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Brian D. Cohen , Contributor
Artist, educator, writer

Failing, Again

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Jasper Johns works on etching plates in a Paris studio, April 1978. Photograph courtesy Associated Press.

I took a walking meditation workshop last weekend. I became frustrated and impatient that the person in front of me was moving so slowly. I thought I'd step right on his heels. We were walking in circles; I didn't really need to get nowhere any faster.

As a printmaker, I almost never get what I expect. The metal plate I work on isn't art; a print is made (later) from the plate, and "You never know what you're gonna get" (as Forrest Gump said about chocolates). Jasper Johns found that in etching "There are fantastic things happening in the black ink and none of those things are what one had in mind." This hasn't stopped me from cherishing an idea of what I want, and from feeling I've failed when I don't get it.

"Fail, fail again, fail better," exhorts Samuel Beckett, reminding us of the necessity and inevitability of repeated failure and the imperative to strive for continued improvement. In making art, we may not get what we expect or want, but we can expect to fail.

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