



Haley Foster, Alpha Beta, Kent State University and Northeast Ohio Alumnae Chapter

"Progress will come in fits and starts. It's not always a straight line. It's not always smooth path." When I think of my journey, this quote from former President Barack Obama comes to mind. Since I was little, I've always been a perfectionist. Each day is a fight against my anxiety about how people will see me if I falter. Some days are easier than others, but no day is exactly the same.

From kindergarten through high school, I strove to be the best among my peers. Because of this, my senior year of high school was incredibly tense. I was obsessed with earning the title of valedictorian over my classmates. In the first semester of my senior year, I took six college classes. I put a ton of effort into each course while also participating in as many extracurriculars as possible. I would often stay up all night to complete schoolwork or be so stressed out that I'd forget to eat. There were several occasions where I'd be in such bad shape that my principal would call me down to his office and order me to go home to rest.

I carried on like this until midterm week came around. Midterms were the last set of grades that counted for valedictorian consideration. My fatigue that week outweighed my self-care. As a result, I failed an exam for the first time in my life, knowing full well that I'd lose out on consideration for my prized title of valedictorian. The worst part was that I was so exhausted that I didn't even care. I was numb to the situation and was just happy to not have to compete anymore. Something inside me broke that week. I couldn't figure out what it was for the longest time, but then I identified it: my need to be perfect. I was relieved to have this pressure taken off of my shoulders.

I was struck with the awakening that recognition did not matter if I was hurting myself physically and mentally to earn it. I always thought that gaining a solid reputation was the most critical thing in the world if I wanted to make something of myself. I didn't realize that I would learn a more powerful lesson from my "failure."

That's not to say that I have completely overcome this challenge, however. In each subsequent stage of my life, I am challenged in new ways to set aside what is expected of me to pursue my own interests. I am a graduate student at my dream school: The Ohio State University. I am surrounded by competent people who make me feel the need to up my game to be competitive. This first semester of grad school has shown me that I shouldn't fight to be the best, but instead, I should focus on doing my best to preserve my mental health. After all, I've lived through my biggest fear of not being perfect already and have come out stronger for my struggle. Because of this, I know that Maya Angelou had the right idea when she said "You may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it." Without meeting a scenario that I thought would be the end of the world head-on, I may never have learned to put myself first. And for that lesson, I am eternally grateful.

225 North Muhlenberg Street  
Woodstock, VA 22664

Phone: 540-459-4212 | Fax: 540-459-2361