Practice Making Mistakes

No one that I know, myself included, actually enjoys making mistakes. Which is too bad, because I seem to make them all the time. If making them were pleasurable, I’d have a lot more fun in life. Rather, mistakes seem to be my common dietary supplement, often—even especially—when trying very hard to avoid them. Mind you, I don’t try to make them, but make them I do, and of all sorts—small and large, inconsequential and not so. Mistakes with what I remember I said to my wife. Mistakes of impatience, arrogance, or gluttony. Mistakes that are honest (ones I don’t know I’ve made till after the fact) and dishonest (ones I know I’m making while making them, ignoring this inconvenient fact). For many of us mistakes are often (though certainly not always) intertwined with the experience of shame and embarrassment, even if only at the microscopic, barely-perceived level of awareness. This invariably expands our undercurrent of anxiety, and leads to disintegration of the neural networks of our brains, our minds, and relationships. So much of life is spent being afraid of making mistakes, our anxiety running amok over how to parent or educate my child; choosing a college, vocation, or spouse; how to have the difficult conversation with my friend or enemy; how to talk with my child about sex (or for that matter how to talk with my spouse about sex); or which vehicle to purchase or what to do with my money, given the realities of our ecology, economy, and culture of consumption. Not a small amount of energy is burned simply avoiding mistakes and what we anticipate to be their emotional jet wash.

One mistake I hear a great deal about has to do with God. We are often fearful that we have made, are making, or will make a mistake that evokes his disappointment, impatience, or anger—you name it. We often pray about, seek counsel regarding, and genuinely consider God in many of the above decisions, along with what we anticipate—via our own attachment patterns—will be his reaction. And this led me to wondering about mistakes. And about their value. What if we were to try the following. For the next six weeks, imagine that in the wake of every—every—mistake (read sin, error, stumble, or some other such noun—you can’t really make a mistake here), God is waiting for you on the other side of that moment to lovingly, gently, firmly invite you into a conversation of discovery, not a crevasse of shame; a new opportunity for growth rather than regression; adventure rather than groveling. Imagine if we practiced making mistakes in this fashion. This means of changing our imagined future by shifting our attention in this way tends to reduce our anxiety, making creativity more likely and “mistakes” less so. More light, less darkness. More of God’s kingdom and less of mine. Mind you, I am not advocating that we jettison wisdom to live with cavalier abandon, or seek to ignore possible consequences of poor life choices. I am merely inviting you to practice making mistakes differently. Now imagine if you and two or three of your closest friends did this together. As far as your brain is concerned, this is all very good news. Less anxiety. More integration. Less paralysis. More creativity. Try this jacket on and see what you think. I’m guessing you’ll like how it fits. Make no mistake about it.