



Batting .300

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By Kate Rohde

When I was in seminary in Chicago in the 70's, I was often the only woman in a group of young men. This was quite an educational process in itself, watching the by-play, the kidding, and the jockeying for position. Because of my special status, I didn't come in for a lot of kidding, but I did get kidded about one thing — my complete ignorance of professional baseball. I was so ignorant I would have seen the title of this sermon and said it was "batting point three zero zero". My classmates couldn't believe I had never been to a professional baseball game, and so they took me to one — the White Sox — or was it the Cubs? Whichever team plays at Wrigley Field. And they gave me a hard time for weeks when they found out I had never heard of Lou Gehrig. "How will you ever be a minister?", they asked me. "Guys will never relate to you without sports analogies." Now of course these were a group of guys who couldn't identify a bed of yellow flowers as daffodils, a group of people whose idea of cooking was opening a package of Hostess Twinkies — so I figured we all have our areas of ignorance. But in honor of the guys at Meadville/Lombard, I wanted to start today's sermon with a baseball example.

I am told that some of the best hitters in baseball history, Ty Cobb, Ted Williams; Babe Ruth; and Lou Gehrig; had lifetime batting averages of .367, .344, .342, and .340 respectively. More recent top hitters, Wade Boggs and Tony Gwynn are .334 and .336. What I am told this means, is that they miss the ball twice as often as they hit it — even though they are the best.

That, to me, is a cause for pause. How many things would I, personally, keep on doing if I failed two thirds of the time — much less consider myself a success at? Of course, I may not be doing anything as difficult as hitting a baseball in a major league game. But that leads me to wonder if my impatience with a high rate of failure may not be the reason I am not doing something that challenging or that spectacular. Indeed, in a paradoxical way, it may be the illusion I have that I ought to get a hit most of my times at bat, that may have held me back from the challenging, yet possibly far more rewarding efforts in life.

I don't think I learned that at home. When I was young, my Mom wrote short stories for women's magazines. She would write them and send them out — first to the big ones like *Ladies Home Journal* and *Redbook*, and when they were rejected there, they would go to smaller, more obscure, magazines whose names even I have forgotten. When a story came back from one, she sent it out the next day to another. She had a little list showing where each story was and where it would go next — it helped her, she said, to have this plan as to how to go on, so she didn't have to think about it after each rejection notice. Initially, most of the rejections were printed form letters. Later, it became a cause for celebration when an editor would pen a little note at the end saying something like — *Not quite our type of material, but please try us again*. She had received over a hundred rejection slips before, one day, she got a telegram from *Redbook*

telling her they wanted her story, "Even the Devil Gets Lonesome", and would buy it for publication. After more than 100 rejections, she was published! And after that, a literary agent signed her and she was published all over the world in many different languages. Thereafter, most of what she wrote for publication, found a market. I have always found that an amazing story of persistence, although I gather that it is a common story among writers — to have a lot of strikes before getting a hit. We more often hear of the overnight success stories, not knowing that even most of them put in a lot of time and effort before becoming an overnight success. My Unitarian Universalist colleague, Robert Fulghum, was writing columns and sermons for 25 years before becoming a best selling author and an overnight success with his collected writings, in *Everything I Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

Of course, it's not as simple as persistence. Most ball players never make it to the major leagues no matter how hard they try and most major leaguers don't get hits a third of the time. In my Mom's writing support group, only one other woman ever got anything published at all and I don't think it was only persistence that got my Mom published; it was also talent and craft.

In my meditation on these, and similar facts of life, I came round to several questions. One was when is persistence a virtue and when is it foolishness? Another question is, what are our criteria for a worthwhile activity?

I am sure I am not the only person here to feel that I have sometimes persisted foolishly. Romance comes most quickly to mind — trying to establish a romance with someone who shows no interest. Of course, when I interview couples planning marriage, for every couple that tells me that they knew at once they were made for each other — another will tell me how she didn't really like him that well, but that he persisted and she changed her mind after she knew him better. But I think the times I have most regretted being persistent, are the times I was doing something that didn't mean much or I didn't enjoy — the times I persisted in some activity, some endeavor, some relationship, that would never have been particularly rewarding, even had my persistence been rewarded. I know people, and I imagine you do too, who have worked hard to achieve goals that gave them little pleasure or satisfaction once achieved — the brilliant doctor that hates medicine — the smart attorney who hates the law — people driven to be successful at something they didn't really care about. I have heard it said that it is better to be mediocre at something you love doing, than to be a great success at something you hate. My grandfather was tremendously successful at what he set out to do — building a business and making good money — but discovered, too late, that that was not really what he wanted from life. So persistence is definitely foolishness, if we are trying to get somewhere we don't care to go. If you would rather be a mediocre singer than a great ballplayer, you ought to be practicing your scales rather than your swing — no matter what.

Still, for most of us, there must be some measure of success for us to continue. The question is what is our measure? When I was a kid, my instrument was the violin. I know from that that any parent who has a young violinist in their family, deserves a

medal. I eventually got good enough that it was relatively painless to hear me practice, but I never got really good. One reason for that was, I think, was my inability to follow my teacher's advice when he said to me, "If you are going to make a mistake, make a good one." Instead, when I was uncertain or lacking in confidence I kind of scratchy scratched around, rather than doing something loud enough and bold enough that my teacher could hear and correct it. My fear of making mistakes impeded my learning.

Likewise, in learning a foreign language, I find that I am too fearful of saying something incomprehensible or stupid, to try things out and make mistakes and learn from them as much as I ought to. In my years watching hundreds of people learning languages in Mexican language schools, the ones who learned fastest and best were the kinds of people who would go out, dictionary in hand and charades skills well honed, and be willing to make utter fools of themselves in their attempts to converse with native speakers. When learning to ride a bicycle, you mount, pedal, fall over, dust yourself off, and start again until you are, however tenuously, able to keep your balance. So, too, these beginning linguists would babble away, make embarrassing mistakes, laugh at themselves and keep on going. They didn't mind that they had claimed to be pregnant, when they meant to say embarrassed. They didn't mind if they got a pack of cigarettes instead of the oatmeal they were trying to order — they would smile, shake their heads, and start again. As much as I wanted to learn the language, my fear of failure slowed me down until I put myself in a situation where I had no choice but to speak the language if I wanted to eat, sleep, and find my way around.

In many things in life, that fear of making mistakes, of failing to do things right on the first, second, or third time around, the fear of looking foolish, kept me back. Some of that is concentrating on our fears, instead of our hopes. One of the best baseball players is quoted as saying, "I don't expect to get a hit each time I swing at the ball, but I always feel I have a good possibility." Martin Seligman, the psychologist who has studied hope, says that while pessimists are more likely to be right, optimists are more likely to have their hopes fulfilled. Thus, those who go to bat expecting not to get a hit are more likely to be right; those who are hopeful about hitting the ball are more likely to do so.

It is also true that success and failure are relative terms. For most of us, just getting up to bat in a major league team in baseball, would be quite a success. But getting a hit is a bigger success, getting on base is better, scoring better still, winning the game better still, winning the pennant better still, and winning the World Series the best of all. But if we are only a success if we win the series, then most of us are failures.

One hears of ball players who were tremendously successful and famous, who none the less end their lives in bitterness because they weren't the best known, the most appreciated. I expect few in this room feel like failures because we haven't ever won the World Series, but I also expect that from time to time we don't appreciate what we have accomplished, because we expect to meet a standard that we have set too high. And, yet there are things that it is important to meet a high level of expectation all of the time — a

commercial airline pilot has to be considered a failure even if he succeeds 99% of the time in avoiding a plane crash.

But generally, we have a lot more leeway. One of the other things my parents tried to teach me in their example was the importance of playing even when there seems no prospect of success. They held views that were considered strange and avante garde in their day. My father wanted to be with my mother in the delivery room when their kids were born, and petitioned to do so each of the four times. They believed that their daughters' education was not wasted. They refused economic ties with South African apartheid. They worked against the War in Vietnam. They worked towards an international approach to peacemaking. They worked on dozens of campaigns of candidates who had no chance of winning. Like drops of water falling on stone, many of the things seen as outrageous in their youth, became more acceptable and even, in many cases became the majority opinion.

A few years before her death my mother said to me in an incredulous voice, that for the first time in her life, all the people she voted for had won. But they continued to work for things they would never see occur. When I asked Mom about that once, she said that for the most important long-term human hopes, she has to define success in terms of participating in doing the right thing as she sees it, rather than defining success in terms of a foreseeable outcome. "It's being in the work, not the outcome." My Dad likens it to playing bridge. Some people, he says, think a bridge hand isn't worth playing unless you have a chance of getting a hundred points and winning the game. But if you get 40 points now, you will have made a little progress and better your chances of winning the game in the next hand — you never know.

My folks would have appreciated a member of a previous church's campaign for the state legislature, running as she did against an incumbent Republican in a district that always votes Republican. Many would have asked what's the point? But my folks would have felt that she was in the work, saying the things that needed saying, challenging the status quo, being the drop of water that might begin to wear away the stone.

For me, there is a clear analogy to what we are about in our religious and spiritual lives. For those of us who choose to be Unitarian Universalists, we don't make that choice expecting that Thomas Jefferson was right and that someday Unitarianism will sweep the land. But we choose to hope that we can make a difference. When the Universalists got started, their beliefs were so scandalous that they were attacked, reviled, and not allowed to sit on juries because it was felt that those who did not fear hell could not be trusted. Now, even among fundamentalists, you rarely hear hell preached in church. When the Unitarians argued for openness towards science and reason and for a scholarly approach to the Bible rather than a literal approach, they were reviled.

Now, all the mainline Protestant and Catholic faiths take that approach. The Unitarians and the Universalists ordained women in the 19th century, 120 years later, most Protestant faiths are ordaining women. Throughout most of our history we have been on the outer edge of religious respectability — and, more than occasionally, beyond

it. But by being where we were, we stretched the limits and made it easier for others to move in our direction. By staying in the game, by doing the work, we lift up religious values and approaches together, and make it safer for others to move in our direction. In religion in particular, success is not defined in winning, but in persistence, in continuing to hope, in staying in the work, in finding meaning not in winning but in playing on a good team. In Religion it is practicing and practicing hoping that from time to time you can have a good run around the bases and come on home.