

8) Confidence, in a Handful of Dust” Steven N. Maheshwary ’12

My father’s best friend is enthusiasm.

You see, my father has an insatiable, zealous ambition to be a great public speaker. As part of that quest to be a great public speaker, he joined a club called Toastmasters which allows adults to join each other at weekly meetings in order to improve their public speaking skills. As a child, I sometimes accompanied my father to local Toastmasters meetings where the first order of business...was that of enthusiasm.

At the beginning of every meeting, each member would pick up a cheerleader’s pom pom from a table and with increasingly deafening (and seemingly misguided) declamation they would yell, “Enthusiasm, Enthusiasm is My Best Friend! Enthusiasm, Enthusiasm is My Best Friend!! Enthusiasm, Enthusiasm is my Best Friend!!!” Imagine, 10 year old me, watching my dad mixed in with these middle aged men and women shouting at the top of their lungs... it might sound overwhelming, but you know what, that day I picked up a pom pom, stood on that table and gave it right back to them.

12 years later, I stand before you...a much more jaded human being than I was on that table at Toastmasters. I’ve had my accomplishments here, but I have also felt self-disappointment within the many of the types of experiences that Harvard has to offer – classes, internships, jobs, student groups, and social relationships.

Wait...I’m NOT the only one? Whether you parents out there are willing to admit it, many of your sons and daughters here today have had similar failures in college. Don’t worry, we feel bad about it too.

In fact some of us know the feeling of failure all too well, the sensation of our heart plunging from our chest into the pit of our knotted stomach, a visceral visage of failure. And the word failure! That word is such. a. bummer to hear. It even has a depressing cadence, almost patronizing – failurrrre. It even implies that all fails are yours. Fail. Your.

See, the thing about Harvard is that success and accomplishment spans every corner of this beatific ancient institution – animated Twitter updates about winning fellowships, chubby cheeked freshmen effulgently ebullient with excitement of getting into Mather House, status updates about snagging jobs at Goldman or McKinsey, and excited dinner discussions of getting into Harvard graduate schools.

But. we. don't. hear. about. failure. It exists in the hushed silences in our dining halls, the fake, weary smiles at social gatherings, in the sulking in the carrels at Lamont, behind the alacrity of our answers in sections.

And most prominent about rejection and failure is that for many of us, Harvard is the FIRST place we experience it. It is a JARRING sensation that can erode 18 years of ambition and confidence, the same enthusiasm with which we eagerly stepped onto the Yard. The numbing loss of confidence gives way to a pause... and then the inevitable, fearful conclusion that we are the singular admission mistake. We perceive our life at Harvard as a universe in a sandbox; some can only see fear of failure in a handful of dust, but I say it is equally easy to find confidence in that same handful of dust.

Because even right now, on the most glorious and hallowed of days when we leave an institution that is famous worldwide for grooming the philandering, sorry I mean, philanthropic, talented, inquisitive, worldly, sexy men and women...some of us may be on an introspective precipice.

Some of us don't have jobs lined up after graduation. Some of us are STILL reeling from recent failures and social rejections and bad grades and insecurities and senior spring.

So let pessimism's persuasive posturing pour into your ears as you recall these painful memories. A legion of internal voices - yours insecurities, fears, and doubts - may make you doubt your resolve, your capacity and may attempt to trip you as you finally take a momentous step outside of Harvard and onto the next chapter of your life.

Today, on the eve of what can't possibly be four years at an institution that has taught us many literal lessons and some figurative morals, I entreat you to seek out motivation and enthusiasm in the wake of failure. I believe the Toastmasters' formula was onto something - we need enthusiasm in the face of fear, even if we don't count it as a best friend. Enthusiasm for the fear of venturing into a new city with no friends, in a career you didn't expect, distant once again from your parents here today. T.S. Eliot says, "even if not heard at all, you are the music while music lasts..." I say, play loudly, because being overstated is underrated. Be the music that drowns out the atonal buzz of your own internal uncertainty.

Eminent innovator Steve Jobs says the single greatest revelation in his life was that he will die. None of us have bested this beast. We will die - so why spend this

moment or the next letting the personal punches that Harvard has meted out challenge us in the next chapter of our lives? The great modern poet Drake supplements this philosophy, he says "You only live once, that's the motto. YOLO." While the 18 years of momentum we have built before Harvard may seem all for naught, the lesson is learned that we must persevere harder against the outrageous fortunes borne by the slings and arrows of maturity.

What you do next with your life will not follow a fixed path that we have followed up until now. The vast world we meet next imposes ambiguity – there are no set Core or GenEd classes to take, no consistent HUDS menu to rely on, and the commute may even be farther than the plane ride between the River and the Quad. And this can offer a lot of pain and confusion, but the best gain made from pain is the reign of enthusiasm. Enthusiasm from the fact that you go to Harvard, you have worked hard to get here, and will in fact work even harder once we leave in order to raise ourselves to the next echelon of crazy awesomeness. It is not fear of failure we seek in this sandbox of reality, but confidence we find, in a handful of dust.

Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis once said, "Wins and losses come a dime a dozen...but effort? Nobody can judge effort. Because effort is between you and you." So let's take our Harvard wins and losses and use them for tomorrow and the day after and for the rest of our life. Class of 2012, I entreat you and implore you and ask you to realize that with your next step in this life long marathon you ought to exclaim:

"ENTHUSIASM, ENTHUSIASM IS MY BEST FRIEND! ENTHUSIASM, ENTHUSIASM IS MY BEST FRIEND!"

Thank you class of 2012 and best of luck!