2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience (650 words)

I was stupid. I gave a defeated chuckle as I ripped my own face. I never thought I’d ever do it metaphorically and literally. I probably shared a moment of empathy with the losing presidential candidate in Indonesia at the same year as I walked around taking down campaign posters with my face on it. ‘The important thing is you give it a shot’, they say. No one told me that the pain of losing goes up proportionally to the amount of effort I put in. Having to tear down every tangible evidence of any efforts I made a day after vote counts should be a punishment of its own class. Now I’ll never be a student council president. At the same time it took me to run and fail spectacularly, Vera grows a new leaf after intermittent watering. There is little that can equate to the sense of achievement that followed. After receiving my first ever succulent as a birthday souvenir, *taking care of it has been a full time job believe it or not.* Water every Tuesday and Saturday, leave in direct sunlight every Thursday, relocate to under bedside lamp after every sunset, repeat. Every time my friends would come over, they’d be in shock as to how much Vera has grown in just a short while. As a wave of pride washed over me, I cheekily grinned, knowing that weeks of attentive care had been paid off.

I shouldn’t have run for the election. In a way, Vera and I are alike. Evidently not in colour, but similar in a way that controlled environments are all we’ve ever come to know. Funnily enough, the one time I decided to go out of that environment, out with the variables that fabricate my everyday life, everything went sideways. In fact, it went out the windows so quickly I couldn’t save any of the effort, or any self-dignity. Running (and losing) for the student council president was what cost me my leaves that I have been ceaselessly taking care of over the years. Vera stayed in her safe environment, I did not. Vera was smart, I was not.

I knew what I was getting myself into. I was no longer in my habitat, and it was a challenge I did not know how to fully tackle yet. But still, I dived head first into what felt like an abyss of loneliness and helplessness Standing outside out lecture theatre after briefing the Grade 9 students about out campaign, I remember so vividly how comical it all seemed. I hadn’t even won yet, why I am already giving out candy to the people who might not even vote for me? It was laughable, to say the least. ‘Foolish’, one of the teachers commented – they were right. For a long time, I wondered what I could’ve done better. However I soon realized that me and Charlene, who ran as my vice president, spared nothing in pursuit of being elected. Countless hours of brainstorming and laborious practice for our speech had been put into this. We spent every waking hour we had on perfecting our vision for the future of the student body, from the events we would host, to the minor changes we would make around school. There was nothing we could’ve done more at that time that would’ve won the hearts of the audience. It was stupid to do what I did.

But I realized later that I was stupid for thinking stupid is bad. Breaking out of a controlled environment often means failure without warning. But I realized that if I had been smart about what I do, I would never had taken the risk to run for election. I realized my stupidity was the only thing in me pushing to do something regardless of my chances. When I started to apply this to my day-to-day life, my worries about the minute things started to dissipate. It was liberating. I wouldn’t have gotten my internship without being stupid. I knew I didn’t have a high chance of getting accepted, but if I didn’t try in the first place, I wouldn’t be where I am now.

I learnt that being stupid is good. I learnt that being stupid is not being unintelligent. I learnt to continue being stupid every time I come across a challenge or something new. I realized that being stupid is as liberating as you could get; that I won’t ever achieve my dreams by being smart about it, I have to be stupid enough to chase after it.