

# The Hard Way is the Best Teacher

By Dennis Payton Knight

I was taught years ago by the songwriter Roger Miller not to bother roller skating in a buffalo herd, nor take showers in a parakeet cage. It was easy learning, and I wish he had taught me other life principles such as cutting electricity before I rewire the writing, and shutting off the water before I re-plumb the plumbing. Those things I had to learn the hard way, just as I discovered the incompatibility of dish soap and dishwashers.

We all would like to glide through life in a series of easy, perfect experiences, but what do we get from them? I can't say, for instance, that the frequent and pleasant experiences of eating ice cream ever carried me to new intellectual heights, but in the doing, I learned the hard way not to swallow too much too quickly. Ironically, that lesson has been driven home often in frontal assaults on what is, ostensibly, my main receptor of knowledge, the brain, and it hurts.

If errors teach me to live, I am in good company. Tallulah Bankhead said, "If I had to live my again, I'd make the same mistakes, only sooner." George Bernard Shaw said, "A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing." James Joyce wrote, "Mistakes are the portals of discovery."

Oscar Wilde said, "Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes." Wilde also told us, "Most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes." In that vein, Jane Fonda confided, "You don't learn from successes; you don't learn from awards; you don't learn from celebrity; you only learn from wounds and scars and mistakes and failures. And that's the truth."

Fred Astaire had another take on how mistakes are seen by the public. "The higher up you go, the more mistakes you are allowed. Right at the top, if you make enough of them, it's considered to be your style."

Of course, errors are not always explained away as learning opportunities. According to Freeman Dyson, "Aviation is the branch of engineering that is least forgiving of mistakes." Or as Frank Lloyd Wright said, "A doctor can bury his mistakes, but an architect can only advise his clients to plant vines."

There is also room in this philosophical meandering for comedians like Sam Levenson, who joked, "You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can't possibly live long enough to make them all yourself." According to Red Skelton, "All men make mistakes, but married men find out about them sooner."

I'll give the last word to the comedian Steven Wright, who may have put my favorite spin on the entire topic when he deadpanned, "When I woke up this morning my girlfriend asked me if I slept good. I said, 'No, I made a few mistakes.'"