

Leading Imperfectly

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STORYLINES

LEADING IMPERFECTLY

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My son is crying again. It's a weekday evening and he refuses to do his homework. In his frustration, he lies on the sofa, forearm over his eyes, shedding tears. Lately, I don't recognize his behavior. I sit next to him and pause for a while before digging in. "School is really, really hard." I say slowly. I wait for a reaction. His eyes shielded by his arm, he nods his head. And then, nothing. The nod was the most I was going to get. "Sometimes rough things happen at recess." I try. No perceivable reaction. I rack my brains for what else could be happening. Then, unexpectedly, he blurts out: "I can't concentrate because I am so afraid of failing!" and he cries even harder.

I sit frozen on the edge of the sofa, utterly surprised. He has not failed at anything; in fact, he does well in most things he tries. How could failure have such a strong and dark grip on a thriving 7-year-old boy, I wonder.

Multifaceted

As though entering another dimension, I am sucked into my memories. Just a couple of years ago, my mother handed me some relics of grade school. Notebooks, pictures, etc. Among them was a card from my grade 2 teacher. I don't recall ever receiving the card, though I do remember the teacher. When I opened it, the message I read was the last thing I expected: "Sandra, do not be afraid of making mistakes." I was 7 years old.

*

When I was a resident, we used to receive performance evaluations at the end of each 4-week rotation. During one of these evaluations, a cardiologist had told me: "Be careful of the high expectations you have of yourself. Because when you have a family, your high expectations of them will drive them away." Both her knowingness and her concern for my wellbeing left a deep impression on me.

Since then, I have thought about her statement many times. The truth is, I am blind to my high expectations. I don't know when or how they show up, I don't know what language they speak or what their shadow looks like.

*

When my daughter was six years old, she fractured her arm. The morning after the ER visit, I was fussing about her, on that same sofa where my son lays crying. I was placing and replacing pillows, adjusting her blanket and the straw in her juice. She had looked up at me and said, without judgment: "Mama, it doesn't have to be perfect."

I had stopped in my tracks and stared at her. Where did her wisdom come from?
"Okay" I had agreed reluctantly.

The truth is, then as now, I have difficulty discerning where good-enough ends and where not-enough begins. Because there is a thread woven into my being called perfectionism.

My perfectionism thread shines and shimmers arrogantly and makes promises that cannot be kept. It utters threats of failure if I look away. And if I try to uproot it, it smiles smugly at my futile and destructive efforts. As I sit on the sofa, I wonder if the same thread of perfectionism is woven into my son's being.

Kindness

The expressions of kindness that I have received over the years – care, concern and acceptance – have shown me that in the shadow of perfectionism, there is another thread. It is a humble thread called self-forgiveness. It is quiet, speaking only when spoken to. But when I place my faith in it, it sings a song so powerful that perfectionism is suspended. Failure is redefined as *intention* and *effort*; self-judgment becomes *acceptance* and *acknowledgment*.

I ask my son: “What will happen if you fail?”

“I will have to repeat my year.”

“And what will happen then?”

He considers the question. “I will know all the answers already.”

I feel relieved. For the moment, his fear of failure is dissolving.

“That’s right, I say, and everyone will still love you. Me, your father, your sisters, your grandparents, your cousins and aunts and uncles and friends. Everyone will still love you, even if you fail.”

My son seems to drop whatever he has been fighting with internally.

I realize that with tenderness, sometimes the blind *can* lead the blind, and the imperfect *do* guide the imperfect. ■

Biographical note

Sandra Derghazarian is a community neurologist and a physician coach who has loved stories for as far back as she can remember. *Storylines* is a column in which she shares stories about work and life. As much as possible, she tries to stay loyal to the messy and sometimes contradictory experiences of everyday life.