

After failure

By [James A. Harnish](#)

April 12, 2010

I live and work with a lot of folks who believe that God has given up on them. They are convinced that their failures are so great that there is no way that God can use them to bring hope or healing to others. Many have lives that are controlled by the memory of some past failure. Many of them throw in the towel and decide that the way life has been is the way it always will be. They accept the identity their failure imposed upon them.

When Fred Snodgrass died in 1974 at age 86, the *New York Times* obituary headline [identified him](#) as follows: "Ball player muffed 1912 fly." It was as if nothing else had ever happened in his life. Snodgrass's story captured my attention because our culture is so deeply addicted to the success and failure of sports stars. What happens when a hero fails? Does Tiger Woods have a future? How does anyone deal with the naked truth of the past?

I'm fascinated by the way John weaves so many memories from the past into this week's Gospel reading. Maybe it points to the way we carry our past around with us, for good or ill. We get to decide what we will do with the memory of our failures. Will they be "all she wrote"? Will they block us from living into the future? Or can they be redeemed and made useful for others?

The early church used the memory of Peter's biggest failure as an example of the power of God to forgive our failures, redeem the past and renew our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. If God could do that for Peter, God can do it for all of us!

My file contains a [Living by the Word column](#) in which Craig Barnes wrote,

You can either be a priest or a victim. Those are your only options. What you cannot do is just forget about the hurt, or deny it or store it up to use later. To be a priest is to free others of shame and yourself of hurt. To be a victim is to hold onto hurt, which is like holding onto a disease. It will eat

up your soul.

Because the reading from John is layered with memories from the past, I can't help but wonder if Paul was remembering Peter's story when [he wrote](#),

This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

If he wasn't, he certainly could have. I intend to remember it too.

*Additional lectionary columns by Harnish appear in the April 6 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*