



Success & Failure by MARIA TAN

*Yesterday, a monk
Today, a foolish monk*



The Place

The retreat was held at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore in Tuscany, Italy. The Benedictine monastery was founded in the early 14th century by St Bernado Tolomei of Siena. The Olivetian Congregation follows the Rule of St Benedict, and has a special devotion to our lady.

The monastery sits on a cliff surrounded by woodlands. At the entrance, a tower with drawbridge stands open and welcoming. Step in, and an avenue of venerable cypress trees leads you to the Abbey courtyard. Each tree, still and silent, tells me that I am in the right place.

The Retreat

The theme of the retreat was *Love and the Gift of Failure*. Fr Laurence opened fresh and challenging insights. Although we welcome success, he said, failure is inevitable. Both are built into life. Thomas Edison encountered failure after failure before he invented the light bulb. Each time he failed, he did not despair but was encouraged that he had discovered one more thing not to do. Just like the Chinese saying: Failure is the mother of success. failure gives birth to success (失败为成功之母.).

Fr Laurence explained that our response to failure depends on our perception of truth. Things change according to how we look at them. If success and failure are seen through a dualistic viewpoint they become two mutually exclusive outcomes, and failure is to be avoided. Seen in a unified view, success and failure are simply aspects of the whole, and failure does not really matter.

In order to go through the cycles of success and failure with a degree of equanimity, we need to know the meaning of our lives. And the meaning, Fr Laurence emphasised, is love. However, love is demanding. Love is relentless in bringing down the ego and challenging the yardstick of how things should or should not be. Success and failure, both are gifts. As we practise dying to the ego in our daily meditations, we begin to experience what we are destined for. Resurrection comes and we see failure and success without judgement. Success is success; failure is failure. Both have a place and both are gifts.

My Journey

*Yesterday, a monk
Today, a foolish monk.*

That was the haiku Fr Laurence gave us at the start of the retreat. Did the monk fail? Probably not. He had grown in self-awareness.

Going to Monte Oliveto for a retreat is the closest I have come to realising an almost forgotten childhood dream of living in a monastery high up in the mountains. From the time I was young, I was attracted to silence and the non-dualistic teachings of Tao and Zen. At that age, I sometimes felt guilty that I was reading these 'pagan' texts. There was a constant tension between the Catholic faith I learnt through catechism classes and the belief and attitude of 'being' which I read about and was attracted to in Tao and Zen. All these struggles came to an end when I chanced upon Christian meditation while trying to make sense of a failure. I have been meditating faithfully since then.

Meditating in our fast-paced Singapore presents many distractions. Many at time during meditation, I side-tracked into planning for a project I was working on or scanned through the to-do list to check what I had missed. When my sister Catherine signed me up for the Monte Oliveto retreat and made all the arrangements, I thought this would be a great chance to meditate with NO distractions.

How wrong I was! I probably had equal or more distractions during the four daily meditations at the retreat. My mind went on explorations of the cypress trees around the monastery, had conversations with the ideas that Fr Laurence presented, and savoured the interesting encounters with newly-made friends from the international Community. An ill feeling about having 'bad' meditations tormented me for four days. On day five, light dawned. I had just walked uphill to the gate of the monastery to the restaurant where our meals were served. The place was crowded with tourists and cyclists; it was a busy day. Lunch in hand, I found a quiet corner at the front yard. Immediately, the warm noonday sun embraced me as a light breeze passed by. I closed my eyes, and a thought surfaced: 'God is not found just in silence, nor is he just in the whisper of the breeze. God is also in the noisy market place; he is also in the scorching Singapore sun.'

The retreat ended sooner than I realised, but with the new insight I was ready to return as a monk in the world. Little did I know that the test would come so early. We were at Rome airport waiting for our flight home. Our scheduled flight was delayed by two hours but we were told that we could still catch our connecting flight in London. With so much time to kill, my sister and I started to write our reflections. It was only when we sensed people moving that we hurried to the counter only to be told that we had been waiting at the wrong gate and that our flight had taken off half an hour ago. They could try to find us a flight to London, without luggage, but the next available flight from London to Singapore would be three days later. A traveller's worst nightmare! So did we get back? As Julien of Norwich assured: "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Indeed all was well. Perhaps we passed the test.

Yesterday, a monk
Today, a foolish monk
Tomorrow, a monk

No judgement. No expectation. All is well.

