Freedom in Failure

by Deborah Wilkerson, University of Kentucky

Preliminary examination results:

Fail. Please meet with your committee members to discuss your exam.

These are the words I have seen five out of the six times I've opened an envelope after pouring my soul into studying for a prelim exam. ...

Failing both prelims I attempted [my first year] only served to cement the feeling that I wasn’t cut out for grad school. I cried—a lot. When the next round of prelims rolled around … I struck out again. ...

Leading up to that second round of prelims, school had started once more, and suddenly I was a second-year, which meant that the new first-years started looking to me for advice. ... And the dreaded question came, “Which prelims have you passed?”

What was I going to say? Would they take me seriously if I told them that I hadn’t passed any? Would they ever want my advice or help again? I decided to be honest, and at first it was hard. But gradually it became easier, and I wasn’t only honest about it, I was open about it. Slowly but surely I embraced the fact that I had failed and I got comfortable talking about it.

And, oh, how much freedom I felt. You see, when we hide our failures, when we keep them locked away from curious coworkers and friends and family, we must stay vigilant. We have to fight every day to maintain an unrealistic image. It’s exhausting and it only perpetuates the problem, as others begin to think that failure has its sights set on them and them alone.

But when we unlock the door and let even a small light in the room, it banishes the darkness. Sure, it hurts at first. But our eyes adjust and suddenly everything is clear. And when we share that with others, it gives them permission to fail. It gives them permission to let that guard down and be vulnerable and, dare I say it, human.

Now, failure isn’t as scary. Because I’ve seen it, I’ve felt it, I’ve experienced it, and I’ve come out on the other side. This doesn’t mean the fear doesn’t creep back in. It does. Frequently. In fact, I’m writing this as I decide which prelim to attempt this coming January, and I feel a keen sense of trepidation.*

But we give power to failure when we don’t talk about it. We give it power when we hide it. So I write this to leverage the power for my good and the good of those around me. To remind myself why I don’t have to be afraid. To remind YOU why you don’t have to be afraid. Because you’re not alone in your failure, friend. And neither am I.

Photo Credit
Photo of Deborah Wilkerson courtesy of Deborah Wilkerson.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Deborah Wilkerson is a third year mathematics graduate student at the University of Kentucky. Her mathematical interests lie in the field of number theory. When not studying, you can find her reading, shopping, or baking. Her email address is deborah.wilkerson@uky.edu.

*In January Deborah took and passed the prelim in topology.