

# On Failure and Finishing

CASSY BUDD

## Play Through Your Mistakes

Music has always been a very important part of my life. Nearly every major memory of my childhood involves music of some kind: singing with my family on road trips to pass the time; learning barbershop music with my mom and sisters; listening to the Tijuana Brass band on the record player while decorating our Christmas tree; singing my father's favorite song, "Love at Home" (see *Hymns*, 2002, no. 294), for family home evening; and admiring my mother as she played the organ in our sacrament meeting every week—something she still does at the young age of eighty. Given that music played such a prominent role in my youth, it will not surprise you to know that I took piano lessons for ten years, from the age of eight to seventeen.

My first piano teacher—we will call her Mrs. Smith—was very strict and had high expectations for mastery. During my lesson she would often follow the music with a pencil as I played. Sometimes, after I hit a sour note or used the wrong fingering, Mrs. Smith would flick my fingers with that pencil. She intended to help me recognize the mistake so that I could correct it. Unfortunately, after several experiences with the dreaded pencil, I learned that the least painful way to handle my musical mistakes was to remove my hands from the keys as quickly as possible.

This habit of abruptly stopping after a mistake was also unintentionally reinforced when I would practice at home. Our piano was positioned on a wall that was opposite our kitchen; in fact, it was back-to-back with our stove. I would often practice while my mother was making dinner on the other side of the wall. When I would make a mistake, she would make a staccato "ah" sound. Startled, my hands would fly from the keys.

I know this was not the intended outcome because I heard her do the same thing when she made her own mistakes at the organ or piano. She still does this today, but only in practice. When she is at the organ or piano for performance, there are few errors, but when they occur, they are hardly noticeable. She can play right on through a mistake like nothing happened. I, on the other hand, cannot.

Most of my piano recitals with Mrs. Smith took place in the chapel of my home ward building. These were reverent occasions—no clapping after the end of each performance, just polite smiles from the audience as we each took our turn at the grand piano. We were not allowed to use our music, so for me, the walk up those three velvety

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red steps to the piano felt like walking into a battle unarmed. I was terrified that I would make a mistake, take my hands from the keys, and be unable to find the right placement again.

This terror of performing would follow me into adulthood. When I was still in the early years of my public accounting career and had two small children at home, I was called as the Relief Society pianist.

The first week was a disaster. I lurched through some prelude music from the back of the *Children's Songbook* (chosen for its simplicity) and then practiced a little deep breathing to calm down during the announcements. Then it was go time. I began playing the first chords of the opening song, but before I could make it through the intro, I plunked a sour note, and, unsurprisingly, my hands rapidly retreated from the keys. Panicked for a measure or two, I desperately tried to get back into the groove. As usual, the chorister led everyone through all of the verses. The longer they sang, the worse I played, until I was reduced to picking out just the melody line for the last verse.

This little episode played out like an old rerun each week until, fatefully, someone in the presidency asked if I would like a key to the church so I could practice. I politely declined, explaining that I actually had a piano at home. I was released within the month.

To this day, even when I am home alone practicing in complete solitude, I cannot play “Sweet Hour of Prayer” (*Hymns*, no. 142)—the simplest of hymns—without stopping, unless I have the unlikely good fortune to get through it with no mistakes. For this reason I try not to call attention to my piano training (cat’s out of the bag now, I guess). I am so paralyzed by my mistakes that I am of no practical use at the piano.

It may be easy to say that this paralysis is not my fault and that the teaching style was somehow to blame. But I cannot hold Mrs. Smith nor my mother responsible for this problem. You see, my sister, Terry, had the same piano teacher with the same pencil, the same mother with the same “ah” emanating from the kitchen, and the same recital

settings. Yet she has gone on to accompany many performers, play for work parties, play both the piano and the organ at church, and, in general, bless the lives of others with her musical training and talent.

When you allow yourself to be paralyzed by your mistakes, you diminish your ability to be useful in God’s kingdom. Making mistakes is simply part of the human condition and can be one of your most productive learning tools. Yes, you need to recognize your mistakes. But more than that, you need to find a way to effectively play through them.

I picked up the ukulele several years ago when I was called as the Young Women camp director. I learned a whole slew of camp songs in just a few weeks, thanks to all of that piano training. I still love to play the ukulele while my family sings, and I sometimes use it to write little educational songs about accounting—to the everlasting delight of my students, I might add. I still make mistakes with my uke, but they don’t stop me from moving on.

The stories I have chosen to tell you today are not easy for me to share. These are not my proudest moments in life, and I usually prefer to wear my confident, professional persona for public consumption. However, I have come to appreciate the value of weakness and the strength that comes from acknowledging it. I hope that by sharing a few of my failures you can find some appreciation for your own.

### **Show Up and Try**

Three years ago a few faculty in our department decided to take a ski-instructor class together. The idea was that we could spend Friday afternoons learning how to teach something completely outside of our expertise while also enjoying some recreation together and generally deepening our friendships. A few of us—me included—invited our spouses to join in the fun as well.

We met together for the first time in a classroom and introduced ourselves to our new classmates.

In the process, students commented on their self-assessed ski abilities, and I realized, with some growing trepidation, that I was likely the least prepared for the expectations of the course.

The following week we met at Sundance and spent a fair amount of time on the flat area by the lift just learning how to orient a beginner to the gear and how to teach someone to get in and out of skis and how to get on and off the lift. We played a couple of simple games together, and I remember feeling somewhat more confident about my place in the group. All was going relatively well for me in the class—until we rode the Arrowhead lift to the top of the resort.

Prior to getting on the lift, we had been instructed to exit to the right at the top, ski to the beginning of Bear Claw run, and then look down and to the left, where we would see the instructors gathering the class. We were then supposed to join the group, after which we would be split up by ability before heading down the mountain. I made my way to the top of Bear Claw without much trouble, but when I looked to see my classmates skiing to the rendezvous point, I froze. If I were to follow my peers, I would have to ski at what appeared to be an impossible angle. I had never skied on something quite like that before, and I immediately started looking around for other options.

I determined that rather than ski directly down the mountain, I would simply ski the mountain horizontally, back and forth, allowing me to take a less severe descent to the desired location. I took a deep breath and skied to the right toward the trees and then forced as sharp a turn as I could manage to head back to my class. Unfortunately, my calculations were off, or perhaps my snowplow was ineffective, and I could see that I would be well below the rest of the class upon completing my epic return across the face of the mountain. Flustered from this realization, I fell.

Mark, one of the course instructors, hurried over to try to give me a couple of pointers. After what must have been a few frustrating moments for him, he hollered up to the group that he would

stay with me and that the others should go ahead. The class had been divided into its groups: the advanced skiers (which included my husband, Spencer), the intermediate skiers, and me. I was humiliated.

Mark stayed with me and did his best to coach me down the mountain, and given that I had no other options, I did my very best to listen to his counsel and imitate his movements. Much of that day is a blur to me. I was constantly switching focus between Mark's patient instruction and my own thoughts about the futility of the whole endeavor.

I left Sundance that Friday unsure if I would ever return to class. I even worried about what would happen when I returned to face my colleagues on Monday morning. I fully expected some good-natured teasing and a little fun at my expense, but instead, everyone simply talked about how much fun it was to do something different together. To my surprise, no one focused on my inability; rather, they talked about their own improvements and their desire to keep learning. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and I privately resolved that I would finish the class.

I skied alone a lot in the beginning, and it was hard. I didn't become an incredible skier overnight—or ever. I did join the intermediate group for a few runs toward the end of the course, but I was always the last one down the mountain. Still, even I could see that I had improved.

This experience gave me a deep appreciation for the value of the “try.” Simply showing up and starting where you are is all that can be asked of you. Regardless of your level of experience, your failures, or your perception of your own potential, wherever you are in life, you just need to show up and try. Try to listen to the patient instruction of the Savior, try to imitate His movements, try to ignore the negative self-talk when your movements do not measure up, and try to focus on the joy in the learning instead of the defeat in the failure. And amidst your “try,” recognize that others around you are in the middle of their own “try.” Celebrate their progress, even when they seem to

be farther along than you, and give them a pass when they fall short.

In my own classroom I have seen through experience that failure is one of the best ways to generate lasting intellectual learning. Let me share something from the authors of *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*:

*Unsuccessful attempts to solve a problem encourage deep processing of the answer when it is later supplied, creating fertile ground for its encoding, in a way that simply reading [or being given] the answer cannot.*

[Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 88]

I look forward to these unsuccessful moments with my students, though I know they are in pain. It is very satisfying as a teacher to witness the transition from failed attempt to recognition and understanding.

Failure is useful in physical development as well. Strategically working a muscle to failure—the point at which you can no longer lift or push or pull whatever you are lifting or pushing or pulling—and then allowing proper time for the muscle fibers to repair is one of the most effective ways to build strength. This process of failing and repairing eventually results in stronger, more efficient muscles.

To improve my overall health and fitness, I recently started working with a trainer. My trainer, Josh, is big on this idea of failure. He chooses movements and weights that will get me to the failing point just at the end of a set, and somehow he knows when to step in to help me finish. It used to irritate me to have him grinning and laughing while helping me through the last few failed reps, but I realize now that he saw progress where I saw failure. He looks forward to those moments, like I do with my students, because he gets to be a real participant in my growth.

If failure is important to our intellectual and physical improvement, perhaps it is important

in our quest for perfection as well. Could it be that our moments of extremity are necessary for our spiritual progress and that our Savior knows that only then we are ready to learn? Regrettably, accepting help when we need it most can be difficult.

### Accept Help

In March 2008 two of my former students, Mike and Taylor, invited my family to go spelunking in Spanish Moss Cave. We were all excited to accept the invitation, though we were not experienced rock climbers. Mike started us out early on the appointed morning to do a little training at an indoor gym, after which we hiked five miles into Rock Canyon and up to the cave entrance.

Upon arrival, Mike and Taylor took a few minutes to unlock the metal gate and arrange the ropes we would use to rappel into the cave. Taylor entered first, and then it was my turn.

The initial descent is into a corkscrew-shaped crack in the rocks that twists downward for fifteen to twenty feet before it finally opens into the domed roof of the cave. Once through the crack, we each rappelled approximately fifty feet down to a sloped floor that continued into the belly of the cave.

We spent a couple of hours exploring, marveling at the oddly shaped formations along the way. As we picked our way through the loosely marked trail, our only light source, beyond the occasional flash from my husband's camera, was the light produced by our headlamps. I could see only a small circular area directly in front of me that quickly faded into blackness. Limited by the darkness and the unfamiliar terrain, the progress was slow.

At the bottom of the cave, just before we turned around, Taylor took a picture of my family—my daughter Shamae, Spencer, and my son Riley. I like recalling this part of the journey because I remember feeling charged with the exhilaration of a great adventure with my family. It captures the pinnacle of my experience. I felt triumphant, like I had accomplished something different, something

unique and special. But I would not carry that same feeling with me out of the cave.

The return trip was harder than the descent, largely due to the lack of light. I look back at the photos we took and wonder why I was trying to scramble over rocks when there seemed to be a clear path just a few feet to the side. I can see those pathways now with the benefit of flash photography, but at the time I was not able to see the route with any clarity.

We clambered back up to the domed room, but the real challenge remained: we still had to negotiate the rope that hung from the ceiling and disappeared into the winding rock exit above. And this time we would be climbing up with the assistance of ascenders instead of dropping effortlessly down.

Mike ascended first and secured himself above with a second rope, ready to assist us. When it was my turn to exit, Taylor stabilized the bottom of the rope and Mike positioned himself in the corkscrew to coach me through the process. I had only learned to use the ascenders that morning, and although it had seemed simple in the climbing gym, I struggled to get my arms and legs to work together now.

I managed to inch about halfway up the rope before I had to stop, slumping down in the climbing harness to rest my legs. But fear would not let me rest my arms. I clung tightly to the ascenders, refusing to let go and unable to relax. I spent several minutes dangling twenty-five feet above the ground, mustering the necessary strength to keep climbing.

I gathered myself and continued up the remaining visible length of rope until the top ascender would move no further. I had reached the rock above and needed to let go of the ascenders. This was the only way I could find handholds and continue climbing.

Again, fear took hold of me, and I had neither the strength nor the fortitude to let go. Every muscle in my body shook, and I began to contemplate what living in a cave might be like. In this panic-stricken state, I heard Mike talking above

me. He was telling me to relax and to stay calm, giving me instructions on where to reach.

I pointed my headlamp upward to shed light on my path, but I could not see any suitable holds, so I told Mike, "I cannot do this."

I looked up again hoping to see him, but because of the curvature of the rock I could only hear his voice. He tried different instructions, but there was no way I was letting go of those ascenders. I didn't trust the rock, I didn't trust myself, and I didn't trust my ability to leave the perceived safety of the gear to which I clung. I remember hearing some movement above me and then nothing. Then Mike told me to take his hand.

This time when I looked up, I could see Mike's forearm, with his hand open wide. I laughed out loud. "You are just going to pull me up one-handed?" I asked.

"Sure!" he said confidently. We argued the relative merits of this idea for a time, me telling Mike that it was impossible for him to just yank me up there with no leverage while harnessed to a rope and cramped in a crevice and Mike insisting that he could do it. Given that I am telling you this story from the Marriott Center and not from inside Spanish Moss Cave, you can guess who won that argument.

Looking up again, I was seized with the realization that I really didn't want to stay in the cave forever. I wanted to go home. This awareness gave me the courage to trust Mike and reach for his hand. One moment I was dangling from the dome and the next I was wedged into the crevice, still clinging to one ascender with my free hand. I could finally relax my arms.

Then Mike's steady and confident voice guided me farther up the twisting exit: "Move one hand up. Reach your foot farther to the left. Switch hands in that hold. Use your legs. Stretch a little farther."

Mike kept me moving in the right direction until we encountered one last challenge: I was too short to reach the next hold and too timid to make a swing for it. Mike suggested that he try to pass me in the crevice, get beneath me, and then boost

me up to the hold. I was not sure the maneuver would work, but by this point I was humbled enough to listen to his advice. Mike managed to find a way around me and secure himself against the wall just below me. When he told me to use his back as a step stool to reach the next hold, I had visions of me standing on his back, his hands slipping against the rock under my weight, and his body falling through the hole in the cave ceiling. We again argued over the merits of his crazy idea—I am a stubborn one—but I finally gave in and stepped on Mike, who held firm so that I could reach the hold I needed. From there it was a relatively easy climb to the open air, and I soon found myself alone with my thoughts while Mike returned to assist the others.

Sitting on top of that hill looking out over the valley, I couldn't suppress a nagging feeling of defeat that contrasted starkly with my proud moment at the bottom of the cave. I replayed everything that had just happened. Did Mike really pull me up from the top of a fifty-foot drop? Did I really step on him? Was I really that needy? Yes, yes, and yes.

We are all that needy. Perhaps you would have fared better than I did in Spanish Moss Cave, but we all, at one time or other, will be in a situation in which our strength or knowledge or skill or perhaps even our desire is not enough. These are the times when your Savior pulls you up out of the darkness—if you will let go and take His hand. These are the times when His voice guides you to safety—if you will listen carefully. And it is for these times that He descended below all things—to become your stepping-stone.

I love these words of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland:

*When [the Savior] says . . . , "Come unto me," He means He knows the way out and He knows the way up. He knows it because He has walked it. He knows the way because He is the way. ["Broken Things to Mend," *Ensign*, May 2006; emphasis in original]*

I asked Mike recently whether he was ever concerned about getting me out of the cave that

day. Without even thinking about the answer, he replied, "No, there was always a plan. I carried all kinds of gear you never saw. There is always a way. Sometimes it is 5 percent me and 95 percent the other person; sometimes it is 99 percent me and 1 percent the other person. But I know I can work with whatever the person has to give."

Our Savior is the same. He can work with whatever you have to give if you are willing to accept His help.

Brian K. Ashton of the Sunday School general presidency reminded us that "repentance is not a backup plan just in case our plan to live perfectly fails." He also said, "[Repentance] is not just for big sins but is a daily process of self-evaluation and improvement that helps us to overcome our sins, our imperfections, our weaknesses, and our inadequacies" ("The Doctrine of Christ," *Ensign*, November 2016).

Living perfectly is not the plan. Repentance is the plan. Jesus Christ is the plan. I think we erroneously equate perfection with living a perfect life, with never failing or falling short, but Jesus Christ is the only one who ever did or ever will do that. Perfection for us, then, must be about something else.

John S. Robertson explained in a BYU devotional that our understanding of the word *perfect* has changed over the last 400 years: whereas we use *perfect* to mean "flawless" today, its Latinate root meant something closer to "finished." Furthermore, the Hebrew word that was translated as "perfect" in the Bible might have been more accurately translated as "complete" (see "A Complete Look at Perfect," BYU devotional address, 13 July 1999). Perfection, for us, is not about being flawless; it is about being finished.

Artists who practice the Japanese art form *kintsugi* repair broken pottery by filling the cracks with a lacquer made from gold, silver, or platinum, restoring the damaged piece to something beautiful and whole. *Kintsugi* teaches that scars are not something to hide; rather, they are to be celebrated for the unique beauty they exhibit. The scars themselves are considered precious and

therefore are mended with precious metals to honor their value. The finished piece is even more beautiful than the unbroken original.

Similarly, we honor the scars of our Savior, for He has graven us on the palms of His hands (see Isaiah 49:16). He is not ashamed of His scars. On the contrary, He has given us this invitation:

*Arise and come forth . . . that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am . . . the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. [3 Nephi 11:14]*

When we turn our broken pieces over to the Savior, our gaps are filled with Him—with His perfection—and we are made complete; we are finished by the Great Creator through the restorative power of “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). We come to know the Savior not just by recognizing and reverencing His scars

but by recognizing and reverencing our own. We are bound to the Savior through our mutual scars, “and with His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5; see also verse 4).

I echo the words of Elder Holland:

*[When] you are lonely, please know you can find comfort. [When] you are discouraged, please know you can find hope. [When] you are poor in spirit, please know you can be strengthened. [When] you feel you are broken, please know you can be mended. [“Broken Things to Mend”]*

Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, desires to mend your broken pieces, fill your empty spaces, and make of you a vessel that is more beautiful and whole.

May you each find the strength to fail and, in the hands of your Savior, the power to finish. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.