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When I was a young child, my father would always recite this poem to me at bedtime, in a cadence I can't help but replicate when I read it, even to myself. Maybe you know it.

It Couldn't Be Done

BY EDGAR ALBERT GUEST 1881–1959

Somebody said that it couldn't be done
But he with a chuckle replied
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one
Who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin
On his face. If he worried he hid it.
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it!

Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;
At least no one ever has done it;"
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat
And the first thing we knew he'd begun it.
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,
Without any doubting or quiddit,
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it.

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,
There are thousands to prophesy failure,
There are thousands to point out to you one by one,
The dangers that wait to assail you.
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing
That "cannot be done," and you'll do it.¹

For my tenth birthday, my father gave me this poem as a gift in a wooden frame, so I could always have it nearby. It lives in my office to this day. He told me stories of his prodigal childhood from as early as I can remember. We visited MIT, his alma mater, where he showed me engineering and technology innovations that only an esteemed institution such as that one could have. He wore his MIT sweatshirts, placed his MIT chair right next to his desk, and admired it. My father showed me his gymnastics medals and demonstrated, well into his forties and fifties that he could still position his body, his glorious machine, into shapes that much younger men could only dream of. There was

¹ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173579>

no opportunity to miss the messages of conquest, victory, and success. These were my father's prime values. I would spend summers with my father in California, where he would design our own university of two, he the professor, I, the student. The curriculum: eliminate all failings.

When I was a child, I was very afraid of the water. I dreaded swimming lessons. The deep end scared me to death – I thought I would never do it. I saw other kids half my age on the swim team, swimming lengths of the YMCA pool, with their sleek cap-covered heads and aerodynamic goggles, as I took shallow, anxious breaths of the chlorine filled air. My father signed me up for twice weekly swimming lessons. You have to conquer your fear, he would say.

I was also late to ride a bike; it just didn't seem physically possible to balance that thing. It doesn't stand stably on its own, like other modes of transportation; what sensible being would expect it would be different with person on it? Noticing this doubt in me, my father borrowed a very old, rusty bike from his neighbor. He hand-refurbished it; this was an act of love. Every evening, he – tired from his days as a radiology resident, and I – exhausted from hiding all day at the YMCA day camp that I really couldn't swim, would practice bike riding. He would do the thing where you run alongside the bike, but I could tell when he let go, and would scream for him to hold on. Once, the time I hit my stride, I looked back to check on him. He had let go. For decades, there was a gravely patch of scar on my right knee. A epidermic memorial to the price one pays to overcome a weakness.

In the end, I love to swim, and I love to ride bikes. I fear neither. He accepted no failure, no fear, and no quitting. He lived by that poem, and all who lived around him would have to live by it as well. And, success! I am a success story – a living testament to his failure-free training program. My father wanted to win at everything. He won at college; he won at gymnastics; he won at radiology – a finely tuned specialist in his field. Many of you know he died two years ago – but, his legacy of effort lives on in a convoluted corner of my heart.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book about our focus on success and conquest called *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. He tells this story: "An American tourist found himself in India on the day of the pilgrimage to the top of a sacred mountain. Thousands of people would climb the steep path to the mountaintop. The tourist, who... thought he was in good shape, decided to join in and share the experience. After twenty minutes, he was out of breath and could hardly climb another step, while women carrying babies, and frail old men with canes, moved easily past him. 'I don't understand it,' he said to an Indian companion. 'How can these people do it when I can't?' His friend answered, 'It is because you have the typical American habit of seeing everything as a test. You see the mountain as your enemy and you set out to defeat it. So, naturally, the mountain fights back and it is stronger than you are. We do not see the mountain as our enemy to be conquered. The purpose of our climb is to become one with the mountain and so it lifts us up and carries us along.'"²

We see life as a series of mountains, I'm sure of it. Mountains to climb. To conquer. To put our personal flag atop and declare victory. And, if it's hard to get to the top, it makes for an even better story. But, top-ward bound we are. Failure is not an

² Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, 1986, p. 50.

option. Life coaches and inspirational leaders everywhere are selling the key to success. Here's one of my favorites, from an online life coach:

"There is a difference between those who succeed and those who don't. [Here's what you do:] First make up your mind about what you want. Second make up your mind that there is no such thing as failure."³ Alrighty then. Good plan.

There is a lot of messaging in secular culture about success and conquest. We get a lot of that in the oxygen and blogosphere. Everyone's perfect kids, awesome job, sexy, fun spouse. Happy offspring with their little backpacks proliferate this time of year on Facebook. Lunches packed. Smiley faces. Smooth mornings. Perfection. We graze on these images all day, all of us out to pasture. Chewing, chewing, slowly digesting and inevitably overeating; we're a bit nauseated from everyone's perfect life. Success, self-defined and constructed, and then shared, and hate-liked. What are we doing? Working so hard to present perfection. What are we afraid of? That we may be discovered? Imperfect? That our lives are riddled with fears, failures, insecurities. Many of them. Every day.

I was an insecure, anxious kid. Guess what, I was. I was scared of things that other kids did easily. Believe me, if there had been Facebook, that would *not* have been posted. My first triumphant lap around the block on that awesome refurbished bike would have gotten a lot of likes, though. My little face beaming with pride, shredded up fears still lingering. But only on the inside. Thumbs up. A hundred "friends" like this!

This is a problem. It's Yom Kippur – the day of honesty and openness; it's the day of vulnerability. The gates are open. We appear in white. Not distracted by color or vanity, we stand true in our own skin, enveloped only by the sincerity of our souls.

Remember the Robert Fulghum book *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*? Fulghum tells a parable of "adult hide and seek" by reminiscing about the kid who always hid too well, and then got so mad when no one found him. "Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him...[Fulghum draws a poignant parallel]: A man I know found out last year he had terminal cancer. He was a doctor. And knew about dying, and he didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. Everybody saw how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody...But privately, his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, ...He hid too well... *Hide-and-seek*, grown-up style. Wanting to hide. Needing to be sought. Confused about being found. 'I don't want anyone to know.' 'What will people think?'"⁴

What a conundrum: we wish to be known, we want to be sought, we fear being found. And, tonight, we are implored to reveal our truest struggles, even if they are failures. Reveal to our own hearts, to one another, to God, who knows all. If we actually reveal ourselves – so scary.

The entire purpose of Yom Kippur is just this: a huge moral inventory and admitting to God, to ourselves, and (maybe even) another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. Sheer panic! I didn't make this ritual up; but, I'm inspired by it and scared of it. I can still get as scared as the girl staring down into the deep end. But, I'd love to be liberated – from the pursuit perfection and her trusty sidekick: hiding.

³ <http://www.efficientlifeskills.com/6-things-everyone-must-do-to-avoid-failure-pursue-happiness/>

⁴ Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, *Moments of Transcendence: Yom Kippur*, 1992, p. 17.

So, let's get to it, already. What's the worst that can happen? I remember being invited to an AA meeting once where a participant was working on the fourth step of the twelve step program. The fourth step requires making a "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." Oh God. The real thing. Comprehensively. And, then, perhaps even more frightening is the fifth step: admitting to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.⁵ I the man who was sharing about his journey at that meeting. I will never forget how he described the anticipatory anxiety of discussing his darkest thoughts and actions to a trusted confidante. His sponsor encouraged him to say it, whatever it is. And, when he said it, the sponsor simply said, "Ok." And, the earth did not open up; nor did lightening bolts strike him. But, the soul was unshackled that day. Hide and seek, grown up style.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a renowned Lutheran minister from Denver who is covered with tattoos and piercings. She wrote a book called *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. It is a semi-autobiographical description of her excellent bad self. She is a hero of mine; she has no idea this is so. She tells it like it is and is convinced that our real human messes are the forum for grace, enlightenment and evolution. There must be mess in order to get real. There's no way around it. Last September she was interviewed about her approach, and she spoke wise words about the enchanting, real experience of being flawed:

"I've just never met a human being who has not experienced some kind of suffering, some kind of brokenness. [She said]...Everybody has something that they...feel powerless over, that we feel like has a hold of us, that we don't feel like we have much choice in ...I think that this is very, very common...[she pauses] I mean maybe some people don't, but I don't find them very interesting. ...I don't want to have coffee with them."⁶

Think about the most interesting people you know. They are not always the easiest. They are not the slickest. They are the most textured and complicated. I always fantasize that our synagogue community would transcend the typical pattern. The typical pattern, of course, is that people come when there is something to celebrate or attend. But, if we feel vulnerable, broken, damaged, weak, or otherwise imperfect, we stay home. And hide. And, maybe while we're home hiding, we'll post a few cute pictures of the enviable dinner we cooked; our clean, well-groomed children, or that splendid vacation getaway, when we looked happier.

I fantasize that we'd be a community where we actually know one another's real fears, real pains, utterly human flaws. I wonder if this could ever be possible. It would be hard, because we can leave when things are hard. Communities in which real fears, real pains, real vulnerabilities are known do not allow for hiding. Think about the most impactful community experiences you've ever had. There was nowhere to hide. College dorm life. Summer camp. The military.

I remember when one of our kids talked affectionately about a great friend at camp with smelly feet. I thought: this is what it's about. Great guy; smelly feet. Both. And, everyone knew both.

⁵ <http://12step.org/steps/the-12-steps.html>

⁶ <http://www.onbeing.org/program/transcript/nadia-bolz-weber-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace>

My freshman college roommate was incredibly appropriate, from a very proper and successful family of Chinese immigrants. But, I know she had gas. Only in her sleep, though, in the middle of the night, when she could finally relax. When I pointed this out, we cracked up together.

These seem like such trivial examples, and yet... who here would be open to an acquaintance finding out about even frivolous “flaws” such as these. What hope is there for us ever really knowing each other, warts and all? And, if we’re not willing to share vulnerable dimensions of ourselves, real relationship is truly limited. So, we hide. And, the only problem is that all we want in life is to seek, and be sought.

In a just a moment we will all stand up. And we will say it together: *Our God,...we are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Eternal our God and God of all ages, we are perfect and have not sinned; rather do we confess...*⁷ We confess our shortcomings, our human flaws. But we do it together, from a script of italics. In this, we hide a little bit. It’s unison. Some are ours. Some are not ours. It’s not that vulnerable. We haven’t all been obstinate or possessive, rancorous. Maybe we haven’t all shown violence; weakness of will; xenophobia. It’s nice of us to stand together and collectively claim these. But, we are still hiding somewhat.

This year, we participated in a national project inviting individuals to name their own struggles and post them anonymously on the board. These came a little closer to home. Some examples: I’ve been overindulging on wine; I’ve been avoiding my mother’s phone calls; I’ve been prioritizing the wrong people. I am unreasonably impatient. I am not that great at being a spouse.

These are some of our real human struggles. Maybe they are mistakes; faults; errors. You know, there’s a difference between having a flaw and being a flaw. There’s a difference between having a blemish and being a blemish.

Once, on his show, Jay Leno highlighted a hilarious “mistake” on a print ad for an elite private school. The school’s ad said: “Where Excellence is not an Option.” Of course, it meant to say something like excellence is not optional; more like compulsory. My father’s favorite poem meant to say failure is not an option. But, I’d rather say failure is not optional; it’s compulsory, human. And, what’s the big deal? What’s the worst thing that could happen? We fail. All the time. You know it and I know it. But, we don’t know it about each other. We’re too scared.

Writer Charles M. Blow explores this fear in an essay he wrote on the topic: “Daring to step into oneself is the bravest, strangest, most natural, most terrifying thing a person can do, because when you cease to wrap yourself in artifice you are naked, and when you are naked you are vulnerable. But vulnerability is the leading edge of truth. Being willing to sacrifice a false life is the only way to live a true one. I had to stop romanticizing the man I might have been and be the man that I was...— made in the image of God, nurtured by the bosom of nature, and forged in the fire of life. ...concealment makes the soul a swamp. Confession is how you drain it.”⁸

Brene` Brown, author and vulnerability researcher has found this to be true: “As children we found ways to protect ourselves from vulnerability, from being hurt, diminished, and disappointed. We put on armor; ... Now as adults we realize that to live

⁷ GOR, p. 269.

⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/opinion/sunday/charles-blow-up-from-pain.html?emc=edit_th_20140921&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=67039760&_r=2

with courage, purpose, and connection – to be the person whom we long to be – we must again be vulnerable. We must take off the armor...show up, and let ourselves be seen.”⁹

Funny enough, as a child, I never remember thinking it was a shortcoming to be so scared. Unpleasant, sure. But, as an adult, when I get scared about things, I feel embarrassed about those fears. But, when I do talk about them, I find that those around me don't find them that weird. And, even if they do find my fears weird, they usually just help me. But, first, I have to state them.

Would we dare? Would we share even one thing we feel shame about to a trusted friend? Would we feel unburdened if we were found, and loved along with of our flaws, not in spite of them? To dare to be more fully known, can it even be done?

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Who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.

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⁹ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 2012, p. 112.