

Reconciling with
the Past

A LIFE
AT WORK

*The Joy of Discovering
What You Were Born to Do*



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CHAPTER FOUR

RECONCILING WITH THE PAST



Leonardo advised aspiring artists to discover the pictures to be found in cracks in walls; Chinese sages were conceived as their mothers stepped into the footprints of unicorns; all of us make up our lives out of the cracks in the walls of our past memories and the unicorn footprints of our futures.

LYNDA SEXSON

When we want to get on with the alchemy of our life work, we might look into the vessel that holds the raw material of our lives. In it we can find our painful memories: people who got in the way, experiments that failed, hopes and promises that didn't work out, losses and failures, rejections and interrupted careers.

All of this "bad" stuff from the past is like compost. We have to go and gather it and place it in the pile that will be the dark resource for the alchemy about to take place. Jung said that if you don't have a pile of rotten stuff to work with, you should go out and get some. Most of us don't have to look far. We are painfully aware of the

many dark moments in our work history and our problem is more an unwillingness to dredge it up and look at it once again than to have an empty pot.

Alchemists referred to this phase of the Work as *nigredo*, the blackening. In the laboratory lengthy and strong heat has given the mass of material in the vessels a dark, and perhaps even charred, appearance. Metaphorically, the material of our life, subjected now to the heat of anxious consideration, memory, and analysis, shows its darkness and shadow, its bitterness and sadness.

This is the time to watch all those old memories turn various shades of dark as we feel their bitter emotions and remember their discouraging influences. As you can imagine, alchemy was a smelly business, and as you go about the alchemy of your own life, you can catch the stench of bad memories.

All of this bothersome business is appropriate and useful. Telling your unhappy stories, calling up memories you might rather leave untouched, and remembering people who didn't help you much on your way is all valuable—your bad experiences are as much a part of you as the good ones, and to be fully present to your current work, you have to include them as well. This is only a phase—later your focus will shift to brighter ground. But you can't omit the *nigredo* out of some sentimental focus on the bright side of things. If you do refuse the darker material, the alchemy will never truly get under way.

Failure

Memories of childhood and family lie deep in a person's psyche, and failures from the past also play a strong role in the unfolding of a life work. Over time, you create a history that becomes your

narrative, a string of jobs and positions that create your identity. For most of us, that history is full of missteps, lost opportunities, and crushing failures.

Some people are able to brush off the mistakes and persevere in their careers with some optimism, but many people so identify with their failures that they develop a negative image of themselves and expect to fail at whatever they do. There doesn't seem to be a particle of optimism in my friend Scottie's head. He has identified with failure, and the spurts of hope at the start of a new job have become part of his story of failure.

For some, the impact of failure is linked to a parent harshly rebidding them never to fail. You would think that parents would understand the importance of supporting their children and guiding them through difficulties and failures, but in therapy I hear story after story of a demanding, hysterical, or otherwise overpowering parent. With strident warnings sharp in their memories, some people can't imagine taking a risk at work and perhaps courting failure.

The damning risk of failure can meet you at every turn. You can be successful in your work and be known for your competence and past brilliance. Then, when you fail, people may be shocked, and their displeasure may persuade you not to take any more chances. Successful people can reach a plateau where the fear of failure inhibits them and keeps them stuck at their current level.

My own life story contains a special genre of failure. When I was living in a religious order and preparing to be a priest, I was studying theology at the monastery but also pursuing my interest in music composition at a local university. My music studies were part-time and secondary to theology.

I did quite well for a couple of years, and then I met a professor who offered to lead me in an independent study in composi-

tion. He was a brilliant, well-read, amazingly gifted man, one of the few true geniuses I have met in my life, and his knowledge extended far beyond music. As a composer he was brilliant, but he was also gifted at languages.

At first, he gave me some basic instructions on how to create a coherent piece of music. Together we analyzed old scores and listened to the latest styles. Soon he was asking me to write full pieces for piano or voice or ensemble. It wasn't easy for me to do all that he demanded—I was taking a full course of theological studies, some taught in Latin, at the same time. I now understand that the limits on my time made it difficult for me to excel in music. But I was also intimidated by this man's talent. He could do so much in music naturally, without effort, that I began to believe that, given my lesser talent, I would always be a second-rate composer if I pursued my goals. Eventually I left music behind, after two university degrees and many years devoted to the study.

Years later, I wondered if I made a good decision in abandoning a career in music. I know that I could have done good work in schools by teaching, conducting, and arranging. Today I get satisfaction from playing the piano daily and arranging music for university and professional choirs, but I still wonder if I could have had a good career in music. The regret is not very strong, but it does bring some tension to my life as a writer, even though I feel strongly called to that work.

The tension I feel about a lost music career feels positive to me. It keeps me on edge, questioning myself in a constructive way, even though the feelings themselves are not pleasant. Whenever I read of people who have managed to sustain several careers at once, I wish I could have done it. But then I'm placed back in the vessel of my calling. I want to crawl out of it sometimes, but it is who I am. The

ension keeps me alive, and the knowledge that I am doing my life work by writing eases my heart.

The Relentless Dog of History

Even if you are successful at a job, if you have had an especially difficult history, you will feel its effects throughout your life. This isn't to say that you can't be happy or make progress with the weight of your past, but you may never be fully free of it. It may always nag at you and haunt you.

When we talk about a life work, we are not imagining perfection. You may find work that satisfies your cravings, but you may also, at the same time, continue to feel the effects of a difficult childhood, abuse, and failure. The amazingly successful and self-possessed Oprah Winfrey confesses that she still suffers the effects of early years of abuse and poverty. In her, though, you can see her past suffering as a strength, allowing her to keep her sense of values in the midst of wealth and fame and to use her resources with generosity and imagination.

I have a friend, Steven, who grew up in a tough south Boston neighborhood in a hardworking but in many ways ill-functioning family. All his life he has been doing real grunt work in the family business of cleaning banks, offices, and restaurants after hours.

I first met Steven when I was teaching art therapists. He stood out from the crowd with his intelligence, good humor, and talent. He was a dancer, actor, and director. Eventually he went off to get a Ph.D.—he is interested in psychology, philosophy, theater, and a number of other fields. While writing his dissertation, he lived with my family for a year and a half. It was a sad day for us all when he went back home to help his brother carry on the family business.

I was a member of Steven's dissertation committee, and I was overwhelmed by the sheer intelligence and insight in his work. He continues to direct plays, teach drama to young people, and apply his many ideas about culture as he keeps theater alive in his small seacoast town.

I don't know if Steven has found his life work. I think he is certainly well on the way. Yet he seems to carry his south Boston experience with him in everything he does. He has gaps here and there, the burden of his past, and yet he has done more than most to raise the level of culture in his community. To me, he is an example of someone who doesn't try to completely overcome his past and yet carves out a productive, influential, highly intelligent life work. He embodies James Hillman's idea of a person fired up with his own calling and going strongly in his own direction, irrespective of family pressures and problems. The dark influences are there, but they don't put out the flame of his creative intelligence.

My family and I tell him: "Stop cleaning restrooms. Make some good money. You've got a Ph.D. now, get a teaching job." But all this well-intentioned cheerleading is off the mark. Steven knows who he is and what he must do. Somehow his necessity to help with the family business is part of his life work, at least up to now. He follows his own urgings and certainly knows better than we do what is driving him toward fulfillment.

A life work is a multicolored, tattered quilt. It is not a simple, monochromatic, one-size-fits-all template that you simply adjust to. It may have gaps and holes and incomplete sections. It may not even feel like a life work, especially when you are in the middle of it. There may come a time when you can look back and see the sense in all the parts and glimpse a true life work, but even then it may be full of holes made by a long history of struggles.

You don't have to look for perfection. Dark shadows from the

past may always color what you are doing. You don't have to expect that one day you will resolve your family, your childhood, and the ups and downs of your life. A life work is more a sensation than a fact, a realization that your work has been meaningful and not that it has finally become complete and flawless.

The Good That Can Come from Bad Influences

When you look at the life stories of successful people, you notice that many of them had negative elements in their past. They didn't spring up from well-intentioned, wise, farsighted parents and social settings. Nor did they always "overcome" their past, fighting against negative influences and succeeding in spite of interfering relatives. Sometimes what appears to be a negative influence turns out to be a positive push forward.

Dr. Jonas Salk, the famous researcher whose work on a polio vaccine was one of those rare accomplishments that in a single stroke saves lives, came from a family of Russian immigrants without much education. As a youth, Salk knew he wanted to do something to help humankind, and he seriously considered becoming a lawyer and then a politician. But his mother had little confidence in this idea. "My mother didn't think I would make a very good lawyer," he said, reflecting on the turn of events that led to his career in medicine. "And I believe that her reasons were that I couldn't really win an argument with her."

Salk didn't consider his mother an obstacle. On the contrary, he felt encouraged by her generally. You may wonder about a highly intelligent, thoughtful man making a life decision based on his mother's belief that if he couldn't argue with her, he couldn't deal with a court. But sometimes negative comments lead to positive de-

isions. Maybe she knew her son well and had a vision of his future that was hidden in her simple comment on his ability to argue.

Parents can steer a child forward toward a life calling in both negative and positive ways. A child can process what he hears, whether it's supportive or challenging. In the long run, it might be better for a parent to speak his mind, so long as he isn't being just blindly critical for neurotic reasons, and let the child work out a life for himself. Jonas Salk said that he had two general principles in mind as he grew up: He wanted to foster his innate sense of wonder, and he wanted to make a contribution to humanity. These spiritual ideas kept him going as he sorted out the best particular route to follow. He could digest his mother's ideas in light of those principles.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning trumpeter Wynnton Marsalis grew up on the streets in New Orleans. His mother was "very smart," he says, and made him read when he was a child. His father was a musician who gave his son a trumpet when he was six, but he wasn't interested at first and didn't start playing until he was twelve. His father also treated his children like adults. "And my father, he would always talk to us like we were grown men, just in the content of his conversations. We never knew what he was talking about half the time. We'd just go, 'Yeah, yeah, okay.' Like you could ask daddy just something basic, 'Daddy, can I have a dollar?' And he would go into like a discussion!"¹

Children may wonder what their parents are talking about when they speak to them in adult rather than child language, but eventually the vision of the parent may pay off. Wynnton Marsalis describes a childhood of mild delinquency and a slow development. Eventually he became an intelligent musician and a highly cultured man, a major influence on other young people trying to make it in a confusing world.

As an adult, Wynnton Marsalis understands that though his fa-

ther's music was not the kind he could pursue specifically; it taught him in more general ways how to be a good artist and develop the character needed to practice and to deal with adversity.

What you do with your past is more important than what it threatens to do to you. You have to see what is valuable in it, shape it to your own hopes and principles, and not get overwhelmed with its negative elements. The past, good and bad, is a rich resource as you try to find your life work. You may think you have to focus on the future to find your career, whereas you may find more material, the alchemical *prima materia*, in your childhood and family.

What Not to Do with the Past

Your past is who you are. It is your particular fate. You may wish it had been different, but it is what it is. It is your starting point and the place you always go back to in memory. You carry it with you.

For most people, the past is a mixture of blessings and trouble. I remember my kind and generous grandmother once telling me that she would rather not have been born than to raise a family in the depression era. Because the past can be a heavy burden and can understandably affect present attitudes, you may be tempted to deal with it heavy-handedly.

Some people take the heroic approach. They are going to overcome their past and be successful in spite of it. They put their energy into not being something rather than in being someone unique. The singer Johnny Cash once expressed his philosophy about the past: "You build on failure. You use it as a stepping stone. Close the door on the past. You don't try to forget the mistakes, but you don't dwell on it. You don't let it have any of your energy, or any of your time, or any of your space. If you analyze it as you're

moving forward, you'll never fall in the same trap twice." He says you should close the door on the past, but then he adds that you should analyze it so you don't repeat mistakes. So, he really means, you don't close the door.²

Some blame certain people in their past for their failure to find the work they want. They may blame a parent for not giving them support, a teacher for not understanding them, or a friend for not giving them good advice. I used to blame my music composition teacher for not preparing me sufficiently for graduate work, but I was lucky to have had him as a teacher for a few years. It was my choice not to enter fully into a career in music.

Blaming is a defensive maneuver. It helps you to avoid facing yourself and your choices. It's different from analysis, where you carefully sort out the reasons for your progress or lack of it. It's one thing to tell the story of your father not appreciating your world and the desires you have; it's another to examine his background and come to an understanding of the differences between you.

The past is not a problem to be solved. It's your mystery, the complicated tale of who you are and how you came to this point in your life. You may analyze your personal history, but analysis is different from problem solving. As you analyze your development, you may gain insight, but you will never fully grasp how you came to be. Analysis is ongoing and always unfinished; a problem is solved once and for all.

Many people look at themselves and their lives as problems. They are always looking for a clue that will explain everything and finally make life better. In therapy, I have met many people who are looking for the final solution to their lives. If all they find in therapy is insight and deepening, they move on to the next therapist, hoping that he or she will possess the ultimate clue to their lives.

A woman once came to me asking help in finding a direction

in life. "I want to do something with my life," she said. Then she told me how she had married the CEO of the corporation she worked for. She had money, friends, and possessions, but she felt deeply unsatisfied. She hated her marriage most of all. It just didn't work out, but she didn't want the mess of a divorce. She particularly didn't want to appear as a failure in the eyes of her friends and family.

I reflected back to her the intensity of her displeasure in her marriage, suggesting that dealing with her feelings and her life at this point would be a good place to start. But she wanted an immediate solution to her career woes. We talked for a while, feeling the stalemate, and one day she announced that she was leaving the bad marriage. Suddenly her life began to open up. She developed a new group of friends, discovered that her family was relieved to see her finally released from the marriage, and eventually found an entirely new area of work.

In this woman's case, a period of thoughtful consideration of her marriage and her family led to the career vision that had eluded her for a long time. She had to reflect on her past, not overcoming it but seeing more clearly. Establishing a new relationship to her past decisions and her views about her family effected a powerful catharsis, a clearing of her vision. Then she was able to move forward. She didn't try to change her past or overcome it, but only have a deeper understanding of it.

The past feels like a burden only when it is thick, solid, and unsorted. You repeat the same stories, blame the same people, and feel the same frustrations. If you can look more closely and tell the stories with new detail and insight, the past loosens up. You see it in slightly fresh ways, and it is no longer a bothersome lump of emo-

tion. It can become lighter to carry and even offer support for a new career, where before it was only an obstacle.

You don't have to be a genius at interpretation, but you do have to tell your stories openly and allow any insight to come forward. It helps to find the right people to listen attentively to your stories. A good listener is sometimes difficult to find. Most people are too quick with advice or they side too readily with your biases and interpretations. When you do find someone who will listen thoughtfully to your stories, tell them with the hope for fresh understanding. In the next chapter, you will be given specific lessons in storytelling.

One of the richest insights in alchemy is the idea that you have "stuff" to work with. You don't have to go into a blank future empty-handed; you can sort through the positive and negative elements of your past. Alchemists said that the *prima materia*, the raw stuff of your life, may contain a great deal of rejected, unpromising, and even objectionable material. But out of it, and in spite of its confusion, you can make a satisfying life.

We are going to move on now to another aspect of that raw material—its tendency to present itself as chaotic and unformed. Everyone would like a clear message about what to do next in life, but usually we have chaos, with, at best, hints of where to turn. A philosophy of chaos might help us, one time after another, we have to deal with confusion rather than order.