

Mistake Salad

By *Alan Cohen* (<http://www.alancohen.com/>)

A mother seeking to inspire her young son to progress with his piano lessons took him to a concert by the famed virtuoso Ignacy Paderewski. After the two took their seats, mom noticed a friend a few aisles away, and went to chat with her.

When the mother returned, she discovered her son was missing from his seat. She began to search for him, but he was nowhere to be found. Suddenly the house lights dimmed, the curtains parted, and a spotlight shined on the gleaming Steinway piano on stage. There, to the woman's horror, she saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out the notes to "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." Embarrassed beyond words, she began to rush to the stage to retrieve her mischievous little musician. Before she could get there, however, the great piano master emerged from a stage wing and approached the child. Paderewski leaned over and whispered in the boy's ear, "keep playing." Then he reached his arms around the boy's and added a bass part with his left hand. With his right hand Paderewski improvised a running obbligato. Together, the seasoned master and the young novice turned a potential disaster into a triumph that inspired everyone.

Are you so sure your mistakes are just mistakes? Or could they be building blocks to a success beyond any you imagined? When my friend Dorothy goes home to visit her family each Thanksgiving, her mother serves the traditional "mistake salad." The dish was born many years ago, Dorothy explains, when mother was using a cookbook to make a salad. In the process, her mother accidentally included half the salad ingredients from a recipe on the left side of the open cookbook, and half the ingredients from a different salad recipe on the opposite page. Everyone enjoyed the salad so much that she continued to serve it every year. So it was really no mistake at all.

There was the fellow named Alfred, who invented dynamite. When Alfred's brother died, the city

newspaper confused the two and printed an obituary noting that the deceased's most notable act was the creation of the explosive, subsequently adapted to manufacture bombs. Stunned to consider that his name would forever be associated with destruction, Alfred sought to leave a more positive legacy to humanity. So he instituted a prize for people who contributed to world peace. Now the Nobel Prize, established by Alfred Nobel, is the most coveted and respected award in the world.

Everything is part of something bigger, and mistakes are no exception. Every minus is half of a plus, waiting for a stroke of vertical awareness. In his brilliant book *Illusions* **Richard Bach** explains that every problem comes to you with a gift in its hands. If you focus only on what went wrong, you miss the gift. If you are willing to look deeper and ask for the insight, the problem dissipates, you are left only with the learning, and you advance on your path. Gallup conducted a poll asking people what was the worst thing that ever happened to them. Then the pollsters asked the same people what was the best thing that ever happened to them. The surveyors found an 80% correlation between the worst and best experiences. Four out of five people reported that the worst thing that ever happened to them turned out to be the best. *A Course in Miracles* tells us, "It takes great learning to understand that all things, events, encounters and circumstances are helpful." The Course also notes that trust is the bedrock of a true master's belief system. Trust implies faith that there is a wiser plan afoot than the one that meets the eye. Only the inner eye, the insight of higher wisdom, can make sense out of apparent human error. We all make mistakes, and plenty of them. Enlightenment does not ask you to be perfect; it simply asks you to be open to a bigger picture that embraces your humanity while rising above it. True perfection has space for imperfection. Think of your life as a grand mosaic. When you examine your acts with a magnifying glass, you see many flaws. Step back and you discover that every little piece has an important place in a grander design. It is our belief in mistakes, and dwelling upon them, that makes them seem more real than eternal love. Within you is a child who wriggles off into unacceptable places. Also within you is a Paderewski, a master who knows how to transform child's play into a masterpiece. You can regret your errors, and those of others, or you can honor them. At the very least, mistakes are opportunities to practice forgiveness. At the most, they are invitations to acknowledge perfection. Ultimately, real forgiveness means seeing good where

others find fault. A friend is someone who sees through you and still enjoys the view. You become your own best friend when you do the same.