

What We Talk About When We Talk About Success

The title of this talk derives from Raymond Carver's well known short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," whose original title was "Beginners." I'd argue that Carver's title, though clearly not as sexy as the one that appeared with the published story, was more fitting to the narrative, which, like much of Carver's work, is about various degrees of failure. Gordon Lish, Carver's longtime editor, not only rewrote the story's title, he changed the name of a central character and much of the narrative's content. Carver, we learn from correspondence, had begged Lish to reinstate what had been cut.

The editing of Raymond Carver is illustrative of how the more public side of writing success—i.e., publishing, which is more often than not determined by forces beyond the material and/or author—can actually weaken, or fail, the writing. In this way, Lish, who reputedly called Carver "his creature" and took credit for the writer's success, also failed him. Consider this appeal by Carver—one of many in a long letter written in 1980—after he read the redacted version: "If I go ahead with this as it is, it will not be good for me. The book will not be, as it should, a cause for joyous celebration, but one of defense and explanation."

"A cause for joyous celebration." Eight years earlier, Carver, eager to have work published in a glossy magazine, had allowed Lish to make major edits of a story that appeared in *Esquire*. Carver's first wife, Maryanne, called her husband a "whore" and accused him of selling out to the establishment. So by 1980, we can infer from the author's desperate begging that he had come to a different understanding of what success meant to him as a

writer, and it had to do, I think, with feeling that each word, each sentence he had set down in his story belonged to something larger. Perhaps, too, he recalled the rush of everything clicking into place, literally, as he pressed the keys on his typewriter. Later in this same letter, Carver offers to send back the advance to Knopf and even pay Lish for all his work.

I find myself wondering what would have happened had Carver prevailed and the more drastic of Lish's edits been rejected. But I also find myself thinking about how everything might have been different had Carver not been an alcoholic or had he not been abusive to Maryanne, or had he not left Maryanne, become sober, or met Tess Gallagher, who became his second wife and whose successful efforts to restore his edited stories to their original forms have made it possible to include him in this talk about success and failure.

II. Boston, 2012

At the conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (commonly known as AWP¹), I moderated and participated in a panel called “Fail Again, Fail Better: Lessons from the Flip Side of Success.”² The panel members were Eugenia Kim, Nalini Jones, Brian Hoover, and Dustin Beall Smith.

¹ An acronym sometimes exchanged between writers and teachers of creative writing a bit like a secret handshake.

² The title of this panel is taken from Samuel Beckett's penultimate novella, *Worstward Ho*, published in 1983. Beckett writes: “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” I first read the words *fail again, fail better* at an AWP conference (Denver, I believe), where they were, as you can tell, out of context. Because of this, perhaps, they seemed to me a kind of advice, which made them very much a part of AWP itself, where we come to hear and be heard. It made sense to me as a writer, especially as a writer who had started late and quickly ascertained that she was not going to write as prolifically as, say, Virginia Woolf, or Toni Morrison, or E. B. White or, or, or... But the truth is that Beckett is being Beckett here, mocking everything that has come to be cliché, from the expression Westward, Ho! from whence his title derives, to the adage “If at first you don't succeed.”

Dusty talked about how ambition can set us up for failure, and Eugenia, wearing a Tiger-Mom persona, about doubt and cultural expectations of success; Nalini talked about flaw versus failure, with fabulous examples from Dickens; and Brian talked about the critic and essayist Seymour Krim, who dubbed writing “the failure business”. I talked about various ways to think about success, which is to say that I talked, sideways, about failure.

If you were not at this particular meeting of AWP, imagine if you will, the setting: a New England convention center (Hynes) and a hotel (Sheraton), connected by the Shops at Prudential, a place that features typical mall franchises selling food and beverages, clothing, gifts, books, and the ubiquitous novelty socks and sunglasses. You get the picture: Anymall, Anystate, the U.S. of Anywhere, this one under the glass of an atrium and thus protected from what turned out to be a pretty intense snowstorm during the course of this particular gathering.

After a certain number of days in such an environment—the combination of sleep deprivation, stimulating conversations, and the up-close-and-personal-ness of so many writers (are there really *this* many of us? you think occasionally), the immersion, in other words, *into* words and the practice of language—brings on a sort of neurochemical reaction that is peculiar to creative people when they magnetize themselves into groups. It is as if you can feel synapses firing and particles entangling³. *Rarefied* is the word I reach for to describe the sensation, though that is not a wholly accurate modifier, as its root means “having many intervals and gaps,” and as anyone who attends these things know, the most white space we

³ Entanglement in quantum physics: if two particles (like photons or quarks) interact physically, their quantum states assume complementary values, and the relationship is maintained even if they are separated by great distances. You don't know the values of either one of them without measuring, but if you measure you find that whatever the value of the quantum state in the first particle is, the value in the second is exactly complementary.

see during such a conference exists only on paper. But rarefied it feels nonetheless, perhaps because so much neurotransmission and quantum-particle activity *is* taking place, so much so that an almost tangible promise of creativity thins the membrane between reality and artifice so that as a mere mortal, you might recount the tales of the immortal gods. Athena sprung from Zeus's head. Ideas made manifest, as it were. Rarefied.

So there I am—we all are—at AWP in Boston on the last day of the conference, a Saturday. I've been here since Wednesday and I've been busy, as one must be at AWP. Our panel is scheduled for the last time slot of Saturday, the absolute worst time on the schedule, and I fear that no one will show up. It is, after all, about failure. It is not lost on me that some years ago, when Dusty and I had first conceived of this same panel, our proposal was rejected. Thus, all morning, my idling thoughts are interrupted by the idea that the decision makers at AWP had used a kind of funky algebra that nonetheless made sense: Failure + Failure = Failure. Just so you know, three of the original panel's participants were different people, one of whom had just won the Pulitzer for a book of poetry titled *Failure*.

The worst part of this particular AWP, this panel, and this Saturday is that at eleven in the morning, I had still not finished writing the talk I planned to give. Nor had Brian, one of the co-panelists. We are both masters of the fine art of procrastination, and have conspired to put off doing many things while engaged in lengthy conversations about our techniques for slacking. But today we have semi-valid excuses: for a multitude of reasons, we simply have not come prepared to this conference. We dare not entertain the joke that we have failed at failing, lest we fail harder. I ask him if he'd like to repair to the quiet of my

room to finish our essays. Brian is slender and wry and looks younger than he is. Right now, his skin is pale and his red hair is tousled in such a way as to suggest that it may become unmanageable at any minute. I'm thinking that if his hair looks that anxious, I must have the words *train wreck* painted across my face. Neither of us has had more than seven hours of sleep total during the last several days. Today, breakfast disappeared into the vacuum of things that could not be completed, and it's looking as if lunch is headed to the same place. The panel starts at 4:00 PM.

Doesn't really matter, I think, no one's going to show, anyway. I do not say this to Brian, who was my student and is now my friend, and whose words I want other people to hear and read. This is his first AWP, which I'm sure he'll never forget, and then suddenly I'm hearing that terrible St. Pauli Girl beer ad slogan, "You never forget your first girl," and wishing, desperately, that I had slept more and had greater presence of mind to have finished this talk instead of mulling over it just hours prior to giving it. I have never done anything like this in my so-called professional writer's life, which is why I am paralyzed to the point of not comprehending the irony that I am in the throes of failing.

At about half past noon, Brian and I steal away to my room on the thirty-fifth floor. We wear serious expressions. I put on my glasses. The momentary quiet in the room is almost absolute; the madding crowd of AWP is thirty-five stories below. We focus on our laptop screens. Our keyboards make promising noises. We Will Not Fail is the mantra that has wrapped us in its arms. We read our talks aloud to one another and time them. Make suggestions and then make corrections. Have one last go at tweaking before saving our respective talks onto thumb drives.

At 3:20, we go to the business lounge on the thirty-seventh floor to print our talks. I am sure the printer will malfunction. When it does, I am unsurprised, and in the vacuum that is created from expecting the worst, I start thinking about Sartre and *No Exit*, and the clamminess of existentialism washes over me. I want nothing more than to be somewhere other than this room. Or, at the very least, not here in a lounge whose windows are sealed shut. A very nice and competent Sheraton employee saves the day, fixes the printer, and suddenly Hell is not other people, it's just Sartre junk, and I see that Brian and I will make it, but by the seat of our slacking pants. I am thirsty but don't want to drink anything because then I'll have a full bladder to contend with and besides, I already know I'll need to find a bathroom just before the panel begins.

By 3:45, we are headed downstairs. The elevator stops at the thirty-sixth, thirty-fifth, thirty-fourth, thirty-third floors. Everyone who exits or enters seems to be moving in slow motion. Sartre must be the proverbial ghost in this machine.

"Think it could be a Sabbath elevator?" I mutter after we've left the thirty-second floor.

"What's that?" Brian asks.

Pushing an elevator button qualifies as operating machinery, I explain, and any form of work is prohibited for observant Jews on the Sabbath. Brian nods. Looks at his watch.

"It's 3:50," he says. Of a sudden, we've made it from the thirty-first to the twenty-ninth floor without stopping. Coincidence, not sensitivity to Jewish custom, is what we are experiencing.

We then ride in a silence interrupted by the opening and closing doors. By the second floor, we are alone in the elevator.

“Kim,” Brian says somberly, “Really... I’m grateful for your enthusiasm and support of my writing.” The door opens. “But I’m never doing this again,” he says before we exit.

We both laugh.

Of course there is the subsequent speed-walk through the mall, which is packed this Saturday afternoon with folks who have been cooped up during the storm and folks leaving on the last full day of a huge conference, toting heavy suitcases and bags filled with books, and folks wandering in various degrees of stupor to The Last Panel as if it were something it isn’t. The room we are to appear in in less than ten minutes can be walked to, briskly, in five or so minutes. Brian and I cant forward, our focus ahead on a diagonal objective; we could have been cast in Monty Python’s Ministry of Silly Walks skit. I am trying not to laugh, mostly because, naturally, I *do* need the bathroom. And the convention center’s restroom that is closest to the panel venue is, not coincidentally I am certain, out of order. I manage to locate a restroom and use the facility. I enter the room where the panel is being held, at exactly 3:59 PM.

Did I mention that I thought no one would show? Well, contrary to my expectations, all the chairs are filled; people are standing in the back, and we can barely close the doors. Folks are still greeting and chatting as I enter the room. There are hugs in the aisles, promises to talk after the panel, invitations to drinks later in the evening, and I’m smiling,

though I'm alarmed by the turnout and hoping I'll make it through the crush of people to the podium to start this show on time. But also I am pleased.

We all want to feel some measure of success, especially when we practice an art in which audience is requisite and rejection figures so prominently. And speaking of rejection, almost every time I mentioned what came to be known as the Failure Panel, I was asked if we were going to talk about surviving rejection. On that subject, I have a few brief comments to make, one of which is that writers are the only people I know who will tell you they just received a “good” rejection. As in “we liked your work, but it just doesn't fit with our list,” or my favorite, “the writing is good and that's the problem” (which I want as my epitaph), or the handwritten note from the literary journal editor, inviting us to “submit again,” which in itself should be taken with, if not some hesitation, at least several large grains of salt. The rejection of our work by agents and/or editors with particular tastes, all of them different, can be talked of only for so long. One person likes something; another does not. End of story. We must persist. We must remember what Rilke says, in his letters to the young poet, that you must write only if you feel you would die if you didn't or couldn't. You can visit the website called literaryrejections.com and see for yourself the stories of well known writers, from Herman Melville to Chinua Achebe, Mary Shelley to Alice Walker, all of whom, like so many others, collected multiple rejections before a smart reader catapulted their works—*Moby Dick*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Color Purple*, respectively—into the proverbial limelight.

AWP itself, one might argue, measures the success of creative-writing pursuits in America. When I first attended AWP in 2004, 4,000 people were registered for the conference; in 2014, over 13,000 were present. In a decade, then, attendance has tripled. Which, AWP staff and board members might tell you, is an indicator that the conference itself is a success. But what do these attendance figures really *mean*? In 2008, the *New York Times* reported that, with the advent of self- and e-publishing platforms, the number of people writing could soon outnumber those who are reading. A year after that article appeared, in a book titled *The Art of Recklessness. Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction*, the poet Dean Young called on writers not to bemoan the seemingly sudden ubiquity of creative-writing MFA programs in the last decade, but to celebrate a culture whose interest in creativity may be on the rise. I'm not sure what to think of that—I'd like to excuse my lack of a solid opinion about this matter on my being a Libra who must weigh everything until enough time passes, and no one notices that I've not made a hard and fast decision about something that is minimal, compared to, say, global warming, a major failure on the part of humanity.

My gloomy cynicism aside, I agree with Dean Young, that there is nothing wrong with a rise in the pursuit of creativity, especially within an academy that has not been completely democratic in recognizing the importance of practicing an art that is critically disemboweled with one theory after another and whose recognition of the MFA as a terminal degree is now being eroded by a proliferation of PhDs in creative writing.

But more to the point: after our failure panel was over, and I was clearing out my small press's half of a table at the book fair, what I saw gave me pause.

The cavernous rooms—spread out on several floors—that housed the book fair, where over 700 exhibitors plied their books, journals, giveaways, and program prospectuses, were strewn with detritus. Empty water and soda bottles everywhere, the recycle containers overflowing. Cardboard, printed matter, paper waste of all kinds—*how many trees cut down for all this?* I wondered. All of the trash was being collected by workers wearing disposable latex gloves. Some percentage of them had driven vehicles to come to work, and some were using petroleum- or electricity-fueled machines to fulfill the tasks of their jobs. And book-fair exhibitors were packing or hauling cartons and suitcases for their returns home, which more likely than not involved an airplane or a car. *The size of our carbon footprint is vast*, I thought, realizing that I'd never want to come ever again, at least not of my own volition, to a conference of this magnitude. It made no sense to me, and yet it made all kinds of sense: in its success, like any empire or empire-wannabe, AWP had failed.

That's not to say that I won't recommend that students attend at least one AWP conference; but now I want to add that one should try to go and be there in the most carbon-minimal way. It's important to understand what it means to see and be visible in a community of writers, and vital to reconnect with people you'd not see otherwise, to immerse in the bath of creativity, and to both rejoice and despair at the number and variety of publications that are being put into the world. But given that we *are* writers and should be plugged into the news about climate crisis, we must examine the cost of our gathering and propose and institute other options.

III. Failure & Loss

In 2012, the fiction writer Nalini Jones and I co-taught a workshop on writing about loss. When she and I started thinking about readings to assign, or ways to talk about writing about loss, suddenly loss was everywhere we looked, and every story and essay that either of us had ever written was also about loss. In that same way, once I started thinking about failure—an exercise I put off until I could no longer fail at it—failing had succeeded in trumping loss as a defining trope in my own life, and before long, I understood that failure has been the most constant and faithful companion I've ever had.

Some examples: as a very young child, I was convinced that I had failed to keep my parents' marriage intact (they divorced when I was three). I learned later that their separation had nothing to do with me, which means, in an odd twist I failed to anticipate, that I had failed to fail. By the time I became a teenager, I failed to do so many things that I made a list of resolutions a month after my sixteenth birthday, of all the ways I intended to improve my shady character. I came across this list after my father's death, itself an exercise in the failure of my brother Ken and I to agree on anything. At the top of the page, written in all caps, which even then I knew signified some kind of urgency, I wrote: "TO BE BEGUN FULLY ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH, PARTIALLY ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 10TH." It's too bad that my memory has failed me, that I cannot recall why the plan was to undertake some of these changes partially on one day and fully the next, but maybe the prospect of so much change all at once was daunting, and I needed to manage it within a sequence of steps.

Under three categories—"For School," "Outside School," and "Personal"—I penned twenty-eight resolutions. Nothing about the date stands out to help me remember why I felt prompted to write such an assessment of my own deficits. I was promising myself (and my

parents obviously, since my father kept the list in his filing cabinet for almost thirty years) to be better than I was, to *succeed*, in other words, at becoming someone I was not. Thus, under the rubric of “For School,” I wrote such things as “Top Quality Work/On Time,” “Skip School Only on Very Important & Special Occasions,” and my favorite, “Do Something of Major Importance Before School is Out.” That last one is also the most ironic because before school was out that academic year, I ran away from home and dropped out. Just forty days before I would have graduated as a junior.

This list is a goldmine. An artifact of my teenage self, a relic testifying that I was a girl as lost to me now as I, in my present adult shape and form, was unimaginable to her then. How perplexing to have been two completely different people sharing the same body over time. And how puzzling a creature I must have seemed to my parents, perennial adults from my adolescent perspective, not individuals with pasts and youthful errors of their own, but “parents,” whose loss I failed to imagine.

As to my “Outside School” section of the list, I divided my resolutions between fledgling independence (as in, “Get Permit and Learn to Drive”), preparation for who I am now (i.e., “Keep Room Neat and Clothes Clean”), and perhaps a bit of guilt (as in “Be Good to Parents”). I did learn to drive—in Boston, in fact, which made me so anxious about urban driving that I am practically incapable of it now. In terms of tidying up and organizing, I prospered, developing an overwrought skill that has oft been at the center of my failure to co-habitate. But in terms of being good to my parents, I failed and failed again, and not better, but miserably. Not long after I wrote my list of resolutions, I became the daughter who announced, with not one iota of shame, to taking hallucinogenic and illegal drugs and

having sex. With great flourish, I declared to my parents that I didn't care what they thought about any of it.

I cannot decide what is stranger: that I made these resolutions, that I only vaguely recall the context in which I made them, or that I discovered them in a file bearing my name, which my father kept in a locked cabinet.

Regardless, my teenage years were hell on all of us. Luckily I managed to pull myself more or less together in my twenties, because loss was going to join failure in complicating that decade between 1983 and 1993. First to go was my stepmother, Phoebe, who raised me, dead as a result of infection caused by the wires of her pacemaker, a failure of medical technology. Six years later, I lost my mother, whose suicide represented failings of so many orders I cannot list them all here. A year and some after my mother's death, my oldest half brother Ron died from complications related to AIDS/HIV, which he had contracted from IV drug use, which all of us in our family had failed to confront. Then there was the two-year period in which three of my close friends committed suicide—all in their late twenties with severe depression, which I had failed to recognize and respond to. There's more, but I'll spare you.

Some years later, it became obvious that I had failed in other ways, and, specifically, by not accomplishing all the many things I had planned for myself—learning Russian so I might read Chekhov and Ahkmatova in the original; practicing ballet long and hard enough to do just one perfect pirouette; and, of course, writing all the books I had envisioned writing. And with this recognition—which I refused to allow to morph into regret—I welcomed my forties as the decade in which I was going to finally pursue the vocation of

writing, though I did not, could not, picture the additional losses and failures ahead. Again, I'll spare you....

Suffice to say that by the time I skidded, a bit out of breath, into the twenty-first century, I felt as if I had walked through a gauntlet of heartbreak and emerged on the other side, the result of which was a kind of maturity, one wrought of endurance and which actually corroborates the original meaning of the word *succeed*, to come after, continue, endure. I had persisted⁴. Crossed the great water, as it is written in the *Yi Ching*. Learned the rudiments of narrative storytelling and started working at it, which has afforded me the rather exhilarating practice of transforming experience into art and the equally thrilling work of teaching. I did not, however, possess an image of who I was or what I would become if my achievements actually matched my ideas of them, and most certainly, I did not imagine myself addressing a room of writers, teachers, and students—some strangers, some friends—about the topic of failure.

But here I am. So now that you know a few of what might be my many failings, I'm going to ask you to reconsider both failure and success. Let's return to the girl who penned those resolutions, and let us think back to the teenagers all of us once were.

Here it may be useful, perhaps, to contemplate the verb *accomplish*, which means “to complete,” and gives us both the noun *accomplishment* and the modifier *accomplished*. As writers and readers, students and teachers, we understand what it means to list our accomplishments and/or to be called “accomplished.” Curiously, the archaic definition of this word means to

⁴ Which is not the same as surviving.

equip thoroughly *and* to perfect, which helps explain how it has come to figure so prominently in the language of performance.

Performing—not only adequately, but with distinction or excellence—is, perhaps, what we’re actually talking about when we talk about success. And it is this kind of success that drives the academy, impelling most students to think about grades instead of learning, *and* it is too often this kind of success that fuels how we think of ourselves as writers (or artists of any other kind)—forcing us to favor product over process, and the subsequent result of writing again to publish more as opposed to writing again to write better or more deeply.

“Success,” writes James Baldwin, “is the most treacherous label.[...] The young think that failure is the Siberian end of the line.”⁵

What does it mean, then, to be successful as a writer?

With Baldwin’s observation in mind, I’d like to answer that question in several parts. The first is to say that one creates one’s own definitions—that sense of diversity is one very appealing part of belonging to a community dedicated to the pursuit of writing. I have strong opinions about small, independent presses and how they will persevere, i.e., be successful in the temporal sense of “coming after” the current crisis state of affairs in print media. I believe in knowing how to sew a pamphlet on whose pages is printed an essay because our country is, essentially, founded on an essay called “Common Sense.” To contemplate and

⁵ “Alas, Poor Richard,” in *The Price of the Ticket*, 276.

articulate what “comes after” is different than pursuing an ideal of the Next Big Thing, just as there is a distinction between persisting and surviving.

Money is only one small measure of success. Ditto fame. Look at John Williams (not the composer but the writer who was almost forgotten): he wrote four novels and a volume of poetry. His novel *Stoner*, which received excellent reviews when it was first published in 1965, sold barely 2,000 copies. Reissued by the *New York Review of Books* Classics series in 2006, it has since become a bestseller in Europe and has been declared the 2013 book of the year. (It’s about an academic who, essentially, is a failure.) In contrast, think of Gertrude Stein, who was a seminal force in American letters and literary experimenting—everyone knows her name, but, as a student of mine recently pointed out, almost no one is reading her work in college classrooms. One might say the same about James Baldwin and even Cynthia Ozick, both successful if you consider their prolific output, both shapers of contemporary thought, both under-read.

When we consider our culture’s attraction to and consumption of the Next Big Thing, it’s not so difficult to understand why a writer’s name is known and not their work, or, conversely, that a writer’s work might be swallowed in time only to be spit out over forty years later.

The second part of my answer comes from an assignment, which is called Fail!⁶, and asks students to turn in work that they consider a failure. I first tried the prompt in an undergraduate class I teach, Experimental Ink, in which students create work that blends words and images.

⁶ *Draw it with your eyes closed: the art of the art assignment*, edited by Paper Monument (The n+1 Foundation, 2012).

One of the students in this particular class, John, brought in a figurine made of Popsicle sticks, with articulated legs and arms and sporting a pewter helmet. This project had clearly taken John considerable time and attention, and I wanted, rather selfishly, to keep the figurine for myself. He said he had wanted to freeze the “spirit man” in a block of ice, but, of course, had he done that, he didn’t know how he would have brought it into class. And then he told his classmates and me that it represented failure because fulfilling the assignment meant doing something he *wanted* to do, as opposed to something he was *required* to do. Needless to say, I found what he said astonishing and provocative.

I ask undergraduate students, in their final portfolios, to reflect on each of their projects.

Here are John’s words:

“The fail assignment made me want to laugh. When my friends were like, ‘What do you have to do for homework tonight?’ and I was like, ‘I’m really not sure I just have to fail,’ I found the response exhilarating. To be meant to fail!? Preposterous! So of course I had to ignore the assignment, that’s the first thing I like to do when I usually fail, only when that happens I am only ignoring parts, the parts I don’t like. So for this assignment I just figured if [...] we’re meant to fail then I suppose I could do whatever I wanted. I think if there was a class called Fail, or Do Whatever You Want Class, I would have really delved into the work. In the end I was very content with the spirit man I had made. He was cool and I think it was interesting [...] that one could [put] a great deal of time and effort into a failure.”

In essence, then, John, who had not at that point read Samuel Beckett, was following that writer's absurd "advice," to "fail again, fail better." John's failure was a subversion, not only of academic expectations, but of the culture of make-work that accompanies the ever-changing technological innovations that have become ubiquitous in our workplaces, schools, and homes. I think Beckett would have approved of John's philosophy. Perhaps, too, it's not surprising that John, liberated from the burden of That Which Is Required, was able to envision a use for found objects—Popsickle sticks; a lost action figure's still-remaining helmet—in which the sum of the parts exceeded the whole. Which recalls, for me, Raymond Carver's plea to salvage all those sentences and words, character name, and a title—the things that, for him, made his story a successful whole and which Lish had discarded in *his* fervor to make a success of Carver.

The third and final part of my answer to the question, "what does it mean to be a successful writer," has two sides. The first is about the kind of work you produce, and comes from an anonymous teacher, who described a friend's writing as being "vivid, concerned, and fulfilled." When I first heard that phrase, it spoke to me strongly. Anyone who's ever been in one of my classes or workshops will have contributed to a working definition of those words, which describe the kind of writing that succeeds, comes after, persists. Nalini Jones says that, for her, "vivid, concerned, and fulfilled" refer to that which is felt later, by the reader. Those words can also describe the success we feel when the writing itself—the act of typing or penning one letter at a time—succeeds in its attempt to illuminate what it means to be human, to make meaning of experiences such as loss or love. For me, *vivid* connotes what

Virginia Woolf called “moments of being,” a state of lucidity that is transcendent and where language itself is so precise as to be crystalline, a sensation that sometimes cannot be captured in words. As the great Taoist Lao-Tse said of the very thing he sought to teach, “the true Tao cannot be spoken.” *Concerned* means the drive I feel to tell a story, the sense that one’s life may depend on setting down *these* words *at this time*, about *this thing*. *Concerned* means that we are writing about things that *matter*. Finally, *fulfilled* should remind us that we are participating in what Woolf, citing Milton, called “a dialogue across the ages.” That we are, as Toni Morrison put it, writing the stories we want to read.

The second side, which is more about process and community, comes from a woman who, at twenty-eight found herself a recently divorced, unemployed mother of a small child . Here she is at age forty-two, reflecting on that experience:

“Failure meant stripping away the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began directing my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might have never found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear [of failure] had been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.[...] Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above the price of rubies.”

The writer of those words is J. K. Rowling; the occasion for them was the 2008 commencement at Harvard University.⁷

When Rowling says that failure stripped away the inessential, I am reminded of what my Pilates teacher, Robin, often tells us as we move through the exercises invented by a man—Joseph Pilates—who, as a boy, suffered from health that had failed: “Stop fidgeting and be precise,” Robin tells us as we stretch into a posture. “Do it wrong to get it right.”

⁷ J. K. Rowling, 2008 Commencement Speech at Harvard, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination.”