

It's time to embrace the 'f' word

October 28, 2007

In their search for perfection, writes Alice Pung, may our high achievers also find a little perspective along the way.

NO TEACHER likes to hear the "f" word, particularly not during final-exam time. That's understandable: "failure" seems frightening when students are constantly told that they are not limited by anything, and should excel at everything. A certain paradigm of success is encouraged, and a particular type of student is hailed as the consummate model to fulfil this ideal: the High-Achiever.

The High-Achiever is the perfect student because teachers have no need to upbraid her, only to encourage. If she ever struggles, she is asked to think of her tribulations as material for a potential book about her future glory. She is labelled a perfectionist, but that is not to be considered a term of derision. Conversely, she is taught to list it as her greatest flaw to land jobs in interviews. Yet although she may be accomplished at everything, there is one thing that the High-Achiever cannot handle: the dreaded "f" word.

As a teacher, I am taught never to tell students they've failed, only that they "did not pass". Students are sensitive, we are told, and any shake to their self-esteem will shatter their desire to achieve. We are taught to teach our students how to succeed, but we never let them question why they should. Once during a school visit when I put that question up on a big overhead projector, an alarmed teacher asked whether I was telling students to fail.

But when I speak directly to high school students they are curious, because they are braver and more resourceful than our society gives them credit for. Students realise that if we don't learn to have a good relationship with failure, but are just taught to doggedly work at success, then the terrible fear comes in. The fear of losing. The anxiety about not attaining. The conviction that your best is never good enough.

As a university pastoral care adviser, I know that often the High-Achiever is a person with severe anxiety problems. She will cry in the toilets if she gets an A instead of an A+. She will control her body in self-destructive ways, while the rampant fears in her mind are left unchecked. She may be the migrant who is studying at the library during lunchtimes because when she gets home she has to sew for her parents. Or she may be the middle-class model from Kew who coaches the debating team and runs a marathon. But often when she comes to see me, she is not a healthy person.

When I was 17, my teachers took me to a small and secret room within the labyrinth of school corridors, so that I could re-learn how to breathe. I had also lost the ability to remember when to eat, sleep and speak. Up until I "lost it", society, my loved ones, and well-intentioned people continued to reward the anxiety-ridden, petty-minded and unhappy person I was because my academic achievements appeared so impressive.

But there is nothing impressive about a nervous breakdown. No one wants to know you anymore. Your friends float into the periphery. You are like a useless machine that no longer works, a computer that has run too many programs, caught a virus and crashed. Who will use you for inspiration now, when no one wants to catch your disease? Dulled by depression, your rubber-mask of a face must not be seen, so you learn to hide yourself from the world. You are a cipher.

This is the other side of success — the risk of losing your resilience, courage and curiosity. At 17, I lost it to such a degree that I no longer cared whether I ate, slept or survived. This doesn't fit into a narrative of accomplishment.

This is the reason why I never focus on telling a tunnel-vision story of success to students. Not all of us will reach such dizzying heights. Yet all of us have experienced some degree of loneliness, loss, self-doubt and despair. We must learn how to deal with these very real matters first and foremost. We must realise that being successful will not eliminate these natural and inevitable feelings. We must realise this before these negative feelings become insurmountable. If you have cultivated an anxious, unhappy persona, it's harder to be happy merely because of a

change in circumstances. In fact, any higher accomplishment will only breed more insecurities and anxieties, larger and more hideous than the last.

As our students sit their final exams, I hope they will give it their best shot and remember that what matters in the long run is not perfection, but perspective. When Sir Winston Churchill said that "success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm", he had pretty good perspective. Let's hope that this is the kind of learning that is encouraged in our students.

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