

Out of the Burrow:  
A Personal Essay on the Fear of Success

"I have completed the construction of my burrow  
and it seems to be successful."

-- Kafka

Twelve years ago, I published a book called Failure: An Autobiography. In it, I took a square look at a number of my failures and shortcomings, from childhood on. The implicit premise of the book (which I probably should have made more explicit - another failure!) was that failure is, or can be, an experience of value in and of itself - existential and spiritual value - rather than just a banal "learning experience", or a necessary stepping-stone on the way to success. I still remember the response I got from one of the approximately 150 literary agents to whom I sent out query letters. (As it happened, I never did get taken on by an agent; it was through the publisher's U.S. editor, the friend of a friend, that the manuscript was finally accepted.) The agent remarked that the only way a book like this could ever work was if it was hysterically funny; and since mine wasn't, she was passing on it. But although there was humor in the book (or so I like to think), it had been my intention from the start to take a serious look at the experience and significance of failure in a number of different areas of my life -- school, work, friendship,

love -- and I think I managed to remain true to that goal. I had written the book in the belief that a frank discussion of one's own inadequacies and embarrassments would be of interest and perhaps value to others, not only in a cautionary sense, but in a cathartic sense as well -- and cathartic precisely in the sense that Aristotle meant: allowing the release - the "purgation" - of the emotions of terror and pity. Failure, after all, is one of the things Americans are most terrified of; and pity is a generous term for the feeling extended to those perceived to have failed. (I saw myself as taking the "high road" to the subject.) Though humor was a necessary part of the journey, it was never the main point.

Twelve years on, however, I see that a serious interest in the experience and meaning of failure was not the only engine driving my story. There was another motor at work, too (and these combined energy sources constituted a kind of literary "Integrated Motor Assist" system): the fear of success. The synergy seems obvious now, but somehow it eluded me at the time of writing. I have since come to realize that this fear has been with me as long as (and probably longer than) my curious identification with failure. Indeed, my fear of success has probably been as formative as the attraction to its shadow, and it's high

time I gave it some attention, too. After all, success and failure are flip sides of the same American coin. It would be hard to say which bedevils us more, the pursuit of success or the avoidance of failure. And as an American, it would be disingenuous of me to pretend I am not part of this crazy chase. But for now, I want to step to the sidelines and take a closer look at the game.

I think there are a number of things about success that scare me. First of all, it brings pressure - the pressure to follow up, to keep succeeding -- and I have never been very good at handling pressure: I tend to choke in the clutch. And it's not just the pressure of follow-up that spooks me; it's also the sheer effort required.

(That's where my constitutional laziness kicks in.) Then there's my belief that success is somehow both vulgar and corrupting. This notion is no doubt connected to another characteristic of mine: the strong desire to retain a personal sense of purity and innocence. (You could call this my own brand of purism.)

Finally, success produces a condition of exposure, in at least a couple of senses: exposure for the fraud I suspect myself of being (you know the drill: if I should ever achieve success, it would by definition be fraudulent and counterfeit, by virtue of the fact that I was the one

achieving it); but also exposure of a more physical and elemental (albeit idiosyncratic) sort: a laying open to the "natural elements" of social life. In other words, no more retreating into my private, comfortable burrow. (See here Kafka - the beginning of "The Burrow", perhaps my favorite of his stories: "I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful.") For success, you see, has nowhere to hide; it is, or can be, a very public spectacle, whereas failure in most cases is a private affair. (The solace of its privacy is one of the things that attracts me to it.) Success, at least in the public form I am conceiving of here, is not at all comforting, but rather the opposite: it is exigent and demanding, rigorous and unforgiving. It does not allow of retreat (into the burrow, say). Success creates a glare, an open exposure to bright, harsh light. And I do not like bright, harsh light. I am the creature of a more diffuse, crepuscular light: the light of late summer afternoons and evenings. I seek a more forgiving illumination for my being. I would like to inhabit a painting by one of the Hudson River School.

Now these admissions - and so much, so soon! - somewhat depress me. They strike me as rather cowardly and pathetic. Yes, you could also say they are the opposite of

cowardly, since they require some degree of courage to confess. Then again, we may feel that nowadays, situated as we supposedly are in the Golden Age of Memoir, such confessions really don't require much courage at all, since so many people are producing them. We are awash in other people's dirty laundry, and perhaps have already reached a saturation point. Indeed, some are now pronouncing the end of the Golden Age of Memoir - or at least of those memoirs that look more inward than outward. Bad news for yours truly, whose gaze has always been trained primarily on himself. Bad news for navel-gazers.

Of course there is always the hope, for us omphalologists ("scholars of the belly-button" - my coinage; accent on the antepenult), that through the individual we can access the general; that the royal road to the universal lies through particulars. That each separate person, if explored with enough depth and understanding, will reveal the lineaments of what is common to all. That is the hope, anyway, that keeps me going, that keeps me writing. (The two for me, at 64, have become synonymous: to keep writing is to keep going, and to keep going is to keep writing.)

All of which would be totally fine and unproblematic, if all I were doing were just writing for myself. But I'm

not. I'm writing to be read. I'm writing to be published. (Not synonymous, I know. Call me naïve.) And here's a dirty little secret: I, too, want to be a success. I want to be what I'm also scared of being - what I've long been scared of being. Because, at this point, I've had enough failure in my life. It's not that I don't in some ways still embrace it -- and maybe even, in my own way, court it. I like my burrow of failure, and seek it out. I like its comforts, and its gentle, diffuse, crepuscular light. It is comforting; it is familiar; it is known. (All-too-well-known! Allzusehrbekannt! as Nietzsche might have said.) And it is still - failure, that is -- relatively neglected as a subject. Its spiritual and existential benefits are underappreciated. Perhaps Dylan said it best (and I used what he said as the epigraph for my book): "There's no success like failure, and failure's no success at all." One of the great lines in my literary pantheon. It combines the idealism of the purist with the realist's rueful irony.

But it strikes me now that I've spent a lot more time thinking and writing about the first part of Dylan's formulation than the last. That is, I've taken failure -- my experience of failure -- as the focus of my imaginative attention and energies. Let others write about success, I

figured; I was more original - and worthier - than that. I was above being concerned with the bitch-goddess. (In my view, as I mentioned earlier, success was vulgar.) I was occupied with nobler truths; for you see, I identified the sad and dark with the noble. The beauty of the minor keys (and also the black keys). A romantic through and through - or so I imagined, for many years. (I did my dissertation on Byron and Wordsworth. But to tell you the truth, I was always more attracted to Wordsworth's qualified optimism than Byron's grand, dramatic pessimism. And still am.)

For a while now, I've thought of my interest in failure - in its phenomenology, if you will, its mysteries of consciousness, the depth and variety of emotion connected with failure - as of a piece with my interest in depth in general, in deep states of awareness. As if the lighter sides of life and experience had no depth at all, or at least none worth exploring. But maybe I was just playing it safe all along - exploring the details of my burrow, of what I was familiar with, the light and limited terrain I was familiar with, rather than thinking about why I was so comfortable in that burrow to begin with. Rather than looking at the fears that were keeping me inside it. But what about the environment outside the burrow - the wide-open landscape of success: its exposure, expectations,

rigors and demands? Its freedom! Well, those things were - are - frightening to me. The world of action, activity, achievement is frightening to me. It produces, among the other effects already mentioned, performance anxiety. Will I choke in the clutch again? Will I fail to cut it? Will I disappoint?

It's funny how you can be afraid of what you want. It's called ambivalence, I know, and it shouldn't come as a surprise to any conscious person - let alone any writer. But I guess I've been mystifying my relationship to failure, rather than seeing it as a by-product of my fear of success. An attraction to failure just seemed so much more interesting, romantic, and unusual than a fear of success. I mean, who isn't, on some level, afraid of success? We are all a little hot and sweaty under the spotlight. And what is public success but a huge, hot spotlight? So much more original to explore my interest in failure than my fear of success. The untrodden way has always held a great - all-too-great! - cachet for me. How I loved (and still do) that epigram of Spinoza: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." (And let us have it in the original Latin, while we are at it: "Omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt.") Ah yes - sing



it, most excellent Sephardic Amsterdam Jew! Sing the song of the chosen few!

But I am coming to appreciate more and more, in my vulgar old age (and I mean "vulgar" here in its literal sense -- "of or pertaining to the crowd"), the song of the many. The song of Whitman. Which is also, I perceive, the song of myself. Who woulda thunk it? Surely not I, former acolyte of the fine, the difficult and the rare. (From Übermensch to Allzumensch!) It's not that I am renouncing those excellences; it's more that I am beginning to take another square look at "how it is with me". (Heidegger - at least as I have gleaned him from George Steiner's much more readable book. I like my Heidegger as I like my light: perfused through a gentler medium.) How it is with me in regard to my fear of success. My fear of the bright exposure. The wide-open spaces. And all the rank unsubtleties of broad daylight.

Maybe it's the unsubtleties that frighten me most. The blatant frankness that declares an out-and-out success. No time or need for those cherished Wordsworthian qualifications, those second or third thoughts. You did it. You got a hit, you bastard! Now run! Slide, if you have to - but get on there, get on base! Take the acclaim, accept the praise - embarrassing as it is. Suck it up!

Suck up that good stuff! Take it in. Don't run away from it. Why is that so hard for me? Why is it so hard, and so unpleasant, to receive earned compliments? What is it that does not like to see gratified my hidden hunger for praise, for deserved acknowledgment by my peers? What is it in me that will not believe it? What is this perverse thing that wants me to retreat into my burrow, to go back nostalgically to the quiet hours of anonymity, when life was simpler, and somehow purer?

I call it the "killjoy genie". No sooner does this curious power receive the rub of success than it emerges from the bottle - for it is kept bottled up, in a transparent, invisible bottle, the killjoy genie, shameful thing that it is - in order to quash, or at least try to quash, the happy feeling. It tells me not only that I am unworthy of the happy feeling - and don't we all know that voice, isn't it familiar to all of us, in all its different, individual registers? -- but something else as well, something stranger, and even more discomfiting. It tells me that those who are patting me on the back, cheering me on, giving me praise and compliments, are wrong. They are mistaken, perhaps even deluded. And because they are these things, I feel sorry for them. My first reaction to a recognized achievement is to feel sorry

for the person, or people, who are congratulating me. And it has been ever thus. Who would not want to avoid such a feeling, and the success that produces it? My peers, my congratulators, are misguided. They've got the wrong guy. They are on the wrong track. And because I am grateful to them, despite their error -- because I owe them a debt of gratitude despite their mistake -- I feel sorry for them. They seem vulnerable to me. My feeling sorry for them records their human vulnerability. Out there in the wide-open, exposed spaces of my success, I see how vulnerable they are, those mistaken cheerleaders of my fraudulent accomplishment. And I wish they would stop it. I wish they would stop making me feel embarrassed for them. Their open faces, their wide-open faces, seem particularly vulnerable. It is enough to make me long for the private solace of my burrow. And I am already, in my mind at least, back there. I am not here, in the light of recognition. I am back there. My killjoy genie has made sure of that.

Success, you see, means losing my innocence and purity - the innocence and purity of my anonymity. My slightly sad anonymity. My default condition is always a slight sadness. It's called depression - a default, baseline depression. Nothing clinical - rather environmental,

ambient. Mild depression is the sea I swim in, the water that floats me, the air that I breathe. My depression, my failure, is my virginity, you might even say. My purity. And success threatens to violate that purity. To become successful would be to lose my sadness, my defining sadness.

The comparison to virginity was not an idle one, because the prospect of losing my sadness is not so unlike how the prospect of having sex was for me, the first time. I was not all that eager to do it. Actually, that's putting it mildly. I was scared. I was scared to lose my virginity, which would mean losing the last part of my childhood innocence. (Of course, I was aware I had lost most of my childhood innocence by the summer after third grade, when I first learned about "the birds and the bees".) But as long as I retained my virginity, I could feel that that aspect of my childhood, and its innocence, were still intact. This "willed innocence" was also not unlike my "Santa Claus Syndrome", whereby I could tell myself that I still believed in Santa Claus by paying lip service to him, even though I had really ceased believing in Santa Claus by fourth grade. (Sexual and "Clausal" innocence both fell at about the same time.) In this way, the wish to believe could continue to stand for the belief

itself. The desire to be still innocent was great enough that it could crowd out, at least for another year or two, my common-sense knowledge of the fictionality of Santa Claus; or, later, my "carnal knowledge" of my inevitable sexual destiny. In the case of the latter, the preservation of my virginity was like a pledge, a token, of the status quo of my childhood - a reassurance that I was the "same person" I had always been. The safe burrow - the burrow here of my innocence, rather than my failure - was still there, and could be retreated to. And insofar as my innocence, my "status quo", was associated with my baseline mild depression, my sadness, the avoidance of any kind of success, acclaim or recognition, was an assertion of the status quo, a preservation of my childhood identity. Just as I had been afraid of losing my belief in Santa Claus, and later, losing the innocence of my virginity, just so, on into adulthood today, I am afraid of losing my sadness. And insofar, too, as success might mean an end to my sadness, I am afraid of success as well.

The prescription of an anti-depressant (Zoloft) 23 years ago, which I am still taking, has hugely lessened my baseline sadness, and has also enabled me to handle pressure much better. But the imprint of the baseline sadness remains - if only as a memory of the status quo,

and a reminder of my temperamental tendency. And I would have it no other way. I set much store by the memory of my burrow. It is a kind of token of identity - a touchstone of who I am. I am the guy who used to be the kid who was usually just a little bit sad. And when he wasn't - when he became happy in the glow of a recognized achievement, and was congratulated by others - the killjoy genie would emerge from the invisible bottle to make him feel sorry for his cheerleaders in their delusion, and remind him of the way it had been in the burrow. Remind him of the solace of anonymity, and the baseline sadness.

Yes, I am that guy who used to be that kid. I remember it well. But it is time now, at 64, to grow up - or rather to keep growing up. It is time to stop being afraid of success. It is time to face the music - the silent music, the music of silence - of the wide-open spaces. Furthermore, the fear of success is un-American - as un-American as the fear of failure is American. Now I would rather be true to myself, and un-American, than be a self-betraying American; but I think I see a way to have my cake and eat it too - to be American in a way that preserves my identity, and the memory of my personal status quo. The memory of the burrow, and its solacing comforts. Because it was always the memory of the burrow that

beckoned me. That was the function of the killjoy genie as much as anything: to evoke the memory of the burrow, and turn me back to it in my mind. But as another American writer - and an arch-Romantic, too - reminded us, you can't go home again. Especially when there are all those wide-open American spaces to explore. The light there may be bright and exposing - but that's OK. I have my Ray-Ban Wayfarers™ to protect me. I think I can handle it now.