We have to be willing to begin again

This is true of failures in writing, in faith, in life itself.

by Kathleen Norris in the May 5, 2021 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the ninth in the new series.

I was addressing a group at a writing retreat when someone raised a familiar question: "What are you working on now?" In the past I always had a ready answer, but the subject had recently become painful for me. Suddenly I saw an opportunity to enlist the group's help.

Most of them had read one or more of my books and were well-disposed toward my writing. So I decided to read excerpts from a book in progress about my younger

sister Rebecca, whose brain was damaged at birth due to medical errors. Considered “borderline,” Becky was intelligent enough to know what had happened to her—a terrible burden that led to emotional suffering later in her life. But when she was young, she used it to her advantage.

For example, when I was 14, my mom allowed me to get my first lipstick. It was in what I would now consider a hideous shade of coral, but then it was a source of pride, even if Ididn’t have much occasion to wear it. One afternoon I found Becky writing with my lipstick on a cinder block wall. I was furious and yelled at her.

Becky smirked and said, “You can’t hit me, I’m retarded!” I knew hitting her would get me in trouble, so I threw some sheet music at her. When our mom intervened, Becky offered an apology that was clearly not heartfelt. She couldn’t stop smirking. I suspect she was proud of having come up with that line of defense. She and Mom cleaned up the mess, and for years Becky told that story to anyone who would listen. That’s my sister, in a nutshell.

I told the writing group I’d be reading vignettes about growing up with Becky, and I asked them to focus on what was wrong with the work—to spot problems, weaknesses, anything that troubled them. I noticed the retreat director looking stunned.

Later he told me he’d never seen anything like it, a writer asking for help like that. I responded by saying that I could never have done it when I was a younger writer, much too afraid of looking like a failure to put that much trust in an audience. And in saying that out loud, I realized that I had attained a new freedom as a writer, and maybe as a person.

The previous few years had been the most difficult of my writing life, with the question of failure looming large. I’d had so much to say for 15 years, with the publication of four more books following my unexpected best seller *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* in 1993. But writing a book on acedia shut me down. Acedia is good at that.

Writing *Acedia and Me* exhausted me. My research entailed reading some of the world’s most depressing literature, including prerevolution nihilist Russian novels and the writings of the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran. I knew that it would be risky to bring that book out without an inkling of what my next project would be.

Writers often experience depression when a book is published; even sending edited galleys back to an editor can trigger distress. Years ago, when the poet James Wright hired me to type a manuscript of his selected poems, his wife asked me to lie about my progress should he ask about it. She needed time to ease him into the reality of it being finished.

And *finished* is the right word. Publication can seem so final that you dread what comes next. You fear that the words will not come and you'll lack the energy to work with them if they do. When *Acedia and Me* was published in 2008, I joked that after writing about such a dire subject I should do a comic novel. I didn't expect to enter such a long and frustrating period of silence.

It was Becky who helped me break out of it. Jealous of my success as a writer, she'd once told me I should write about her so she could be famous like me. I'm descended from a long line of Methodist pastors, so I know a call when I hear one.

In 2015, two years after she died of cancer, I felt ready to write about Becky. Embracing it as a passion project, I joyfully entered into living like a Trappist for months, waking every morning at three without having to rely on an alarm clock. It was as if the work itself was urging me: get up, get going. I felt like a writer for the first time in years.

Eventually I was able to send nearly 400 pages to my agent and my editor. Both responded a few weeks later by saying that something essential was missing. My agent recommended that I set this project aside and work on something else.

I won't say I was devastated; that's a word more suited for receiving a diagnosis of terminal illness. But the blow shocked me, leaving me feeling not only sad but empty. I've worked with both of these women for over 20 years, and they're exceptionally good at what they do. I had to trust their judgment and admit that they must be onto something, even though I couldn't see the problem.

I convinced myself that I was being mature, and perhaps even humble, in accepting their rejection. But after more than a year of self-inflicted misery and the inability to move on, I realized that wounded pride held me in its grip and had prevented me from picking myself up and starting to write again.

The writing retreat was the first time I had spoken about any of this, except to a spiritual mentor. After hearing several of my stories, the group echoed what my

editor and agent had told me. One man commented that while it was clear that I loved my sister deeply, he felt that I was keeping too much distance between myself and the material. He was telling me I had work to do, work that would mean diving again into the manuscript.

The prospect was—and is—terrifying. Any tailor can tell you that it's much more difficult to fix problems in a dress or suit than to start over from scratch. I pray over it, but I still haven't found a way to begin working again with those 400 pages. I have to ask: Have I failed my sister? Have I failed in my vocation as a writer? Is it time for me to rest on my laurels?

To cope with those questions I have to go back to 1948, when I was six months old, critically ill, and facing surgery. My parents were told I might not make it. My mother later related how I would lie for hours in the hospital crib, turning my head from side to side and crying from the pain in my ears. My parents came every day to hold and feed me. I grew so accustomed to penicillin injections that when the nurses turned me over in the middle of the night to give me a shot, I wouldn't wake up. A nurse held me during and after the surgery, feeding me by bottle.

I was in my thirties before I realized the import of this, that the most intense experience of my life—literally a struggle between life and death—occurred before I had the words to describe it. I've been searching for them ever since.

An avid reader as a child, I won an award in third grade for writing the most book reports in my class. For years I got As in English and struggled mightily to get above Ds in math. When I was in college, a professor who was a poet encouraged me to write poetry, so I began to take tentative steps into writing.

But the process intimidated me, and I wasn't yet willing to engage in the revealing of self that writing requires. My earliest poems now seem as if they were written in a code so dense that even I can no longer decipher them. I was hiding behind the words. It took me a long time to emerge and develop a voice that could speak clearly to readers.

Now I had to ask myself: Was I hiding again? If so, how could I work with my manuscript so as to honor my sister the way I felt she deserved, be more true to myself, and better engage my readers? Those are big questions, much like the ones Jesus asks: "Who do you say that I am?" and "What do you want me to do for you?" I suspect I'll be working on them for the rest of my life.

I take some comfort in knowing that I have outgrown the callow, self-serving understanding of success and failure that I had when I was in my twenties. Bennington College provided a safe, insular place for my initial forays into writing, and it was a mixed blessing to go straight from there to the hothouse of the New York City literary scene. Given that environment, it's no wonder that my notion of success had to do more with earning recognition and publication than with doing necessary inner work.

It took me a long time to understand that my success in winning a competition that got my first book of poems published when I was 24 was also a failure. Publishing before I was ready shut me down, and it was ten years before I brought out another volume of poems. By then I had moved to my mom's hometown in western South Dakota and was developing a healthier perspective on both life and writing. A friend said that between my first and second books of poetry it was as if I had discovered gravity.

My attitude toward success and failure changed as I got older, settled into marriage, and learned to bake bread in what had been my grandmother's kitchen. Moving to South Dakota was good for me as a writer. I needed to live in a place where the quantity of rain that comes in a storm or this week's price for wheat and cattle mattered much more to my neighbors than my literary endeavors. People saw my writing as a hobby, and their dismissal gave me room to grow.

Reconnecting with my Christian heritage was another potent force of change. Attending the Presbyterian church where my grandmother had been a member for many years was initially an exercise in nostalgia. But it soon became urgent, a confusing and painful necessity, and I am deeply grateful to the pastors who saw me through my crisis of faith.

In rare moments, my two worlds collided in surprising ways. The Sunday after I told my pastor that I'd had my first poem published in the *New Yorker*, he took the opportunity, at a time in the service when people spoke of birthdays, anniversaries, and the like, to announce this as one of the "joys of the church."

One decisive element in my conversion to faith—and to a new sense of my vocation as a writer—was discovering the Benedictine men and women who were my neighbors on the Plains. I'd been educated to see literature and faith as separate realms, having at best an uneasy relationship. I was not surprised when another

poet, on hearing that I had joined a church, warned that it would ruin my writing. But the Benedictines helped me to see that their values of humility, hospitality, and *conversatio morum* (willingness to change) could be a vital part of both my life and my work.

Writers are not known for their humility: it takes a lot of nerve to write something and expect others to read it. It also takes discipline. No matter how much or how little one has published, every writer starts with the same blank page. Over and over, we have to be willing to begin again. Until I encountered the Rule of Benedict, I didn't understand that this is true not only of writing but of faith and of life itself.

I had already learned to love the process of revision; now I saw that I was also engaged in revising my life. As I moved beyond the adolescent concepts of writing as self-expression and sharing my feelings, I was nudged to become less self-centered, more willing to be a partner to my husband and a member of a church community. Revising a work to make it more accessible, more hospitable to a reader, requires suffering many little deaths to self.

A work succeeds for readers when they find in it enough room to reflect on it in terms of their own experience. And that can't happen unless the writer meets an essential challenge: the need to be fully present in the work but not the center of attention. The work of amateurs tends to suffer from the latter. In the case of the manuscript about my sister, it seems that I have failed in the former. I am not present enough.

I learned a great deal about the importance of being present by serving as a caregiver for my husband, David, my parents, and Becky in their last years. Caregiving was not something I chose. Even in my teenage years I felt I wasn't cut out for motherhood, with its great responsibility of tending diligently and daily to another's needs. But caregiving chose me, and through it I discovered capacities within myself I had no idea were there. Success is simply being there, enjoying another's company and being willing to do whatever job is necessary. Failure is forgetting St. Benedict's powerful admonition to "never turn away when someone needs your love."

The last time I read through Emily Dickinson's letters, I found something I had missed in earlier years. Dickinson was a caregiver for her aged mother, and her words ring true to my own experience. "Mother's dear little wants so engross the

time,” she wrote in a letter in 1880. “I hardly have said, ‘Good-morning, mother,’ when I hear myself saying, ‘Mother, good-night.’” As her mother weakened and was no longer able to walk, Dickinson wrote, “the responsibility of Pathos is almost more than the responsibility of Care.”

Caregiving is difficult and sad. It is also invisible, an inner journey to finding that the reward is simply being there and doing what needs to be done—changing a diaper, emptying a commode, sitting with a person dear to you who no longer knows who you are. You are spending time with someone you love, and that is the greatest gift imaginable. Caregiving for an infant, no matter how smelly the task, is permeated with joy. Time spent with the dying is laced with grief, as you recognize that it will soon end. But joy is there also, and although the loss is terrible, it doesn’t feel like failure when you can call up so many good memories to sustain you.

I’m now in my early seventies, coping with the various bodily depredations that, no matter what marketers may tell you about your “golden years,” inevitably come with aging. I’m grateful to be working, giving talks and leading retreats. In my twenties I was startled to hear the poet John Hall Wheelock, then well into his nineties, talk with enthusiasm about working on new poems. Fifty years later, that memory continues to give me hope.

But my current frustrations with writing have led me to wonder how much longer I can go on. After I reluctantly set my sister’s book aside, I began a book on monastic formation and my own formation as a Benedictine oblate. Currently both manuscripts are a shambles, having suffered from false starts. Stymied, I’ve been forced to hunker down to the roots, like native prairie grasses in a drought.

I try to keep my writing spirit alive by staying small. The brief reflections I’ve done over the last several years for the daily devotional *Give Us This Day*, a ministry of St. John’s Abbey, are some of the best things I’ve ever written. And there is the occasional serendipity of being assigned to review a book that comes into my life exactly when I need it.

Not long ago, the editor of the *American Benedictine Review* sent me a book by a writer I’d never heard of, Pauline Matarasso. I’m currently downsizing and shedding many of my books, but *Clothed in Language* is one I’ll keep, as it contains so much truth that I need. In my years of caregiving I could have used Matarasso’s definition of God’s will as “the next thing I least want to do.” Now it will be a mantra I carry

with me into old age.

Matarasso's perspective on failure has been especially helpful. Reflecting on Luke 22, she writes:

> In one sense Peter's faith did fail: like a failed harvest, it fell short, dried up. In another sense it was a felix culpa: it was Peter's Golgotha, for in that failing, that death, fell to earth the wheat grain from which his resurrection life grew.

Her advice is to "learn to love our failures, that they too may find their place in the will of God."

As a writer I've learned that failure is not always what it seems. It's often when I feel most dead to the world, when the gift of writing seems to have completely withered within, that the breakthroughs come. I marvel that my unconscious has been at work all along, waiting for the right moment to surface. At such times I feel like the farmer in Mark 4:27, who after scattering seed can only wait and marvel that "the seed would sprout and grow and he knows not how." One must prepare the ground, or as Gregory of Nyssa put it, "work the earth of the heart."

I find it increasingly difficult to keep working that stony ground. As I wrestle with the knowledge that I am entering my last years, the question, "Will I publish another book?" is no longer the right one for me to ask. It's more urgent that I find out if I have the energy and the courage to finish writing that book about my sister. Publication is the least of my concerns.

When I was four years old, I sang "Jesus Loves Me" on a Washington, DC, radio station: "I am weak, but he is strong." I guess it's time for me to take those words to heart. For over 40 years as a freelance writer I had to rely on my wits, my willpower, my strengths. Now I've come face to face with a stark existential reality: God is inexhaustible, and I am not.

But I can still pray for possibility. Fearing that his "soul has lost possibility," Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*: "If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere." In my writing, my faith, and my life, that is something I can still aspire to.

A version of this article appears in the print edition as “Begin Again.”