



Fairy Tale Failure
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Like so many other struggling artists, 40-year-old Erika Sunnegardh was working as a waitress in New York. She was living pay-check to pay-check, struggling to make ends meet. It made no sense. She had incredible Yichus. Her parents were both well-renowned voice teachers in Sweden. She studied at the most prestigious music programs including the Manhattan School of Music—the Harvard of the music world. She had a beautiful voice and worked hard. She took every audition she could. And yet, no matter what she did, for nearly 20 years she could not catch a break.

That was until 2006. Seemingly out of the blue, Sunnegardh was chosen to appear at the Metropolitan Opera in the title role of Beethoven’s “Fidelio.” She was catapulted into stardom. She didn’t just sing at the Met, she sang for a Met live broadcast which reaches 10 million people around the world. Articles began popping up. Headlines like “Rags to Riches Opera Singer” and “An Unforgettable Night at the Opera for the Waitress who Dreamed of a Starring Role” and “Stepping Onstage as a Waitress, She May Exit the Met as a Star” appeared in newspapers around the globe.

It was a miracle. As the New York Times wrote, “a story that will give a jolt of hope to every would-be performer with a serving tray.” And yet, as newspaper after newspaper glorified her rise to stardom, something in her story was lost.

It wasn't just that Erika woke up one day and found herself on the Metropolitan Opera Stage. It wasn't that she was waitressing one day in New York, singing to herself when James Levine walked by and sighed with joy as he heard her beautiful voice.

For nearly twenty years, Erika persevered against the odds. As she put it, "I was 30 years old and waitressing, and didn't have any proof I'd do anything else." But even still, Erika woke up early every day to be at work, she worked hard all day long, speaking carefully so as not to tire her voice, carving out time every day to practice. For nearly twenty years she put on serving uniforms and asked people if they would like red or white wine with their meal. For nearly twenty years she bought fancy dresses to wear to competitions and crumpled rejection notices from opera auditions.

Erika's story is not about the magic of being "discovered." Her fairy tale ending was not when the Met hired her to cover the title role in "Fidelio." It was when she woke up in 2004, after nearly 20 years of rejection, and decided to audition again—that was the beginning of her happy ever after.

And so, when the newspapers highlighted her rise to stardom, they left out the most important part of her story: her grit, determination, and relentless hope.

All too often, we fall into this same trap. We tell our stories in a way that undermines the truth of our success. Because we live in a culture that is driven by individual achievement and public recognition, we tell stories about how we were recognized, discovered, about how our hard work paid off. We don't talk about our failures. We don't talk about our frustrations and challenges.

And though it's nice to have fairy-tale endings and stories that show how we succeed in living out our American dream, these narratives come at a cost.

Teens hear stories about how young adults "got into" college and don't realize the hours and hours of activities and homework that go into a successful academic career.

Young adults hear stories about how couples "fell in love" and feel thwarted and betrayed by a dating process that is anything but intuitive and often requires endless swiping and frustrating dates.

People dealing with chronic illness read blogs about how people "changed their diet and got better" and feel like they have failed because they can't manage their condition.

Most of the time, we tell stories about what is least likely to happen. And so, when we experience normal reality, when we find ourselves dealing with ordinary frustrations, we feel like extraordinary failures.

When we come up against a wall, when we find ourselves feeling incapable and stuck, how do we persevere? What gives us the strength to wake up to another day and try again?

Imagine you're Erika Sunnegardh back in 2003. You've basically stopped auditioning. With every rejection letter and notice, you've given up hope for success. You're standing on a patio in the Hamptons, wearing a hideous polyester tuxedo in the brutal summer heat. It feels like it's 100 degrees, the sun weighs down on your head and shoulders. You can feel the sweat dripping down your back. All you want to do is hide in the air-conditioned kitchen, but instead you are smiling at guests. You are trying not to wince as you whisk trays of canapes and hors d'oeuvres through groups of distinguished music critics, members of Lincoln Center boards, and

classmates who have found success in the opera world. The worst is seeing classmates. No, the worst is when classmates try to start pleasant conversation and ask you about your career. How you're doing. As if you would be catering a wedding if you had a career to speak of.

The guests move into a shaded tent for dinner. You assume position, placing a napkin over your arm and carrying a bottle of red wine in one hand and a bottle of white in the other. It's too much. You can feel tears pricking the back of your eyes; there's a burning at the back of your throat. "Would you care for wine, sir?" By then it's a desperate question. Thoughts are swirling, memories of schools and competitions and rejections. You're thinking of what your parents must think of you, of what the judges must think after seeing you at competition after competition, of what your classmates think. *It's over.* You think. And suddenly, you begin to imagine what your life will look like 5 years later. No singing. No dreams. No hope. Just polyester suits and wine. And suddenly, it's as if a switch flips in your heart.

You go home and make a list of everyone you know. Everyone. You send out demo recordings to everyone on that list—to family friends, judges, acquaintances. You've got nothing to lose except the polyester suit.

And then it happens. A family friend you stayed with when you were six years old hears your voice and plays the demo tape for Mr. Friend, of the Met. He listens and arranges for James Levine to hear you. And then, you're asked if you might be willing to cover the title role in *Fidelio*. To be an understudy. You've never been happier.

We live in culture which talks about losing hope. But if you can be there in that moment of loss, if you can use that pain, often you will find that instead of losing hope, you have found

the grit and determination to persevere. As Erika Sunnegardh says, “there’s something to be said for running into the wall. Falling down and picking yourself up is great life experience.”

---לִמְנוּת יָמֵינוּ, כִּי הוֹדַעַ; וְנִבְא, לִבְבֵּךְ הַקְּמָה--- (sung)

In Psalm 90, there is this gorgeous verse: לִמְנוּת יָמֵינוּ, כִּי הוֹדַעַ; וְנִבְא, לִבְבֵּךְ הַקְּמָה. Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. As a child, I always thought this was a verse about patience and perspective. But this year, I began to see the verse in a completely different light. The psalmist prays “teach us to number our days”—not just the good days, not just the successes we find, not just the happy moments. Teach us to number all of our days. Teach us to count and recount every moment of challenge, of gradual progress, of stress and of hope. Because when we can be honest with ourselves, when we can honor stories of struggle and perseverance, then we will develop the skills to survive and thrive in a challenging world.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life.” Let’s stop talking about what’s easy, about magic success and effortless bounty. Let’s talk about hard work, grit and perseverance. Erika Sunnegardh had to wait, but our time is now.