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Honor in Failure

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

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I checked the spreadsheet in front of me again, frantically hoping by some grace or magic that the fifth entry I reviewed would somehow erase my mistake. I couldn't have possibly scrambled more than 1,000 application records, could I have? I poured through the files I had meticulously, even reverently saved over the last weeks. I searched, each click more desperate than its sister before it. Surely, one of these manilla-colored folders held redemption in its electronic depths. Lined up like soldiers at parade, each offered hope, anticipation, sharp anguish as its contents failed to yield the file that would allow me to unmake my terrible transgression.

At long last, the inexpugnable fact of my blunder had to be faced. I steeled myself, gathering what courage I could muster, and knocked on our director's door. My eyes traced an agonied, defeated course along the floor before I wrestled my gaze to his face. Still, it took a moment before my mouth decided to speak. "Sir, I may have accidentally messed up the database."

The kindly mouth smiled. Eyes twinkled and the beginnings of crow's feet at their corners deepened ever so slightly as I was gestured toward a chair. "Let me tell you a story . . ." came the reply.

The yarn was over in a few minutes and likely a conversation that our director has long forgotten telling. I think about that interaction often, though, when I'm teaching or mentoring someone these days. "The moral of the story," he said, handing me a key to the filing cabinets where I would find paper copies of the files I had scrambled, "is 'we all make mistakes!' It's how we deal with them that counts."

I spent a week reconstructing the database, but the lesson in compassion, patience, and how to show grace to those who have made mistakes was well worth the work.

The Honors Program that I had the opportunity to experience was one of academic rigor, to be sure, but its true worth was to be found in the values that students and faculty engendered and encouraged in one another. University has always been a place of discovery: both discovery in the sense of personal formation and discovery in the sense of a broadening understanding of the world around us. This particular Honors Program elevated the pursuit of discovery to the status of a Virtue for its members at my college. Fascination, not just curiosity, was the normal response to other individuals or ways of life. Diversity was something that was desirable, and areas of personal growth and discomfort were often discussed candidly and with desire for understanding one another in the commons room.

Questioning the status quo, even if quietly and even if it did not result in any change, was understood to be of requisite importance for the future of our world. Passion, hard work, and persistence were understood to be non-negotiable traits for shaping ourselves into better people and helping those around us to do the same. Patience with others and with ourselves as well as the ability to show grace in the face of failure were often hard-learned skills.

The value that Honors programs provide to their students is often measured in terms of an academic leg-up or a chance to experience programs that students might not otherwise have access to. I'd like to suggest that this falls woefully short of capturing their importance in the world. The true value of these programs is that they act as rock tumblers. They bring together individuals—rocks gathered from fields and streams and beaches and mountains—and tumble them against one another in an environment which promotes a sense of shared humanity and a desire to see the beauty in the world and in other people. Simply tumbling rocks together isn't enough, though. Rocks alone won't produce much more than some dust and slightly smoother rocks at the end of the process. If, however, you add the right rocks, pour in some carefully chosen polishing compounds, and a specifically curated amount of agitation,

those rocks emerge as something that is beautiful in a new way. Honors programs act as those rock tumblers. They select specific rocks from wherever they can be found and place them together in just the right environment to create an environment where gemstones might be formed. The rocks emerge different and polished from the interactions that would not have otherwise naturally occurred. They shine, reflecting the beauty of those interactions to brighten the world around them.

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