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On Term Papers and Other Daunting Opponents

It's the reoccurring horror of my academic career: the beginning of that essay, project, or term paper. Or maybe it is learning a new language or starting a new hobby, all appear to be daunting opponents at the start of the fight. I never know how, or even if, I will be able to conquer them. But, the funny thing is, that once I have actually won the battle and come out the other side, they no longer seem like such an impossible fight.

Usually, when I sit down to write a new essay, I feel as though I can't find the right words to string together what I am trying to say. Or even worse, I can't even choose a topic that will be interesting for my readers. I'll write a sentence or two, just to reread them, cringe, then repeatedly click the Backspace key until that failed attempt at a beginning is erased from the page. After repeating this pattern for what seems like hours, I'll give up and start working on something else, tricking myself into believing that once my head is clear, I will come back and suddenly know exactly what to write. Only to write a few more sentences again, then pick them apart, then write something else, then pick it apart, then write, then pick, write, pick, until I find myself, the night before the assignment's due date, still with no progress. Then, with that added degree of pressure that only accompanies a quickly approaching deadline, I am forced to finally just pick something to write about and power through until I reach the required page count.

I can myself, not so proudly, admit that this writing process stuck with me for the majority of high school career until my senior year. Then, for the first time ever, I was tasked with writing a 20 page term paper for my college English class. It was by far the longest essay I'd ever written, a daunting task to say the least. But after complaining a fair number of times to my friends who were in a much easier English class, I had the revelation that if I were to follow my usual routine for essay writing, I would be forced to write a 20 page paper the day before it was due. Unsure if that was even possible, I took some initiative and pledged to myself that my term paper wasn't going to turn out like every other assignment.

But in order to do this, I first had to figure out what was leading me to fail so badly at writing all my previous essays. While my parents would call this procrastination, I don't think it boils down to something that simple. It isn't that I am too lazy to do my work or that I want to put off the work until the last minute—I don't. I actually try to get all my assignments done ahead of time. The issue is that getting started is always the hardest part for me. I get so caught up in writing the “right” thing that nothing seems good enough to begin with. In other words, I am afraid to fail. But, I know that I cannot be alone in this feeling. Aside from maybe that one girl in every class who pulls out at least 4 differently colored pens to take notes and has her assignments completed weeks in advance, all students have felt this way at some point or another.

After further examination, I realized that not only do I do this with my school work, but I have experienced it in all aspects of my life. Whether it's learning a new language, trying a new hobby, or meeting new people, I'm always reluctant because I am afraid of failing. I had realized that the common factor of all these experiences is the newness of them. The only reason these experiences are uncomfortable is that we often associate the unknown with the chance for

failure. Having to do something that's new to us or we are unsure about is always uncomfortable, especially if we've faced failure before.

There is a specific moment of my childhood that I think perfectly depicts this idea that our fear of failure is what ties us down. For my 5th birthday I got my first bike—and not just any bike—I got a bright pink bike with those sparkly tassels coming out of the handle bars that float in the wind as you speed by. I'd wanted that bike for months, and I'd spent the whole day with my dad until I finally learned to ride by myself. But, this isn't the basic first-time-without-training-wheels-success-story. That story is about a fear of falling, not failing; this story is different. After learning to ride that bike, that's all I ever wanted to do. Because I was too young to ride in the neighborhood by myself, I'd resorted to riding in circles around our drive way. But here's the catch; for some reason, I was only able to go in a clockwise circles. I'd spend hours going around and around in clockwise circles, until I'd get bored and finally try switching directions. Without a fail, I fell every time. And instead of getting back up and trying again, I'd run inside to show my mom the new scrapes I'd gotten in the accident and give up for the day because I was afraid of failing again. I went through this cycle for a span of about three or four weeks, until the day I decided I was going to quit giving up after falling the first time. Although I probably didn't know this at the time, that day I didn't just accept that I was going to fall down a few times and scrape a few knees, it was bigger than that; I had accepted that I was going to have to risk failing a few times to get to the end goal. And with that mindset, I'd conquered the counter-clockwise circle.

Like with this story and my writing, I find myself being overly critical towards my progress, when in reality, my work isn't really that bad for just starting out. Since I already think I'm set up to fail, I find it easier just to cut my losses and try something new. Since we were

young, it's been etched into our brains that failing is bad, forcing us to avoid it at all costs. But, failing is just a side effect of trying new things. It is simply unrealistic to believe we can be good at everything in the beginning. But when we allow this fear of making mistakes to overcome us, this is when problems arise. We become more hesitant to seek new experiences or build new skills; we no longer take risks. This is when our lives become static. And even if we try to do these things we still are overly critical of ourselves. Although I am not an expert on the "real world" yet, I'd be willing to bet that we won't escape the grasp of this fear as we enter adulthood either. Whether it will be a project for work or starting a business, the beginning is always the most daunting part. It's like standing at the foot of the mountain and looking up. It always looks much higher than it actually is from the bottom.

So if we're doomed to forever fear taking risks, how do we free ourselves? This is what I learned when I finally figured out how to properly approach my term paper. I realized that in order to start anything new, I had to not be so critical of myself, and not be so quick to run away from failure. Instead, I had to embrace failure. I had to realized that we must reach a series of smaller goals first, to put us on the path to reach our bigger goals. Like a single word turns into a sentence, a sentence turns into a paragraph. And, a paragraph turns into a paper. Soon enough, it's done; another battle is completed.