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Learning to Grow

Well known writer Winston Churchill once wrote, “Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.” I think this quote admirably acknowledges the prevalence of failure, yet inspires us to stay motivated in our road to success. In “Brainology” and “Shitty First Drafts”, both Dr. Carol S. Dweck and Anne Lamott, respectively, admirably emphasizes the importance of how failure should be used as a stepping stone to growth, rather than a discouraging obstacle – a mindset I believe we could all learn from. Being raised by Asian immigrant parents, I was always pressured to be a straight-A student growing up, so much to the point that it deteriorated my mental health, which is something I’m sure many other students can relate to. After reading both of the insightful and relatable essays written by Dweck and Lamott, I feel I have learned not to strive as much to be the perfect, successful student my parents push me to be. They have reminded me that instant perfection is often unrealistic and that there is always room for growth.

Through her more professional approach, Dr. Dweck’s “Brainology” remarkably explains and demonstrates the importance of a growth mindset and how it is essential to success in education. Dr. Carol S. Dweck, a Psychology Professor at Stanford University, and the author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, argues that different mindsets and attitudes towards learning heavily impacts a student’s motivation and achievements (Dweck 5). She first introduces the harmful fixed mindset – the idea that a person’s abilities and intelligence cannot grow – and compares it with the more effective growth mindset. In her comparison, Dweck emphasizes the importance of how a growth mindset promotes active learning by allowing yourself to move past failures and stay motivated to learn. As a professor, Dweck seems to have

more of an informative style, presenting both qualitative and quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of a growth mindset, through studies focusing on the academic progress of students in the 5th and 7th grade. The results from these studies easily convince her audience of the benefits of having a growth mindset, and how it can inspire students to work hard and persevere through setbacks in order to succeed. While her references include multiple academic sources that focus on mindset and performance, she also cites many papers of her own, showing that she has developed these ideas extensively over time. Though a growth mindset is the most promising attitude in learning, I know most students grew up with a fixed mindset, due to heavy influences from environmental factors like family, culture, and competing with other students. Unfortunately, my mindset was influenced by all three. Being the daughter of Asian immigrants, I was often pressured to have perfect grades, and told that the things I was passionate about was a waste of time, which soon led to a fear of failure and a reliance on academic validation. This often led me to put so much pressure on myself that it impacted my mental health and made me feel burnt out by the time I got to college, making me feel like a failure when I didn't instantly succeed at something. In her essay, Dweck writes, "... no matter how smart or talented someone is [...] *no one* succeeds in a big way without enormous amounts of dedication and effort. It is through effort that people build their abilities and realize their potential." (Dweck 5). This quote stood out to me because it helped me realize that learning is a process in itself, and that I should have never expected perfection in myself the way my parents did.

Experienced American novelist and best-selling writer Anne Lamott once said, "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere." (Lamott 2). In "Shitty First Drafts," Anne Lamott emphasizes the inevitability of terrible first approaches in writing, through a humorous and engaging style that is reassuring coming from a professional writer like herself. Lamott strikingly highlights that writing a shitty and childish first draft is inevitable and plays a crucial role in the dreadful yet rewarding process of writing a terrific final

draft, reminding us to trust the process and learn to accept our fears and failures in writing. As a professional writer for over 40 years (Flanagan), Lamott uses a more casual and engaging style, using a blunt approach to humor the reader, and make her experiences more relatable to her audience. By mentioning other professional writers and their experiences (as well as her own), she highlights that great writers never really feel “wildly enthusiastic and confident” in their first approach (Lamott 1), which I find many people can relate to. When I write, I usually don’t feel very confident after reading over my rough draft, and often submit it anyway, just to get the grade. After assessing and revising the first draft, I feel like the final draft is much more complete, reminding me why a first effort is so important – it allows us to write down all our ideas before we can organize what we want to say, in a logical way that flows naturally. To relate it to my academics, I realize now that first attempts do not need to be perfect, because there is always room for improvement and growth.

Growing up, I feel like I often leaned towards a fixed mindset as an Asian American with strong cultural influences in academic effort, leading me to spiral into an endless abyss of needing to please my parents. In high school, I noticed my mindset worsened when I found myself competing with my classmates for better grades in order to feel more accomplished. When I first started taking classes in college, I even compared myself with the highest scoring students in my class, making me feel like I didn’t belong whenever I struggled, even if the subjects were tougher. For as long as I can remember, I became obsessed with trying to make my parents proud, always searching for some kind of gold star to feel good about myself.

Only in my last two years of college have I realized that my grades don’t define me, and that perfection is often unrealistic. Both Dweck and Lamott have reminded me how important it is to trust the process and to keep working hard whenever I start to sway towards a fixed mindset once again. Now, I see that success comes from putting in the effort and pushing myself to the best I can be, and staying encouraged to move past my failures. I have less of an urge to please my parents and their lifelong dream of me becoming a nurse, and have decided

for myself that I want to pursue a different career. Alongside my studies, I also continue to practice my hobbies of cooking and painting – things I was told would not make me successful when I was younger – and even run a small painting business when I'm not focusing on learning. Looking back, I understand that I should've focused more on improving my skills and abilities, rather than trying to perfect them on the very first try.

Though I found Lamott's essay to be reassuring and comforting, I resonated more with Dweck's essay, since it helped me better understand that success comes from great dedication and hard work, and isn't something that comes naturally. Reading both these essays helped me understand that I shouldn't be discouraged when I face defeat, but rather I should dedicate myself and work harder to learn in more efficient ways. I no longer want to view these setbacks as a barrier and reasons to give up and feel bad about myself. Now, I have learned to accept my failures and use them to push me to be better, both in my academics and as a person entirely. Instead, I choose to write my own fate and use these experiences as stepping stones in the process of learning how to grow.

Works Cited

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