristophanes, a comic poet (he is said to have burned all his compositions in dejection) and then later a statesman (he fell so preposterously short of that goal that he was sold into slavery and nearly put to death) before finding his vocation in the life of the mind.

History is replete with anecdotes of highly accomplished persons being chastened by unsuccess. We are wont to recount stories of Joyce receiving dozens of rejection letters before finding a publisher for *Ulysses* and Einstein flunking out of high school math. We find it inspirational to learn that Beatrix Potter had to use her own money to publish *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and that *Jane Eyre* was dismissed by an early critic as "sheer rudeness and vulgarity." We marvel at the perseverance of Nietzsche, whose masterpiece *Beyond Good and Evil* sold a measly 114 copies in its first year in print, and the perspicacity of George Sand who had to adopt a man's name as her pseudonym in order to see her work published in a resolutely male literary culture. Yet we tend to interpret such setbacks not on their own terms, as they were experienced by those who suffered them, but in light of their author's future acclaim. That is, we see them as *setbacks* and not failures, detours on the road to success and not the annihilation of the road itself. These are tales told to inspire resilience, not humility, determination, not an awareness of one's fallibility.

That we insist upon taking stories of loss and turning them into stories of gain is no doubt rooted in our preference for happy endings. Something in us needs to believe that any fate can be surmounted so long as one is strong enough to surmount it. And in the face of a chaotic and often crushing existence, such notions are not negotiable. They are necessities that must be treated as true if one is going to accomplish the Herculean feat of getting out of bed and facing the new day. The only problem is that nothing could be further from the truth. Human existence, as we all know at some level, is rife with suffering that resists explanation and obstacles that cannot be overcome. To be human means to be continuously confronted with failure, both one's own and the myriad failures of the world around us, which is why Aristotle insists that flourishing depends not on internal virtues alone but also external fortunate, such as health, wealth, education, and community (NE, 1153b). But mightn't it be the case that learning to live well means learning to live with failure? Mightn't a healthy dose of embarrassment be its own kind of virtue?

In his recent book, *In Praise of Failure* (2022), the contemporary philosopher Costică Brădățan suggests that we stop striving for success at all costs and instead embrace life's shortcomings. Noting that failure "lies at the core of who we are," that "Failing is essential to what we are as human beings," Brădățan extolls the benefits of coming to terms with our imperfections and accepting the frailty and precarity of human existence (p. 3). Doing so, he claims, will humble us and enable us to see ourselves honesty, stripped of the veneer that achievement seems to provide. Borrowing a line of thinking we have already seen employed in the works of Boethius, Brădățan asserts that bad fortune is better than good, failure more beneficial than success. For Boethius, good fortune deceives, while bad fortune enlightens (1918, p. 225). Similarly, Brădățan insists that "failure defines us, while success is auxiliary and fleeting and does not reveal much" (2022, p. 3). Both thinkers recognize the danger posed by hubris. Both see egocentrism as a greater weakness than weakness itself.

St. Paul, in his *Letter to the Galatians*, famously warned that "if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he is deluding himself." Humility, he suggests, is an honest assessment of one’s limitations, an acknowledgment of one’s need for and dependence upon others. Our fixation with success, on the other hand, distracts us from these essential elements of our being. It convinces us that we are—and must be—independent and self-sufficient. It teaches us to shun the help of others and refuse to accept our vulnerability. Is there any doubt what the outcome of such denials will be? Is it any wonder that in those moments when we are most desirous of success, we are least happy, least content to be ourselves, and least tolerant of one another?

Reflecting on the pitfalls of such hubris, the 20th century rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel saw humility and humiliation as going hand in hand. For Heschel, the ability to feel shame was a moral imperative: “What the world needs is a sense of embarrassment” (1963, p. 114). The virtue of embarrassment, Heschel asserted, is that it robs us of our certainty and self-satisfaction. The gravest danger is to believe oneself morally justified, especially in world in which oppression and injustice reign supreme.

> I am afraid of people who are never embarrassed at their own pettiness, prejudices, envy, and conceit, never embarrassed at the profanation of life. A world full of grandeur has been converted into a carnival. There are slums, disease, and starvation all over the world, and we are building more luxurious hotels in Las Vegas. Social dynamics is no substitute for moral responsibility (p. 114).

“The end of embarrassment,” Heschel provocatively proclaimed, “would be the end of humanity” (p. 113). For, humanity and humility are coterminous, and one cannot live a fully human life without being aware of one’s errors and one’s malice. According to Heschel, feeling embarrassed not only keeps our worst impulses in check; it also opens us to the wonder of existence by reminding us of how small we are in relation to a life that is always more than we expected. When we become aware of just how mysterious and uncertain life really is, we grow in our appreciation for that which transcends us. Embarrassment, then, is more than a mere protection against "against arrogance, hybris, self-deification"; it is the true path to fulfillment, to gratitude, to a flourishing live. When we learn to feel embarrassed, we begin to see the world, and ourselves, more clearly. And it is only then that we can live in love and harmony with one another.

Our forgoing discussion has been intended to open space for a conversation about an oft-overlooked virtue, but we began this project with a larger aim in mind. Those who know us well know that our main area of interest is the field of psychology and the outsized influence it has on our understanding of personhood today. It is our belief that one of the largest and most influential educators of character is psychological discourse, language, and practice. And yet, those seeking psychotherapeutic care are rarely, if ever, taught to embrace the feeling of embarrassment. If anything, they are told to feel ashamed of their shame, to pursue self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction at all costs, to avoid humility and instead learn to be proud of their pride. This, we believe, is a major pitfall, and we hope in our future scholarship to take up the insights offered above us employ them as a helpful critique of the moral anaemia that has taken hold of psychology today.

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