Educating from Failure: Dewey's Aesthetics and the Case for Failure in Educational Theory

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Introduction

Several years ago I began a mentoring relationship with an undergraduate student named Sadie.[1] By all traditional measures, Sadie was a common student, earning slightly above average grades and participating in all the activities one might expect of a typical undergraduate. Our relationship lasted through her third and fourth years in school, and the longer I knew her, the more I understood her uniqueness. Sadie was incredibly self-reflective and had a profound love of learning, yet she took the types of academic risks that, though personally and intellectually gratifying, yielded neither a narrow disciplinary focus nor the strongest grade-point average.

While Sadie's approach to her own education embodies what many of us would encourage in our undergraduates, her choices did not come without unintended consequences. Sadie intended to continue on to doctoral work after undergraduate school. Despite several conversations we had regarding the graduate admissions process and, in particular, the need for the highest possible grade-point average, Sadie proceeded along the path that she felt was truer to herself and to her own university education.

In her senior year, like so many of her peers, Sadie offered herself up to a graduate selection process that can be nothing short of cruel and dehumanizing. On a day in late April, she came to my office to inform me that she had not been admitted to any of the graduate programs to which she applied. Having made no alternative plans, she sat in my office experiencing the full weight of this rejection, as well as the uncertainty of her future after graduation.

Several recent articles in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* have made a case that beauty should be taken seriously in educational discourse and

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included as a viable concept in teaching and learning.[2] Recently Joe Winston argued, "If more teachers can come to recognize that beauty matters to them, that it can reenergize, rehumanize, and remoralize their practice, then its rearticulation in educational discourse might begin to counter the more pernicious and reductive effects of technicist thinking."[3]

I believe that Sadie's story, which I will explain in greater depth over the course of this essay, supports Winston's argument, particularly in the sense that she was caught in the double bind of an education system that speaks the language of the ideal of learning while systematically rewarding those who embody its technicist foundations. This essay is an attempt to add to the argument that beauty matters in education through offering a reciprocal but interconnected point: if the dynamic harmony and deep connectedness of beauty need to be taken seriously, so must their aesthetic converse—the disharmony and estrangement of failure.

It is important to note that beauty and failure are not traditionally conceived as contrasting concepts, in that beauty is usually considered a property of things and not as an adjective describing the outcome of an action, like the concept failure.[4] In this essay I am not employing this traditional notion of beauty, but instead am using John Dewey's concept of beauty to draw my distinction.

The traditional notion of beauty as a property of things-in-themselves depends on a subject/object dualism, which Dewey rejected. Dewey wrote:

> Extreme instances of the results of separation of organism and the world are not infrequent in esthetic philosophy . . . [yet] the uniquely distinguishing feature of esthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears.[5]

Further, if neither art nor the self are essentialized into objects, but are instead understood as transactionally emergent event structures, then, as Dewey wrote,

> beauty, conventionally assumed to be the especial theme of esthetics . . . is at the furthest remove from an analytic term, and hence from a conception that can figure in theory as a means of explanation or classification. Unfortunately, it has been hardened into a peculiar object; emotional rapture has been subjected to what philosophy calls hypostatization, and the concept of beauty as an essence of intuition has resulted.[6]

Therefore, I intend to use Dewey's definition that beauty, as experienced in art, "is the response to that which to reflection is the consummated movement of matter integrated through its inner relations into a single qualitative

whole."[7] In other words, if beauty is defined as a transactionally emergent movement toward dynamic functional harmony, then its opposite would be the movement away from such harmony. Failure can be classified, then, as the movement toward dis/function and dis/integration as one fails to integrate the self with the world in thought, feeling, and action.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, however, but dialogically connected. In other words, while the discourse of philosophical aesthetics has long included categories such as the beautiful, the good, and the virtuous, the seeds for achievement of these ideals are planted in the soil of disharmony, uncertainty, and failure.

Using a Deweyan account of art as experience, this essay argues that disharmony and failure are as much aesthetic categories as harmony and beauty and must be taken as seriously in teaching and learning. As Sadie's story attests, it is often failure, rather than beauty, that provides the foundation for unlocking the unique potential of students and helping them cultivate their capacity for creative thought and action.

The Search for Dynamic Harmony

The question of whether failure can be educative begins in the question of what failure is—how it lives in and through us. For Dewey, existence is not an object or essence but an event that is always undergoing negotiation, adjustment, and revision. Each individual's process of learning and growth begins not in knowing, but in unknowing—in the soil of disequilibrium and lack, where desire, imagination, and creative action can take root.[8]

This soil is not simply cognitive unknowing but runs much deeper into the affective, noncognitive "background" of inquiry, which is both qualitative and aesthetic. For Dewey it is this affective background that supports and directs the cognitive "foreground" of understanding:[9] "Art explicitly recognizes what has taken so long to discover in science; the control exercised by emotion in re-shaping natural conditions, and the place of the imagination, under the influence of desire, in re-creating the world into a more orderly place."[10] In other words, when the rhythm of life is disrupted, the disruption is accompanied by feelings, out of which emotions are cognized through reflection, leading to the restoration of habits and ultimately the creation of meanings and values. Yet, as Jim Garrison writes, "the cognitive phase of the inquiry remains perpetually *qualified* by the noncognitive background, or what Dewey also called 'the context of thought.'"[11]

All educators understand that failure begets learning. For Dewey, our everyday lives are filled with small failures that disrupt our expectations, leading to the process of inquiry and the formation of new understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote of this type of experimental failure:

> If we thus regard experience in terms of its result, we have ignored the fact that experience is a process. In fact, this process is essentially negative. It cannot be described simply as the unbroken generation of typical universals. Rather, this generation takes place as false generalizations are continually refuted by experience and what was regarded as typical is shown not to be so.[12]

The very structure of human experience, then, is characterized as much, if not more, by failure than success. There is no doubt that on her journey toward college graduation, Sadie experienced failures in her life, many of which were momentary setbacks requiring her to revise goals, hone habits, and think about the world in new ways. Those tiny failures were ultimately resolved in functional coordination and dynamic harmony. Yet few of the failures Sadie experienced in college cut as deeply as the day she received her final rejection. In this moment her failure reached beyond the foreground of understanding to the deeper, affective background. She was faced with a moment when she had to reharmonize not simply her mode of knowing but also the very structure of her existence.

Further, failure is predicated on the fact that life occurs not simply within an environment but in interaction within that environment. As Dewey argued, the live creature interacts with its environment and is required to react to the unique conditions of that environment to ultimately recover and adapt to those conditions in order to survive. Failure, then, cannot be understood apart from the conditions in our lives out of which it arose. Sadie's moment of failure was not a private, momentary experience but connected with her past and present choices, her future hopes and dreams, her own sense of identity and self-worth—all of which formed a web of meanings and values that contributed to and was affected by her rejection from graduate school.

A mark of a well-adapted creature is the ability to overcome a unique set of conditions, returning both to harmony as well as reaching beyond toward higher meanings and values. This is the hermeneutic circle of existence, which we are always attempting to harmonize. Deep failure becomes profoundly educative if we understand that underlying all effort is an impulsion toward a relatively stable harmony, and if we look at the teachable moment not simply as a way to re/vision the meaning of one's efforts but also to cultivate and foster students' unique creative capacities for future action.

Experiencing Failure

For Dewey, every experience begins as impulsion toward the world. All creatures depend on their environment not simply for survival but for growth as well. Dewey wrote that "the direct material of every reflection proceeds out of some precedent state of affairs in reference to which the existing state is

disturbed or problematic or to which it is an 'answer' or solution."[13] When we have needs or desires, we must turn to the world to resolve them. Yet the world is filled with unpredictable conditions, as well as other creatures with their own needs and desires, many of which conflict with our needs and desires. In fact, it is through encountering obstacles in the environment that we become conscious of our needs and desires; in this way, struggle becomes the generative force for inquiry.

Impulsion, then, is the beginning of a complete experience. When we turn toward the environment for survival and growth, we are met with a host of things that enhance or inhibit our ability to complete the experience of inquiring. Those things that come between the creature and fulfillment must be reconciled in a meaningful way before the experience can be resolved.

Feelings and emotions

If we are unable to resolve our action in the world harmoniously, disharmony and failure results. Failure—particularly, deep failure—is initially a quality, which is felt. These feelings are not the disruption itself but provide the bedrock for the experience to take shape. Dewey wrote: "This contextual setting is vague, but it is no mere fringe. It has a solidity and stability not found in the focal material of thinking. The latter denotes the part of the road upon which the spotlight is thrown. The spatial context is the ground through which the road runs and for the sake of which the road exists."[14] Out of the moment of pain and disorientation, the encountering subject must intuit the disruption correctly. In the intuitive process, feelings—which are not yet emotions and are unattached to any cognitive value—begin to take shape as emotions. The first step in having the experience, perhaps the first step toward cognition, is for the encountering subject to attach her feelings to an appropriate emotion. If we are able to intuit the disruption correctly, proper emotions will result.

There were many intuitive possibilities for Sadie in her moment of failure. She could have felt as though she was being punished or that the news of rejection was somehow a mark of her own inability. These emotional values would have driven vastly different cognitive responses. Instead, after much deliberation, she placed a positive emotional value on the situation, choosing to understand it as part of the process of growth, an opportunity for learning and reflection. Emotions, then, take on great significance with respect to our ability to move the experience of failure forward, because emotions will be the quality that will sustain the process of inquiry, which itself is directed by desire.

When done productively, creating meaning and value from the moment of failure is no different from artistic creation, both of which rely on a sophisticated ability to intuit and work from the affective background of thought. In other words, one must be able to intuit his way through an intuitive expe-

rience while concurrently undergoing the experience itself. It is only when affective harmony is restored, which is an intuitive act, that deep cognition can begin.

An *experience*

In a moment of deep failure, one—almost primordially—cannot move on. In the moment when Sadie learned of her rejection, she experienced not only a sense of cognitive meaninglessness but also, more profoundly, the pain of being unable to affectively stabilize the situation. Before Sadie could begin to find meaning, she had to work through the pain.

In this initial moment there is a functional disequilibrium that is deeper than cognition. For Dewey, intuition precedes cognition and goes deeper. Here, in the moment of failure, functional coordination of thought, feeling, and action is lost. With hopes shattered, there is simply pain and disorientation.

In *Art and Experience* Dewey described *an* experience of art—the aesthetic moment of dynamic harmony—in which the parts and whole of the work, the encountering subject, and the world collide into a unified and intensified moment of harmony. Dewey wrote:

> In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors.[15]

The rupture of deep failure is also *an* experience in which the encountering subject experiences profound interrelatedness through disharmony, disruption, and estrangement. This inclusive, qualitative whole of *an* experience that seizes us and draws us in Dewey called a "penetrating quality." He wrote that "the existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts."[16] It is an affectively intuited understanding of the interrelatedness of the parts with wholes. This quality penetrates more deeply than the moment but breaks into the entire structure of our understanding so that we are seized to the very core.

If, in *an* experience of art, the parts and wholes are drawn up into a consummatory harmony, then in the experience of failure, the parts and wholes are radically disconnected and fragmented. What we previously intuited as the sensibility of the universe becomes illogical and our lives become radically connected to that illogic. We are bound by the weight of the penetrating

quality and have no ability to begin the act of sense-making until we overcome the moment of seizure.

When Sadie received her final rejection letter, she was seized by the gravity of the situation. She described the walk home after receiving the final rejection letter as at first feeling painless, an almost apathetic response, but in an instant she was overcome by the realization that everything she had planned and hoped for was no longer a possibility. Physically unable to move on, she sat on the grass and wept.

The Habit of Habits

Prior to the evaluation of our efforts as either harmonic or disharmonic, a success or failure, there is simply creative action toward a dynamically harmonious resolution. This is the creative act, our unique stance in and on the world, which is not limited to the act of *art making*. Instead the creative act is the very structure of our emergent experience as live creatures transacting with the world. It is how we imagine, construct, and make meaning in the world, and it drives, supports, and qualifies the habits we use to perform everyday operations.

Until the situation was resolved, Sadie always believed that doctoral work was her future. In doing so she worked creatively, drawing on physical and cultural materials from the environment as well as her unique understanding and experience, employing them in a movement toward meaning, value, knowing, and, ultimately, a harmonic resolution to her end-in-view. Dewey wrote: "The expression of the self in and through a medium, constituting the work of art, is *itself* a prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self with objective conditions, a process in which both of them acquire a form and order they did not at first possess."[17] In focusing on her future as a professor, Sadie began to understand her life in relationship to this goal. In doing so she interacted with and embodied raw materials—knowledge, beliefs, habits—in the world to achieve her goal. As it was in Sadie's case, our creative action is not simply the motivation and desire to take a stance on the world but also includes our sophistication in generating unique meanings, values, and knowledge, as well as our willingness to be shaped by the process of creative engagement with the world. In failing to enter graduate school, Sadie not only mourned the loss of past effort spent in service to a dissolved end-in-view but also mourned the loss of a self that was shaped through creative action.

Yet it is not until the resolution of effort that the product of creative action can be valued as a success or failure and, therefore, the valuing of effort is also deeply related to means-ends reasoning. For Dewey, means and ends are interpenetrating and always in dialogical motion.

We might imagine the young artist with writer's block. He is burdened with a misunderstanding of the relationship between means and ends be-

cause he is obsessed with producing a great and harmonious work of art on which his future and identity depend. For him, the reification of ends overtakes the fluidity, improvisation, and risk that is required of creative action; it will not allow failure to become a possibility. On the other hand, we also might imagine the mature artist who understands the interpenetration of means and ends. For her, creative action happens without regard to the objectified result; it is as much a process of growing as of pruning. She understands that what makes her *an artist* is not the valuing of the consummation of her work but the process she undergoes. Her end is not reified but is what Dewey called an *end-in-view*, which is an end always qualified within the very means of taking a stance on the world. Paradoxically, it is the young artist, obsessed with a static outcome—a great work—who often ultimately fails; it is the mature artist, focused only on the act, who fluidly creates.

Sadie's moment of failure was compounded by the fact that she valued all of her actions and beliefs—in fact, her very identity—in relationship to a singular end. She was like the young artist, who is not simply unable to resolve her experience harmoniously but also misunderstands the relationship between means and ends. At first Sadie and I spoke about allowing the grieving process to take its natural course. Later we spoke about the fact that the very self she knew could not have been created without the choices that had already passed. I tried to help her understand the interpenetration of means and ends as the mature artist does: as an always ongoing process of creative movement toward harmonic resolution. In this moment, though difficult and terrifying, if she continued employing the habits she had always employed—improvisation, risk, intuition, curiosity—new, unique ends-in-view would be generated as a natural part of the creative process. Stated another way, an artist does not resolve writer's block by thinking, but by writing.

Creating Profundity from Failure

Experiencing the pain and isolation of deep failure in no way necessitates that we will learn, grow, and make meaning from it. In fact, in most cases, finding value in deep failure is a lifelong process of creative reengagement with the originating experience. It is painful, difficult work, requiring a sophisticated capacity for creative action cultivated throughout a lifetime.

Healing

Creating meaning and value from deep failure is as much an affective event as it is a cognitive event, and such failure must be overcome through an interrelated process of healing and narrative re/visioning. The catalyst for this movement is friendship, which, in an educative environment, can be found in the mentor/student relationship and through the teachable moment. In the moment of deep failure we have a profound understanding of our connection to community, made explicit through the experience of uncertainty

and dependence. In this way, not only is failure overcome through reconnection through community, but it is also catalyzed through our friends, who are members of that community. Only friends can understand the unique circumstances of our failure and have cultivated the trust necessary to help us through the experience. During the process we may find that friendships are redefined, deepened, and others pruned away.

Though it may be possible to move past the experience of failure, meaning and value cannot be realized until we first overcome affective estrangement from self and community. The moment of failure is painful, in part, because it is often illogical and uncertain, pointing out the fragility of knowing and undermining our quest for certainty. In deep failure there is often nothing that can ballast the confusion and disorientation we experience. Dewey wrote: "All the fear, disesteem and lack of confidence which gather about the thought of ourselves, cluster also about the thought of the actions in which we are partners. Man's distrust of himself has caused him to desire to get beyond and above himself; in pure knowledge he has thought he could attain this self-transcendence."[18] The quest for certainty masks the dependent and uncertain state of our existence in the world. In the moment of failure, our inability to transcend this state is made brutally evident. This is a moment of vulnerability in which the suffering person becomes profoundly aware of his interdependence with the community and the world. Healing, then, begins in acceptance of the unknown and in forgiveness of self.

In particular, deep failure is often accompanied by feelings of personal flaw and powerlessness. Here, friendship is vitally important, because often a caretaking friend understands our unique strengths and gifts better than we do. When Sadie was open to discussing her event of failure, I was able to reflect my unique perspective on the situation, which included an assessment of the context of her moment of rejection as well as my estimation of her unique talents, skills, and abilities.

In this way healing is interplay between the affective and cognitive, when the suffering person accepts the circumstances of his failure and begins to take them up into a process of narrative re/visioning. In this moment our creative capacity is applied not simply to operations in the world but also self-reflectively—to the very meaning of meaning. Thus we begin to develop a more sophisticated understanding of our own capacity for creative action, as well as an increasingly developed confidence in our own creative ability to cope with future disruption. Gadamer wrote: "The experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in the openness to experience that is made possible by the experience itself."[19]

Beginning the process of healing is often difficult, and often a caretaking friend helps their suffering friend through this journey. In many cases friendship in this moment involves not simply habit formation but habit sharing. The caretaking friend may help her suffering friend by simply setting him in the motion of habit, offering her own habit if the suffering friend has none available. This is much like the artist who overcomes the paralyzing effects of writer's block by simply reentering the habits of writing. The caretaking friend knows that out of the process of habits, new ends will begin to take shape. The caretaking friend is also taken up into the suffering friend's process of narrative re/visioning in that the caretaking friend experiences the world in a new way through her friend's moment of suffering. Friendship becomes a way to turn the pain of unknowing into a moment of healing through forgiveness, acceptance, and action.

Narrative re/vision

In order to find cognitive meaning and value in deep failure, the suffering person must be able to evaluate the experience of failure as a moment in itself but also to account for it in relationship to the shifting, changing narrative of the self and the self's relationship to community. Because the event of existence never stops progressing forward through time, the moment of deep failure will take on new significances and values as the suffering person grows and develops.

The experience of failure is itself an event, but its impact radiates throughout the entirety of our universe. Dewey wrote:

> That all existences are *also* events I do not doubt. For they are qualified by temporal transition. But that existences are *only* events strikes me as a proposition that can be maintained in no way except by a wholesale ignoring of context. For, in the first place, every occurrence is a *con*currence. An event is not a self-enclosed, self-executing affair . . . In the interaction the product retains as it were something of the qualities of the concurring things. In this case, the event, viewed even as an event, is not merely an event. Such interception and coalescence of qualities hitherto distinct characterize anything that may be called an emergent. Put in a slightly different way, an event is both an eventful and an eventuation.[20]

Part of the difficulty of the re/visioning required during an experience of deep failure is that our daily modes of inquiry most often concern the fine-tuning of habits, meanings, and values that affect our practical functioning in the world. In our everyday lives we rarely attend to the very structure of meaning and value. Yet, if failure is able to be re/cognized as a moment of profound meaning, our reflection on the moment of failure must reach this deeply. Further, the suffering person must be able to place the experience in the context of a unique personal history, present context, and future horizon.

In doing so the difficult work of self-reflection and narrative re/vision is often thrust upon the suffering person, who must now account for the totality of her self-narrative in relationship to the moment of failure.

This is akin to Dewey's account of *an* experience of art, which draws together raw materials in a way that gives them new, previously unavailable meanings and values. Additionally, because the raw materials of creative action are part of the public environment, engagement with them through art also opens the possibility for a new understanding of the environment and the individual's relationship to that environment. *An* experience of failure equally binds together personal choices, values, relationships, meanings, hopes, and aspirations into a moment of extreme chaos and disruption. In doing so it opens the possibility for cultivating new meanings and values as well as pruning away previously miscognized meanings and values. Part of what often makes the moment of failure so painful is that the deeply held habits, values, and meanings we previously thought would function in a generative way fail to function.

In Sadie's case, she had not faced the reality that her grades and study habits were simply not strong enough to gain her access to graduate school. While she was an undergraduate, her grades were functionally appropriate for her situation, and she was achieving at a rate successful enough to move her toward graduation. Yet she refused to look critically at how her GPA would function in a different context, perhaps because she didn't want to confront the difficult reality that was likely ahead. In the moment of rejection, she had no choice but to accept the brute fact of her circumstance and the choices leading up to the moment of failure.

Dewey argued that in order to evaluate a work of art, the critic must discover a "unifying strand" that arises organically out of the work. This unifying strand is neither the essence of the work nor the "correct" interpretation but is a meaningful interpretation that interpenetrates all aspects of the work as well as the work as a whole. Dewey wrote:

> The unity the critic traces must be in the work of art as its characteristic. This statement does not signify that there is just one unifying idea or form in a work of art. There are many, in proportion to the richness of the object in question. What is meant is that the critic shall seize upon some strain or strand that is actually there, and bring it forth with such clearness that the reader has a new clue and guide in his own experience.[21]

Resolving a moment of failure requires finding this unifying strand that makes sense of one's personal history, present experience, and future horizon in terms of the experience of failure. The unifying strand is the moment of stabilization and reharmonization when the failure—its whole and its parts—is reinterpreted into a meaningful event. It also opens up space for

new possibilities for one's past, present, and future as they are creatively re/visioned in light of a new and profound understanding.

There are, of course, always dangerous possibilities in this moment. The event of failure may be explained through a destructive, rather than productive, unifying strand. There is also the danger that, like Dewey's account of criticism, the event will be reduced to an isolated element without accounting for the rich context and experience of the event itself.

Yet productive evaluation of the experience of failure will always reveal more than it conceals. Heidegger argues that "beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness."[22] Another way is through the unfolding of the richness of the experience of failure, as the suffering person reinterprets and reevaluates parts of her life that she had previously taken for granted or accepted as warranted true assertion. It becomes a catalyst for interpretation of past, present, and future, and in this way failure is deeply and profoundly educative.

Once Sadie was able to accept her state of affairs and forgive herself for her inability to control her circumstances, she was able to creatively reengage with her past, present, and future. In the weeks that followed, Sadie and I spent a significant amount of time discussing her choices, values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. In particular, I watched her take a deeper and more honest look at her unique capabilities and personal goals. The process resolved in her realizing that the original goal of doctoral study was not true to many of her own beliefs about the world and did not play to her unique talents and skills. She was able to honor her past choices—which she originally felt were rendered worthless in light of the rejection—by bringing them forward into a new re/visioned future and gained a newfound confidence in her own creative abilities.

Failure and the Teachable Moment

The moment of failure presents us with a profound opportunity to help students cultivate their own, unique potential and, as part of the process, develop their capacity for creative thought and action. Jim Garrison wrote:

> The "teachable moment" is perhaps the most sought-after pedagogical prize. All teachers know what it feels like even if they cannot name its characteristics. It is as wonderful as it is elusive. Teachers long for the moment when their class has that special quality of intimacy, openness, and creativity that provides the almost ineffable experience of getting through to students, of connecting and of students learning and not just getting ready to take a test.[23]

In the fragility of the experience of failure, we find the danger and power of the teachable moment. We cannot ignore the possibility of both ideology and

self-injury. Yet, in spite of the danger, we must be willing to pay the price of authentic, difficult educative moments rather than risk the bankruptcy of the technicist status quo.

Dewey argued that art is relegated to galleries because the intensity of the harmonizing aesthetic moment is understood as being outside everyday experience. In this same way, deep failure is often subjugated to a private, silent domain. The schooling environment, as much of Western culture, relies on epistemological certainty, on a productive account of history, on an objective distancing of people in community. The moment of deep failure is quite the opposite—intimate, vulnerable, uncertain, and emotional. Failure, in this way, is often understood not as a common event that every live creature must experience simply because they live in the world but instead as a sign of weakness or flaw. Yet as members of unique, unpredictable environments, each one of us will have multiple moments of deep failure in our lives, which we attend to in unique ways. The question is not whether or not we will encounter deep failure but whether or not we have the capacity to resolve it in meaningful, productive ways.

Recognizing students' unique capacity for creative action within a moment of deep failure is perhaps the most teachable moment available to educators. As in art, finding critical meaning and potential in failure is a process that not only opens up the possibility for uniqueness but also cultivates creative ability. Dewey wrote: "This unifying phase, even more than the analytic, is a function of the creative response of the individual who judges. It is insight. There are no rules that can be laid down for its performance. It is at this point that criticism becomes itself an art."[24] In order to gain profundity from failure, we cannot shun or ignore it the way we isolate and reify art. Educators must be able to recognize and embrace the teachable moments that often result from students' failure. In fact, moments of student success are often less teachable than moments of deep failure, because students have resolved their process of inquiry. Reciprocally, the stance of failure can be a profoundly open stance, a listening stance, a stance that embodies a deep need for reflection, imagination, and creativity. This is the moment when the students' expectations and assumptions are dissolved and they are open to new concepts and ideas.

Early childhood educators understand and operate in this type of educative environment, because young children live within a deep dependence on the community and operate out of uncertainty and unknowing. As we develop, we become increasingly convinced that our answers are an objective and true account of the world. In the moment of failure, however, we are often confronted with the brutal fact that what we believed to be true was actually false, that our account of the world is no longer functional. Yet if we are open to creating meaning and value, we are thrust back into a stance of confusion, of unknowing, of lack, which becomes the soil where desire,

imagination, and creative action can take root. If we take the experience seriously, it provides us with a re/visioned past, a new understanding of the present and unique, creative future horizon. This is the profundity of failure, when students realize the world is richer than they ever imagined and walk away with a deep capacity for unique, creative engagement with the world.

Notes

1. Sadie is a pseudonym.
2. See also Joe Winston, "An Option for Art but Not an Option for Life: Beauty as an Educational Imperative," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 3 (2008): 71; Howard Cannatella, "Is Beauty an Archaic Spirit in Education?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40, no. 1 (2006): 95; Stuart Richmond, "Remembering Beauty: Reflections on Kant and Cartier-Bresson for Aspiring Photographers," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 38, no. 1 (2004): 79.
3. Winston, "Option for Art," 85.
4. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for assistance in the clarification of this distinction.
5. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 1934; repr., New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 259.
6. Ibid., 135.
7. Ibid.
8. Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros* (New York : Teachers College Press, c. 1997), 114.
9. Ibid., 86–87.
10. John Dewey, *Affective Thought*, vol. 2 of *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953: 1925–1927* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, c. 1981–), 106–107.
11. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros,* 87.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York : Continuum, 2005), 347.
13. John Dewey, *Context and Thought*, vol. 6 of *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953: 1931–1932* (Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, c. 1981–), 12.
14. Ibid., 13.
15. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 37–38.
16. Ibid., 38.
17. Ibid., 65–66.
18. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*, vol. 4 of The *Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953: 1929* (Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 6.
19. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 350.
20. Dewey, *Context and Thought,* 9–10.
21. Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 327.
22. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of a Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York : Harper and Row, 1975), 56.
23. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros,* 115.
24. Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 326.