PROMPT #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?

“Christopher!”, Master Devdee yelled in my direction. It was time for my final round for Gold.  Both of us were drenched in sweat and full of bruises. It was like a scene from Karate Kid, except I went for a 45-degree roundhouse kick before being embarrassingly tricked by a fake and was immediately put down by a guillotine-like kick. “It’s okay, I’ll keep going and win the next one,” I thought to myself and told Master Devdee. He hit the back of my head, “that kind of thought is exactly the reason you lost”.

I started Taekwondo before I learned math, and competed in junior tournaments when I was 8. Throughout primary school, I participated in countless local tournaments. By middle school, I practiced three times a week and competed in regional competitions. Before I realized, I had passed my black belt examinations when I was 15. Through my journey of passing belt colors, I was trained to always move forward and set my eyes on my goals. However, always moving forward and never taking eyes off your goals also mean never looking sideways or looking backwards.

My mentality in always moving forward was also enforced by competitive debating that I had participated since grade 9. One of the tactics in debating I learned was to always keep pressure on the opponent and never falter. Always moving and looking forward has played a critical role in many successes in my life -- Winning a math competition, earning my black belt, or getting top grades. But only after that match in ChunCheon Korea, did I realize it had also cost me many failures in life -- losing an important debate in the Semi-Finals, or biting off more than I can chew for many academic courses. I learned that day I can’t go through life and its problems as straightforwardly as I had.

Losing the final match dealt a big blow to me, not because I couldn’t get gold, but because I realized I had been doing things the wrong way in more aspects than just Taekwondo.  Unlearning a mindset turned out to be much harder than learning it. Having used to not thinking much and giving everything I do by all means. As they say, practice doesn’t make perfect, practice makes permanent. And in a way, I spent my life practicing on unleashing my emotions to push forward and keep attacking my problems. Now I had to learn to hold my emotions and critically evaluate them on what my next course of action should be.

The most important skill I’ve gained in my life is to not always take a step forward in life, but the ability to know when to take a step backwards to get clarity and perspective. My train of thought changed completely. Dropping Advanced Physics for Environmental Systems and Societies felt like a personal defeat at first. But it allowed me to take the Economics HL course which had been my passion for some time. It was a smart decision allowing my mental capacity to optimally learn both Science and Economics materials.

Previously, I had focused on my goal of starting my own business as a successful entrepreneur regardless of my family’s expectations or how difficult it is. But taking a step back, I realized their wishes of wanting me to continue family business was because they had prepared it for my future in the first place. I realized disregarding their life long effort for me was selfish. I’ve decided on continuing the legacy they had broken their backs for and at the same time start my own business on the side. Although it means twice as difficult, I plan on keeping pushing forward regardless, as if I was getting my second blackbelt. Meanwhile, I will keep an eye out for opportunities, not forget to look sideways for options and look backwards to learn from past lessons.