

Destigmatizing Struggle: My Thesis Story

A few days ago I wrote a reflective yet admittedly cryptic passage on Facebook about struggle, its purpose, and how struggle could ultimately be viewed as something positive: that success can be spawned from the opportunity failure provides. The reason why I decided to write about this was to help to dispel the false idea of effortless perfection that pervades campuses like Princeton where success is commonplace and struggle appears to be nonexistent. Even outside of the campus environment the only images or stories you tend to see or hear from your peers on Facebook, other social media platforms, or in person are stories of success and triumph (it is easy to feel inadequate by comparison). However the triumphant moment is only the end result and tells us nothing about the journey it took to get there. The truth is, we've all dealt with struggles or set-backs in some way or fashion in our lives. However all too many of us have dealt with these struggles and set-backs in secret.

I am no different. Last spring (2013), I did not complete my thesis and ended up finishing it during the fall and winter of this year (2014). The extent of my struggle and the emotional pain that I felt was unbeknownst to many as I was deeply ashamed and embarrassed that I had to take an extra year to finish. I didn't want to talk about it or address the fact that I was struggling and that it was hard for me to get through. Even though I knew I wasn't the only one as there are a decent handful who find themselves in a similar situation each year, I felt utterly alone, inadequate, and unaccomplished; I felt like a failure.

But in the end I did end up finishing my thesis and I did officially graduate from an Ivy League institution. The end result, earning an Ivy League degree, says nothing about the journey that was taken to get there. To someone else who may not know the backstory, my degree, my track and field success, and my involvement in artistic groups and volunteer groups may appear to be the results of effortless perfection. Such could not be further from the truth.

The reason why I am writing this and the reason I am making myself vulnerable by telling my story is to hopefully help someone who may be struggling or trying to find their way through their own journey. We need to normalize and destigmatize struggle by letting others know about our journeys and how we found a way through them. If we all knew that someone else has struggled the way you have or are currently struggling, imagine how much easier it would be for you to work through that struggle and come out triumphant. In fact what is struggle but a necessary feature in life that allows us to appreciate greatness? Thinking of it in those terms doesn't make it seem so bad does it?

Here is my story:

I was a member of the Class of 2013 and last spring I missed my class day and graduation because I was headed to Eugene, Oregon to represent the university at the NCAA Outdoor Championships. Most people would have probably been sad that they were missing class day

and graduation but I was actually glad to have an excuse to skip the two ceremonies. Virtually none of my friends knew the extent of my thesis struggles and that I didn't have it finished at that time (the university lets you walk even if you have an outstanding degree requirement like the thesis or if you are course deficit). For me, qualifying for nationals meant that I could avoid it all (class day, graduation, walking through the gates, hearing people say congratulations) as I did not feel that I had earned the right to celebrate anything. Even though I ended up doing horribly at nationals, I was still glad that I qualified for the meet as it protected me from having to deal with the internal conflict, shame, and sadness I would have felt had I walked through those gates with my class.

Me moving back to Princeton this past fall was as much about me finishing my thesis as it was about me continuing my athletic training. Most knew about the latter but knew nothing about the former: I was too ashamed; I did not want to get into the details of why I hadn't finished it last spring; I did not want to be stressed by people asking me when I would finish and if I was done yet. Because of this I worked in secret on my thesis in the fall, meeting with my advisor in the evenings or during breaks when students weren't around. I also did most of my writing off-campus so students wouldn't see me working. Though it would have been easier to complete my thesis in secret at home in Philly, I knew if I stayed home I would have a much more difficult time completing it as I would have not had easy access to my advisor, the writing center, the DSS lab, my Deans, etc. Frankly, I did not think I would finish if I didn't do the uncomfortable thing and move back to Princeton.

Since I was no longer an enrolled student due to the fact that I had completed all of my coursework, I had to find off-campus housing and pay for said housing by working part-time at a clothing store in town. I worked, did some light training, and plugged away at my thesis pretty much day in and day out throughout the fall. There were so many times I didn't think I would ever finish, so many times that I doubted my efforts but I kept going because I knew if I kept working I would eventually see the light. One thing I decided I was not going to do was give up on myself, not again.

Back in the spring of my senior year I had done just that: I gave up on myself. The thesis is an arduous task for many but for me it became a nightmare as I let my fears of failure consume me until it became my reality. As each day of the semester slipped by, I fell ever deeper into the doldrums; I lost hope and faith in myself and I let negativity win. I kept ruminating on the idea that I would not finish my thesis, would not complete all of my graduation requirements and as a result would not officially graduate with my classmates. Unfortunately by thinking about it so much I bought these very fears into existence. Just as success begets further success, failure (or shortcomings) only begets additional failure as personal failure thrives off of negativity. Negativity colors our perception of reality and can inhibit us from reaching our true, full potential. At that time my reality was that I didn't believe in myself; I was immensely anxious and I used procrastination as a coping mechanism. The result? The school year ended and I still was without a completed thesis.

Throughout the summer of 2013, I became eerily indifferent about what happened with my thesis and its completion. It was as if I were mourning a loss that I wasn't yet ready to accept. My indifference turned into inaction, stagnation, and a loss of motivation. Although I was still working on it, it wasn't an honest effort and I was moving at such a crawl that in all honesty I would have probably never finished my thesis had I continued on at that rate. This is something my mom picked up on and eventually confronted me about in a very dramatic fashion. Basically it was an impassioned plea--no demand--that I finish my thesis. With her eyes welling up with tears, my mom looked directly at me and told me in a very stern tone that she needed me to finish. She said that she had done way too much for me to simply give up, that too many people had believed in me for me to simply throw in the towel, that if I couldn't find it in myself to do it for myself that I needed to do it for her. The intensity in her eyes alone was enough to convey how serious she was about the matter. That was hard for me to take in and while I wanted to be defiant and say that it shouldn't be about what she wanted, I knew in my heart that she was right and that I owed it to everyone who'd ever believed in me to finish my thesis. That I owed it to my mother who sacrificed so much to give me the best possible education and the opportunity to be something greater. But ultimately, that I owed it to myself to finish something that I could only fantasize about when I was a poor little black kid in inner-city Philly getting teased and picked on because I was smart: a college education.

Where I'm from college was an imagined idea that seldom became reality. And if someone did go and complete a college education, their journey was often riddled with setbacks, stops, and multiple transfers; it seemed to be a rarity for someone to complete their college education in a traditional sense. So here I was so close to completing a college education, something that I had dreamt about for so long, and I was about to throw it all away. Instead of focusing on what I had done to get to that point, all I focused on was what I didn't have which at the time was a completed thesis and a degree. My mom confronting me the way she did really lit the fire under my ass and made me realize that I was too damn close to give up, that I needed to press on.

Pressing on however was tough as I still had a lot of doubts. In fact throughout college I developed a toxic habit of doubting myself. I doubted my intellectual abilities and my worthiness—I grew to become unsure of who I was, who I am, and what it is I am to become. In addition I struggled mightily with feelings of intense loneliness, bouts of depression, and an often times paralyzing fear of failure. Pressing on through all of this meant that I had to have a blind faith that I could finish my thesis even though I didn't believe it yet. In following one of my mom's infamous sayings "fake it until you make it," I told myself that I was going to finish if I just kept working despite the fact that I didn't quite see a way in which I was going to finish. I tried to chip at it a little each day and even though it still seemed to be a massive disordered mess, progress was being made. I kept at it and didn't let negativity invade my thoughts and affect my progress. Eventually I began to see the light; I began to see a clear path to completion. In the end, I finished my thesis and earned an Ivy League degree. Looking back, even though it feels weird for me to say this, I am proud of myself for fighting through my own insecurities and fears. I am proud that I persevered and that I ultimately did not give up on my goal of completing my college degree. And I am proud that I have the strength to be vulnerable and share my story.

The biggest thing that allowed me to finally finish my thesis was that I started working from a place of positive energy rather than negative energy. Even though I still had my doubts, I did not dwell on them. I instead focused on what I was doing and the progress I was making instead of how much that still had to be done. Operating from a positive space changed everything for me. Instead of allowing myself to become overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, I took comfort in knowing that every bit of progress made meant that I was that much closer to completion. Doing this reduced my anxiety greatly and enabled me to move forward. It really came down to how I used my mind and how I chose to think differently.

Now I'm not going to say that I'm now this super enlighten bastion of positive thought because that is definitely not the case. But I can say that this experience with my thesis has challenged me to evaluate the way I think: there seems to be something truly powerful about positive thought. It's amazing that by just changing the way you think about something you can change the outcome. With regard to my thesis, when I looked at the situation from a place of negativity I couldn't move on but when I looked at the situation with just a little bit of positive energy, I was finally able to gain some forward momentum. The same applies to struggle as a general concept. If you are struggling and are viewing the situation from a negative standpoint your struggles will likely persist, however if you are struggling but are viewing the situation from a positive standpoint, you may be able to see the ways you can successfully work through and overcome the struggle. But when struggle as a concept is stigmatized and regarded as abnormal, it's hard for someone to view his or her own struggles from a positive light. This is why we need to change how struggle is viewed by supporting one another and letting each other know that we've all had times when we've struggled. In closing I will leave you all with the passage I wrote as a Facebook status a few days ago.

Perhaps the things that make us struggle are meant to make us grow, that we learn more about ourselves through our trying times than through our victories—there may be a lesson in all of this. Perhaps it is our failures—our shortcomings—that provide us with the opportunities for improvement. Perhaps it is our successes that are born out of these opportunities. Or quite simply, perhaps the difference between failure and success is just a matter of thinking.