

# FEELER

## Bad Mistakes Make Good Stories

by Sylvia Cunningham/KCRW Berlin in cooperation with *The Bear* storytelling

[Cello music by Illay Chester]

**Denise Banks-Grasedyck:** I don't actually believe in the concept of mistakes anymore. Because I really do think that at any moment we're always doing the very best that we can. So in any moment, if the results aren't what we want, then it was a learning opportunity.

**Galuh Romah:** At that moment when you're doing that mistake, it's a failure. Your life will be, like crumbling down. But after you do that, you can start to think, you know, more wisely. But when it happens, like, it is a failure.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** In Berlin for the Goethe-Institut, I'm Sylvia Cunningham. Today we are talking about mistakes. The kinds of mistakes that you don't forget.

**Denise Banks-Grasedyck:** When we were talking about, you know, what are bad mistakes, I actually had a moment where I thought, "I can't think of anything," [to] which my daughter said, "Mom, what's the topic again?" And I said "Uh, bad mistakes." And she said, "I'm sure you got this covered." Yeah. That made me wonder. [laughs]

**Sylvia Cunningham:** One evening this past June, a group of storytellers met on stage in the German capital for a special edition of *The Bear* storytelling, a monthly event where Berliners share true, personal stories centered around a certain theme. The theme of that evening was: bad mistakes make good stories.

**Renko Pauwels:** I mean you don't want to make bad mistakes on purpose just to have a good story...not that I haven't done that before, like OK, I know this is going bad, but I'll get a good story out of it.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** On today's show: five stories out of Berlin. A woman who plots a great escape on the eve of her sister's wedding, another who reflects on an old passion while discovering a new one, a man who finds himself in uncharted waters when he buys his first pets, a storyteller who thinks back to her mom's words of wisdom, and a woman who plays with fire.

Several of the storytellers you'll hear joined me in our Berlin studio after the live performance, so stay tuned for those conversations. Throughout the show, you'll hear original music from cellist Illay Chester.

Storyteller Galuh Rohmah sets the stage for us. Galuh grew up in a small village in Indonesia and has been living in Berlin for about five years.

*[Applause starts]*

Her story is called "When I Grow Up."

**Galuh Rohmah:** When I was 6, I had a big fight with my 9-year-old super intelligent and wise sister because she didn't allow me to be a Dragon Ball when I grow up. For you who are not familiar with Japanese anime, *Dragon Ball* is an anime series about a boy from a very small village who explored the world to find seven orbs, and he fought along the way so he could make a wish. I don't know if it's worth it, but...so I cried that day and I knew that my sister didn't like to see me crying, and she just said: "Yeah. Do whatever you want." So I wrote in my diary book at that time: when I grow up, I want to be a strong, muscular Dragon Ball.

Fast forward, 11 years later, in the evening before my sister's wedding. I look into her eyes and I ask her: "Do you want to run away?"

And she said: "If I run away right now with you, I would kill grandmother from heart attack. I would kill father from high blood pressure. I would kill mother from depression because he lost two daughters. And I would kill you because you eat a lot and we will starve in the street."

Which is true.

So the next day, she married the guy that she barely knew and she didn't really like. Because it was an arranged wedding from my parents and from his parents because he's richer than us. And just like that, this guy came into our family as a stranger and be with my sister. But the night after the wedding, I kidnapped my sister. I had her under the blanket, under my blanket, under my single bed, and I hold her hand and I - without saying anything - I really wished, I begged [that my sister would ask] for my help.

But she didn't.

And this time I tell her, "Let's just run away." And this time without smile, without even any emotion, she just say to me: "Maybe you think I'm making a big mistake right now, which I am, but when you grow up, you will understand."

At that time, I was so confused with what she meant with "when I grow up I will understand" because I was 17 and she was 19.

But before I could ask this question, my door was just smashed open. My dad came into my room and screamed to my sister: "You are such a disrespectful and disgraceful daughter. How could you let your husband wait for you in your room on the first night? And you!"

He look at me: "If you're jealous because your sister's wedding, tomorrow morning I will marry you with anyone I see in the street."

And he left. I didn't care about what my dad said. But what I saw was just my sister left my room. And before she closed my door, she told me "Just get some sleep."

I tried. That night I tried so hard to just close my eyes. But whenever I close my eyes, I hear the voice from myself screaming to me, saying that my sister was getting raped in the next door.

My whole life, my sister was the person who always tried to protect me and defend my rebellious ass in front of my parents and will kick anyone else who would try to hurt me. And that night, I know she hurt so bad and all I could do is just lying on the bed, did nothing.

It was so hurtful that night for me, that, that you know this - like you feel so painful that you couldn't even swallow anything? I felt physically hurtful that night. The whole night, I only able to just cry and cry until then I just laugh. For nothing.

Around 5 a.m., my door was barely open and someone just creeping and lie behind me and I know it was my sister. I just pretend to sleep. I didn't know what to say. So we didn't speak.

And then she sobbed and she cried behind my back.

I didn't know at that time if she knew that I pretend to sleep or she just spoke out loud. She told me: "Did you remember when you were 6 years old and you wanted to be a strong Dragon Ball? Well, you have to. You got to get out from here. You have to make your own way. You have to fight. You have to make it and you will make it."

That night I was so angry to everyone, to everything. And the anger has shaped my life. It gives me courage: to explore, to dream things that I wouldn't think I deserve, like getting a master degree or standing on the stage right now in this city that I would never dream.

It was such a painful reminder that people like me or my sister, who came from very small village in the middle of nowhere or was raised in such a particular culture, we didn't have the privilege to just work because just work is not enough. I had to work so hard to just be able to make my own decision for my own life.

And last year on my sister's second wedding, this time with a guy that she likes - and she knew - we talk about that night, and she hold my hand the way that I hold her hand that night and she look at me so proudly and she say: "Well, look at you now. You break the poverty chain. You break the wall. You won the fight. You made it. You found yourself."

Shaking my head, I said: "No, you didn't realize, don't you? This whole time, you are the one who tried to save each of our family while trying to save your own self. And you made it out alive and still smiling like this. Between us, you'll always be the strong Dragon Ball one since day one."

She laughed, and then she asked me a question: "So, if you could turn back the time, will you still ask me to run away?"

I said: "Definitely."

Thank you.

*[Applause and cello music]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** That was Berlin storyteller Galuh Rohmah. Galuh joined me in the studio after her performance on stage at the *Bear* live event. We talked about how that moment, watching her sister make what she believed to be a huge mistake, was a catalyst that set Galuh on a whole new path.

**Galuh Romah:** So a week after my sister's wedding, I just left my home, packed all I have which was only, like, one backpack, and I just left to a small city, four hours from my village. And it was...when I was in the bus, with my one backpack and rice cooker on my lap because it was the most important thing my parents thought I need to have. And, of course, some rice from my father's rice farm. That was the moment that I really feel the breeze of freedom, first time in my life, that I can be whatever I want to be. That I can dream of something, and I can achieve it and yeah, that was I think the most pivotal point in my life, in that bus going to the small city.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** One moment that really stuck out to me in the story was when your sister tells you back after the night of her wedding: "Maybe you think I'm making a big mistake...but when you grow up, you'll understand." So, looking back, what do you understand now from that moment?

**Galuh Romah:** I think that what my sister want me to understand is that our parents were really into the image of our family, like it's very important for them that, you know, our family was looking at like the role model in the village, and they want to really keep it that way. And my sister knows I will not be that kind of girl, you know,

she always knows I'm kind of like the rebellious one. And she wanted that at least one of us, at least that my family can be proud of someone and that they can still have this image through my sister, and then I can do whatever I want. And she kind of like sacrificed herself to be this one that my family can be proud of, can tell their friends, et cetera because if she didn't do that then they will also come after me as well.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** Does your sister know that you reflect back on this story?

**Galuh Romah:** She always knows because I always talk about it and whenever my family, for example, like asking me: "When will you get married?" And I always come back to that topic like you guys really didn't learn from your mistake, look at her: She need to get divorced at the age of 22 all by herself, et cetera. And they're always kind of like...they didn't say anything. They're like, "Yeah, you're right." So I always reflect and my sister knows that I was one of the people who kind of like get very hurt by the event because I always try to protect my sister, and we kind of try to protect each other. And I always tell every day before that wedding, to my parents, that "Don't do that. Really. Don't do that. She doesn't want to do that. She doesn't like him." So I always try my best. But I failed.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** Galuh usually tries to make it home to Indonesia to see her family once a year but due to the pandemic, she's not sure when she'll get there next. But one thing she does know: next time she goes, it will be as an aunt, as her older sister's now pregnant with her first child.

*[Cello music]*

Next on this show you'll hear Annie Voigt. Her story is called "What If."

**Annie Voigt:** I stumble over the threshold of my door. I just got back from a long, crappy run. I only started running three months ago – and I mean from now on. And the only reason why I started was because I had this weird idea: I wanted to see if I could become a runner. And what the heck was I thinking to start something new that I'm so pathetically bad at? I wheeze as I'm lying on my stomach in the hallway of my apartment.

That's when I hear it: a violin is playing. And I'm suddenly 5 years old again.

"Do you want to play an instrument?" My mom kneels in front of me in the orange afternoon light.

"The violin," I say. My mom's face twists in pain, probably as she imagines the hours that she's gonna have to spend listening to something that sounds like three cats screeching.

"How about the piano?" She tries to coax me.

"The violin," I pout, arms crossed. Kids can be so stubborn.

Finally, I meet her: my first tiny rental violin. I pull that equally tiny bow carefully across the strings. The instrument makes a quiet, slightly scratchy noise - like the sound of a kitten mewling for the first time. I'm in love.

The years blur into one another after that. I play after school. I play on the weekends. I carry my violin all across town from concerts to orchestra practice to violin lessons, back to school, back home again. I practice every day. First half an hour a day. Later, three hours a day. And I get better and better. And as I do, the drill becomes a little harder. Harsher.

"You're not practicing enough." But I'm already playing until my fingers are sore. "In order to be the best, you've got to give your best." All right. Challenge accepted.

So I practice harder. Eventually, I get so good that one day I even perform at the Berlin Philharmonics.

But there's something creeping in. A feeling that's not supposed to be there.

"Well, that was a little disappointing today, wasn't it?" I hear. "Next time, try harder."

I'm already trying the best I can, but I practice harder and harder. Until I hate myself for every wrong note I play during a concert.

I get off the stage, heaving with exhaustion. I just played as a soloist for the first time, Vivaldi's *The Winter*, supported by my own orchestra.

"That was amazing," I hear.

"I made a mistake." I shove the praise away. I'm not good enough. I'll never be good enough.

We never have enough information to know which of two roads diverging in a yellow wood we should travel by. We can strain our necks to see as far as we can, but at some point that road is going to bend in the undergrowth.

And we're flying blind. Which is what I did...when I didn't study to become a professional violinist and instead enrolled in a bachelors for biochemistry.

My fingers that had once moved an audience now moved vials of liquid samples from one to the other.

"If you don't use your talent, you're gonna lose it," I hear from people who knew me back when I played.

"That's impossible," I reply. "I'm a violinist."

Back in the here and now, I'm still lying on the floor, defeated by my afternoon run.

The violin is also still playing. I hadn't picked her up in years.

But something in this run had stirred something in me. I go over and I carefully pick her out. I tune her. My fingers move as if encrusted by a thin film of rust.

I try to remember the last piece I performed on a stage. I try to remember how to play Vivaldi's *The Winter*.

I can't remember. I can't play.

Violin in hand, I sit down on a chair. I think back to what I used to be. I used to be really good. I used to play on the stage of the Berlin Philharmonics. I used to be a violinist.

Tears are streaming down my face.

"Am I not a violinist anymore? Did I make a mistake? Setting you down so I could become a scientist instead?" I ask.

My violin stares back at me, mute.

The orange wood glints in the evening sunlight. She's gorgeous. Just like the first time.

And for the first time, in a very long time, I realize that there's no pressure to perform. No expectations to live up to. It's just me. And my violin.

It feels like a 10-ton weight is lifted off my shoulders. I lift up my violin. Feel it settle against my neck. And I carefully pull the bow across the string. The instrument makes a quiet, slightly scratchy noise like the sound of a kitten mewling for the first time.

I may no longer be as good as I used to be. But that's not what it's about. It's not about what stage I perform on. It's not about how well I play, just like it's not about how fast or how effortless I run.

It's about how much I love what I do. I love being a scientist. I love running. And I still love my violin. And that has made all the difference.

*[Applause as Annie picks up her violin]*

It's been a while.

*[Annie plays the violin. Her performance ends in applause.]*

**Sylvia Cunningham (voiceover):** That was storyteller and violinist, Annie Voigt. Annie is a Ph.D. student at Berlin's Charité, studying learning and memory.

Less than two months after Annie told that story, she took off four weeks from work to embark on the most challenging run of her life. It started at the lowest point in Germany way up north and will end at the highest, in the Alps mountain range way down south.

Her route is approximately 1,000 kilometers long. That's more than 621 miles.

I checked in with Annie in the first week, when she was about a quarter of the way in and running an average of 40 to 60 kilometers – that's equal to more than a marathon – per day.

I reminded Annie that at the start of her story, she said she wondered if she could be a runner. Now she says if this doesn't qualify her as one, she doesn't know what will.

*[Cello music]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** Up next on the show is storyteller Renko Pauwels. His story is called "Swimming upstream in stagnant water."

**Renko Pauwels:** When I was 3 years old, my sister won a goldfish at a carnival. She was so excited. She and our mom immediately went out to the store to buy a bowl with, like, white and blue pebbles, a tiny little castle. They even bought a book to make sure that everything was perfect. They even gave the fish a prominent place in our living room for everyone to marvel at the latest edition of our family. As a toddler, I was mesmerized with the fish. It was gold. It was alive. And it was breathing underwater! A few weeks after my mom walked into the living room with a fish on the ground and my sleeves soaking wet.

This is a fish-out-of-the-water story, and this is also the reason why my mom never allowed us to have any more pets. No matter how much my sister and I would be asking for it. "Can we have a puppy?" "No". "Can we have a parrot?" "No." "Maybe a pony?" "Maybe no." And their answer was always the same to justify it: "When you're old enough and you can take care of the pet yourself, well, then you can get yourself one. But for now, it's a no."

And we all secretly knew it was because of the goldfish. But I did what she said we would do. So as soon as I moved into the big city, I grabbed that fishbowl from the attic with its whole sub-aquatic interior and put it up in my tiny studio apartment. I bought two fish. One was elegantly somber. It had black fins like chiffon. I called her Princess Gina, the goth royal of the fishbowl castle. And as a mate, I got a more playful variety. It was gold with silver because, you know, the court needed a jester. I recognized myself in both of my pets.

Now, everything went very well. I kept the fish alive. And then it was the Christmas break. I had to go back to my parents and study for my exams. So I didn't know what to do with my pets because they...I had to leave them there for two weeks. So I



thought, "OK, what are my options?" And I thought, OK, either I leave them there alone. Maybe not a good idea. Either I set them free with the hopes that they will survive the freezing cold...or I flush them down the toilet. Luckily, I was a clever student. I picked a fourth option. I thought, you know what? You know, maybe I should just take them with me.

So I took the fish, put them in a bag, put the bag in a bowl. And when I arrived at the bus stop with the fishbowl, with a gigantic backpack full of clothes and a suitcase - heavy - packed with study books, I was just like, am I ready for this two-hour trip? Luckily, the bus driver didn't even look up. Luckily, because I was afraid I had to buy two extra tickets for my pets.

I arrived home and my parents were so surprised. Not only because of the fish, but because I was able to keep these ones alive. They were mesmerized that I was actually taking care. And after the Christmas break, we took the whole parade two hours back again into the city.

Now, as a student, you have many, many, many holidays, many long weekends, many breaks, many...I took that monarch and that jester for many, many trips back and forth from the city. I left them with my grandmother. I left them with my neighbor's parents when I was traveling because my parents still refused to take care of my pets.

They really became like a commuting kingdom and they were happy. Just going with the flow. And I became like this weird guy with the fish on the bus. Well, the fishbowl might have been small, but their kingdom stretched afar.

And then I got the chance to study abroad.

Now, believe me when I tell you that my fish were used to traveling. But they were no frequent fliers. I really had to convince my mother that, well, the life expectancy of the fish really had passed, and that I couldn't put them through this whole trip, and I asked for my mother to take care of them. And um, somewhere halfway through my studies in France, I got a call that the fish had become less bubbly and that the jester had had his last laugh. Not long after I got a message that the queen has died. Long live the queen.

My heart sank because I remember now how my parents have felt. Back then, when, yeah, I put the fish on the floor. And I understand now why they never allowed us to have pets anymore. I also understand that fish don't belong in a bowl. They belong on the road. They're nomads, travelers adventurers. Not globe. Globetrotter.

They say that fish have a memory of seven seconds, but I will remember those fish forever.

*[Applause and cello music]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** That was Renko Pauwels. Renko is originally from Belgium and has lived in Berlin now for about 8 years. In his job as an account executive at a software company, he usually travels a lot for work, but the pandemic has of course put that all on hold, so he's spending much more time in Berlin these days, which he says he's enjoying. Renko joined me in the studio to talk about his mistake – which he says started by not listening to his parents.

**Renko Pauwels:** They were right, and they knew they were right. And I kind of have the same mindset of my parents. And they were right! It was a mistake to get a fish if you travel all the time, if you're never home. Don't take a pet when you cannot take care of it, that's kind of what they taught me. And they were right. So it was a mistake to get a pet if I wasn't able to take care of it. But I guess I had to learn it the hard way. Well...hard. It wasn't that dramatic. Except for the fish, it was pretty traumatic for the fish I assume.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** But I mean, you gave those fish a beautiful life though.

**Renko Pauwels:** I mean, not as beautiful as a fish that could be swimming in a river or in an ocean or wherever goldfish naturally swim! But it's definitely a better life than on a plate. Oooh. We're getting political here. No, I'm joking. No, I did the best I could. I would never get fish again. Definitely not in an aquarium. Yeah, I did the best I could.

*[Cello music]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** Renko told me his brother recently moved out from his family's house, and the first thing he did was get a dog. He says for his parents, it is the same story all over again, just with a different child.

Our next storyteller is Allia Sadeghipour. Her story is called "Xhalee Xhog Shodee? Learning to Accept Well-Roundedness."

**Allia Sadeghipour:** "Xhalee xhog shodee?" Came the cackle from my aunties as they're sitting around this intricately woven Persian carpet and picking off cilantro leaves from the stems between their thumb and forefinger. My other aunt thought it would be hilarious to chase me around their carpet as she screams, trying to jiggle my chubby parts and my little prepubescent boobs.

And then I wake up and it's Monday morning and I realize I'm dreaming about the trauma that I had just experienced at my Baba's house that same weekend. And now it's time for school. And I'm sitting there in my first period class and my hands are gripping the edges of the desks and starting to turn white. And I swear that the table on the desk is getting bigger and bigger and bigger and so big that like my 12-year-old arms can't possibly wrap themselves around it as I'm sitting there waiting for my teacher, who will inevitably call my name to walk up to the board and write a sentence.

Contrary to what people may think, English is not my first language, nor was it my favorite subject. And, of course, it happens. And I pry myself off my seat as there's those really attractive, greasy butt stains from all the sweat, and I slowly clamber up

to the board and hold the chalk in my hand as it's shaking and I start to try and write on the board only to realize that I'm writing down the beats per minute of an EKG machine with the high peaks and low valleys and high peaks and low valleys and high peaks and low valleys. And I keep struggling to try and write something legible as the rest of the class is snickering and mumbling amongst themselves and my teacher...says nothing. And I keep going and going and going, and at some point I just stab a period in the middle of the word and I sit down and I bury my head in my elbows.

And then it's P.E. for physical education. My least favorite period of the day, because that is when my nemesis, Kelly F., well, that's her favorite period of the day. And I'm standing in the locker room and cautiously looking around, over my shoulders to see if Kelly F. and her goons are there today. And at the second I slowly start to peel off my shirt, I hear it. "Haha! Beast from the Middle East is here. Haha!"

Oh. Just keep breathing. And I peel off my shirt as her and her goons start making fun of me, saying, "Haha! Look how fat she is! She's only 12 and she's already got a muffin top. Haha, oh my God." As I peel off my shorts: "Look at her panties, they have period stains on them already! That's so disgusting. Oh my gosh." As I slowly try and put my other P.E. shorts on: "Oh my gosh. Did you see her legs? She doesn't even shave them. Oh my God. She's so hideous. And hairy!"

And then I go out to P.E. and we're doing the mile run. And I decide to hang back and let the rest of the kids go in without me hoping that maybe I don't have to interact with Kelly F. and her goons again. Sure enough, they wait for me. And they wait for me outside of the locker room after I've gotten dressed and follow me to my next period class as they're constantly kind of poking fun at me from behind.

And then the school day is over and I head home.

And much later that evening, my mom comes home and I can smell her because at this time my mom would smoke cigarettes and I could always smell her before I could see her, because there would be this waft of cigarette smoke that would come into the house. And I knew Mom was home. And I tried so hard to stifle my tears because I didn't want her to know that I was upset. But you know what? Moms have a really funny way of knowing exactly what's wrong and whether or not their kid is crying, so as much as I'm trying to shove my face into the pillow, which is now seeping wet from my tears, my mom carefully opens the door and pokes her head in. "Alls, are you OK?" And I can't even say anything. I am just crying so hard that I'm inhaling air just to pour out more tears. And my mom comes in and she sits at the foot of the bed and starts rubbing my back in clockwise motions. And I start explaining, like, "Mom, I...like, the whole weekend, I was at Baba's house and they all made fun of me for being fat and like, am I really fat? And then, you know, Kelly F. was making fun of me for being hairy and am I really hairy? And am I really fat? And am I really ugly? And is anyone ever actually going to really like me and love me and think I'm good enough? Because like even my teacher made fun of me and I don't know what to do and I don't know if I'm good enough."

My mom is just sitting there still rubbing my back. And after a while, she goes: “Oh, Alls. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter if those kids make fun of you. It doesn’t matter if your spelling’s not perfect. It doesn’t matter because you’re loved. And that’s enough.”

But the problem is...as a 12-year-old girl, that’s not what you want to hear. *[Laughs]* What you want to hear is not words of wisdom from a parent. What you want to hear is: “Honey, you’re pretty. Honey, you’re not fat. Honey, you’re not hairy. We can get it removed. Honey, it’s fine.”

That’s what you want to hear.

And it was a couple of weeks ago where I’m having this conversation with my mom and I bring up this memory again, this memory that had, like, scarred me for so many years. And I asked her, “Mom, why didn’t you just do the easy thing? Why didn’t you just tell me I was pretty? Why don’t you just tell me that I wasn’t fat? Why didn’t you just do the easy thing?” And as she does... “Oh, Alls. I didn’t want that to be your only feature. I didn’t want you to think that that was all you had to offer the world. Because you have so much more to offer than just the way you look.” And in that moment, I recognize that what I wanted as a kid...it’s not the same thing as what I actually needed. And as an adult, I know better now.

Thank you.

*[Applause and cello music]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** That was Allia Sadeghipour, a teacher and writer living in Berlin. Born in the United States, Allia moved to Iran at a very young age where Farsi became her mother tongue. When her family returned to the U.S. a few years later, she says she initially struggled with her second language, English, in school. But the challenge also fueled her – and it’s the subject she teaches today. Though her mother’s words may not have been the thing to soothe her at the time, Allia told me the message behind them is what ultimately gave her the strength to be the person she is today: to move across the Atlantic and forge a new path in Berlin, a city she says feels like home more than any other place she’s ever lived.

Now to our final storyteller on today’s show: Denise Banks-Grasedyck. Her story is called “Is it my turn?”

*[Applause]*

**Denise Banks-Grasedyck:** I was really excited when I found out that I was gonna be able to tell a story on the “Eve of the Champs.” And then I heard it was about mistakes and I thought, “I have nothing to tell.” My daughter looked at me and said, “Mom, I’m pretty sure you’re going to figure this one out.”

So I'm 5 years old. My cousin John is 6 and we are partners. We are partners in crime. We are partners in everything. If I do something, John is there. If John does something, I am there. And this really close connection is going to test my character. Even before I know what the word character means.

So one day we are out, and we are in the middle of a Louisiana summer. It's hot. It is dry. And we are playing with matches because what could go wrong? We look out and across from our house is a huge field with very tall, very dry grass. We begin our game and the game is: We light a fire and we take turns putting the fires out. Easy.

So we get a little circle of stones and we ball up some candy wrappers. Light them. Whew. Gone.

We get some sticks. Put them there. Light the fire.

"It's your turn, put it out!"

We take turns and we do this for a while and then we find - in the garbage - an old shoe. It takes forever to light this shoe. But we're determined. So we keep lighting it and lighting it. And finally, it catches. And just about then...a gust of wind comes, and the fire grows immediately.

"Put out the fire! John, it's your turn!"

"No, it's your turn. You put it out!"

"Put out the fire. It's your turn."

And the flames grow and well up and so do the tears in my eyes. And just then, we decide we've got to get out of here. We run away. And my father, who is in the kitchen, sees the flames coming up in front of the window. He reaches for the phone, calls the fire department. This is Melvin Banks. We've got a fire at 107 East Ash. The irony of that address. It is true.

The fire department comes and what happens in between there is an absolute blur. I don't remember that.

What I do remember is when all the excitement now dies down, my dad turns his attention to me. The moment I have been dreading. And I'm thinking quickly because I know if I say it was John, they'll know I was involved. If he says it was me, they'll know *he* was involved. And just about then, my 2½-year-old brother Kevin waddles across the room. And I have a brilliant idea. He's 2½. I mean, he's a baby. He's not going to get in trouble.

My dad says: "So tell me what happened."

“Well, daddy, it was Kevin. He was playing with the matches, and I told him not to. I guess he must’ve dropped one and the fire started.”

I think this is a great idea until the next moment when for the first time in my life, my dad, this big burly bear of a man takes off his belt, wraps it around his fist, leaving about a 6-inch tail and begins to spank my little brother.

And he’s screaming: “No, Daddy. It wasn’t me. Daddy! Stop, stop, stop.”

And I am silent. I run to my room and throw myself on the bed, crying my heart out, and I cry for about three hours until finally the guilt is eating me alive.

And I go to my father and say, “Dad. It wasn’t Kevin. It was John and me.”

And I wish my dad had taken off his belt a second time because what happened next was worse. He picked me up and put me on his knee and he said: “Little girl, you let me spank your little brother for something he didn’t do. I am so disappointed in you.” At 5 years old, the last thing you want is for your dad to be disappointed in you.

I confess and I decide that day, because of my father’s words, he said: “Right or wrong, you take responsibility for what you have done.” I promised my brother my dessert for as long as he wants. And to this day, I think he’s still cashing in on that.

What my dad taught me that day was: you may not have started the fire, but you can still take responsibility for putting it out.

*[Applause]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** That was Denise Banks-Grasedyck. Originally from Louisiana, Denise is a speaker coach and personal development trainer who has lived in Berlin for more than three decades. Denise joined me in the studio to talk about how she sees mistakes as ‘lessons’ rather than as failures.

**Denise Banks-Grasedyck:** The moment you start to embrace the idea that this is an opportunity to learn something, or when you look back at it and ask yourself: “What was this here to teach me?” Then at that moment you gain power over that. And it no longer feels like something that shouldn’t have happened. And this isn’t to say there aren’t situations where we think: “Wow, I would have liked to skip that lesson.” Occasionally that will happen. And at the same time, when we let go of the idea that everything we do has to come out the way we think that it will, it frees us up to learn a lot more and to just go through life with a lot less fear and a lot, yeah, a lot more ease.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** The story that you told, going back to when you were 5 years old. I mean, when in your life did you realize that this was a lesson rather than a mistake?

**Denise Banks-Grasedyck:** I don't think there was a single moment. Looking back on that, I realized then that moment, the lesson that I learned in that is something that has guided a lot of my life. You know, the idea that what my dad was trying to teach me in that moment. I think that that's something I recognized later: This is part of why I am the way I am.

**Sylvia Cunningham:** And it struck me kind of in the lesson that your dad taught you too, that it wasn't really the action itself, it wasn't setting the fire. It was how you handled it. How has that lesson been a compass for you?

**Denise Banks-Grasedyck:** Yeah, it definitely was more about how I handled it and the fact that I didn't want to own up to what I had done. And the idea that because of that, someone else was hurt in the process. I've done many things, where I think "Hm, maybe you could have done that better." or "That would have been one of those lessons to skip over, fast forward." And at the same time, I'm very willing to take responsibility for the things that I've done because of that lesson. Because I know that if I don't take responsibility for my own actions, for the way that I show up in the world – someone will. Someone will have to.

*[Cello music]*

**Sylvia Cunningham:** This summer, Denise started leading regular talks at her church, the American Church of Berlin. The series launched amid worldwide "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations following the deaths of several Black Americans at the hands of police officers in the United States. A little more than a month after the *Bear* event, I attended one of Denise's talks, titled: "How Did We Get Here? Discussing Systems of Race." Denise says these discussions are meant as 'fire-starters.' As a way for people to examine their own biases, to open up conversations with their friends, and to accept responsibility. Maybe you didn't start the fire, she says, but you can take responsibility for putting it out.

*[Cello music]*

Thanks for listening to this show about Mistakes, produced by KCRW Berlin for the Goethe-Institut in Washington, D.C. The stories you heard were told live on June 19<sup>th</sup> at the *Bear* storytelling's "Eve of the Champs" event at Pfefferberg Haus 13. *The Bear's* founder is Dyane Neiman and she has hosted this live event now since 2015 after being inspired by *The Moth*. For more information about Goethe's MISTAKES project, head to [goethe.de/mistakes](https://goethe.de/mistakes). In Berlin, Germany, I'm Sylvia Cunningham.

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