Keeping it Real

I have been challenged twice recently to think about the realities of life and the important role that failure plays as a bedfellow to success.

The first was a snapshot of the life story of Abraham Lincoln given at a recent Year 12 assembly run by Mr Tom Nehmy on the limitations of perfectionist thinking. We were introduced to Lincoln’s self-confessed failures and bungles, desperate times and difficult circumstances prior to his election as President of the United States. It was a reminder that few lives progress neatly from one anticipated point to another.

The second was in the form of an all staff email last week, while staff were busy writing their reports. The email was a photo attachment of Winston Churchill’s 8th grade report—a fascinating read. The comments accompanying many of Churchill’s academic subjects were direct and brief. For French he simply received the following comment: ‘not very good’; while for Written Composition (considering his abilities as an author in his latter years) he received the comment: ‘very variable’.

Getting something wrong and not being good at another is central to learning. No worthwhile human endeavour has been accomplished without failure and struggle. It seems an obvious and almost clichéd truth. Yet there is a growing body of opinion that our capacity to accept and manage the reality of failure is declining.

I began thinking about examples from my professional life. My worst and most extreme experience of this, many years ago, was managing several circumstances where a number of staff in a school I was working at were being directly pressured to alter grades, such was the anxiety associated with a less than optimal performance—a phenomenon so prevalent in some educational settings that it has become known as ‘grade inflation’.

In my interviews and interactions with students at Pembroke, I am pleasingly surprised by their often frank and candid view of their own limitations and failures. To hear it encourages me to confidently hope that Pembroke students are being educated well, and are supported in this by parents and staff who are of equal mind on the important matter of reinforcing a realistic view of the world and, in our case, learning. It reassures me that our understanding of education is much more than preparing young men and women for results alone, even though results and the high expectations that should accompany them are important.

There are occasions, as I am sure is the case in all schools, when some can have an inflated view of their academic standing relative to evidence of their actual learning achievements. Rather than facing the uncomfortable feelings that accompany failing short of a mark or expectation, this can sometimes lead to responsibility shifting. These are great educative moments!

If one digs a little deeper to find the causes of this thinking, it is normally because a student is struggling with the motivation to get down to work; or finding it hard to separate themselves from competitive circumstances that fuel impossible goals; or discovering that the intellectual demands of some difficult concepts are unattainable; or encountering ideas that just don’t seem to click; or discovering that they can falter when trying to manage the demanding skill of retaining huge levels of information effectively and efficiently; and so on …

Some educational philosophies suggest that feeling disappointed, bad and even embarrassed as a consequence of not doing so well at school work is not good. Others focus on the skills of thinking positively. Being positive is fine, but it doesn’t often solve real-life problems; being realistic and taking the opportunities to learn from our feelings and not avoid them, I think, is even better. These feelings are not nice feelings, to be sure, but, provided they are moderate and natural responses to life’s demands, they play a very important role—to wash over them as if they don’t have a place or that they should be replaced is folly.

The challenge for us all—parents, teachers and students—is to take up the opportunities to support students to develop skills that will help mature their thinking. At times, this requires us to temper our desires with compassionate reality checks. Difficult struggles and their associated feelings can spur students on. They can encourage them to try a little harder. They can remind them that there is more to learn. They can help correct bad habits and poor judgment. They can help students become more determined. They can make the acquisition of knowledge sweeter, when and if it finally comes. They can build resilience—an essential character trait to confidently meet the ebb and flows that life presents.

It is well to be reminded that there are no ‘silver bullets’ in education: none to guarantee a subject result; none to ensure a win; none to promise a fulfilled potential; none to deliver a perfect performance. And to think that there is seems to me to miss the point. The trajectory to learn something is rarely straight—unlike the trajectory of the bullet. I can think of no better or more
penetrating statement to encapsulate the point than Immanuel Kant’s: ‘Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built’.

When I sense that students are feeling dejected because they have not met their own and occasionally others’ lofty expectations, I crudely rework the wonderful phrase attributed to Isaac Newton: ‘If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’—by reminding students that they are often expecting to understand and apply concepts and ideas that have taken the great intellectual minds years, centuries and millennia to perfect. In this sense we can regard our efforts to condense and understand this accumulated knowledge and wisdom in less than two weeks, or a term, or a year, an arrogance, and we must forever be thankful to those who have devoted their lives to the pursuit of this knowledge for the opportunity to give us a go in the first place.

So we should remind ourselves regularly that fearing challenges is real and normal, just as failing them is. It is as normal as success is to overcoming them. Failure and success are great and inseparable forces present in all meaningful educational settings. It is, therefore, a real and genuine thrill to see so many of our students tackling new and challenging circumstances across a vast array of activities in all areas of School life. It is also wonderful to see parents and staff supporting them.

We should, together, continue to encourage this attitude. We should provide realistic and critical assessment as well as encouragement. We should not limit student challenges to safe options alone, for fear of failure. We should encourage students to be inspired to learn, more as a way of life, not just as a ticket of leave. A passion for education flourishes when students and staff are fearless in their desire to teach and learn well, knowing that there will be struggles and failures, but also the support to face them honestly.

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