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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Failure*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

I'm sorry to hear that you didn't do as well as you would have liked in your art class. I realize that people at school are already talking about things like class standing and college choices. You live in a competitive world.

Do you remember J.K. Rowling?

She wrote the Harry Potter books that you loved so much.

Rowling gave the commencement address at Harvard several years ago. (She joked that all of the crimson banners made her think for a moment that she was at the world's largest Gryffindor reunion!) She talked about the benefits of failure.

Rowling told the story of her own failure. She talked about how hard it was to balance the ambitions she had for herself and those that others had for her. She described the value of studying things, like the Classics, that wouldn't on their own pay a mortgage or secure a pension. And, she reflected on how painful it had been to be a single mother without a job.

The benefit, she said, was that realizing her greatest fears set her free. Rock bottom became a solid foundation for her. "Had I really succeeded at anything else," she said, "I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged."

Now, I know that you know that getting a bad grade (at least by your standards) is not the same as being a jobless single mother!

But, disappointments do offer a gift similar in character to what Rowling received from her failure. They give us a chance to look more realistically at ourselves, and to come closer to who we are and who we want to be. And, perhaps more importantly, they give us an experience of vulnerability that enables us to connect more deeply with other people who are having similar experiences.

Just as you have to learn to put aside your preconceptions of what eyes or a nose are supposed to look like in order to really see the person whose portrait you are trying to draw, so you have to get beyond definitions of success and perfection that depend on not making any mistakes before you can really live your life.

As Rowling said, "As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters."

I wish you a good life.

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames

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