**Regrets of an Accomplished Child**

**By PAMELA PAUL Published: November 2, 2012**

IN my high school, as in most schools of upper-middle-class overachievers across the country, there were the students who strived and stressed out, the students who knew just what it took to get the job done and then that one kid who unnervingly surpassed us all even though he showed up in class stoned every day.

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I was one of the middling sort, endowed with a reasonable amount of natural ability. But, I figured, if all went according to my carefully hatched plan, I could graduate with all my “to do” boxes neatly checked off, my teachers impressed if not wowed, and the ultimate achievement: an acceptance letter from the Ivy League college of my choice. It all went as planned. I didn’t learn much of anything.

At the risk of sounding like yet another wizened Gen Xer wagging a precipitately middle-aged finger at millennial youth, I’d like to share a lesson I learned only years later: the overtly accomplished child is often the less educated one. To be clear, what I call the accomplished child is a very different creature from the born or cultivated genius, and equally different from the aspiring superstar. With neither the superlative skill of the former nor the extraordinary efforts of the latter, the accomplished child does exactly what is expected of him. And nothing more.

In my case, having pored over my “Fiske Guide” and “The Insider’s Guide to the Colleges” and estimated the precise mix of quirkiness and well-roundedness desired by my chosen Ivy, I did what I needed to do to approximate the right ratio. Sure, I studied for my standardized tests, but I also avoided taking any A.P. science (no guaranteed “A” there). Pre-TiVo, I scheduled my senior year classes around “[Santa Barbara](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086793/)” and an after-school job, so I could leave school by 1 p.m. every day.

This approach held when I got to Brown, a college that, given its lack of core curriculum, was exquisitely structured for my minimal-work ethic. Didn’t want to take science? Didn’t have to. You can forget about math. A dabbler and a dilettante, I coasted along in the classes that interested me and I would do well in.

The theory of risk homeostasis holds that you can make the playground safer, but children will just make increasingly risky moves. Humans will find a way around any limits, self-imposed or otherwise. In my case, there were signs of antsiness: An atheist who couldn’t sing, I signed up for the gospel choir. I joined the women’s rugby team, even though I was terrified of getting the ball and, heaven forbid, getting tackled. But I wouldn’t have taken those kinds of chances with any decision that “mattered,” like my academic record and the path it would set me on after graduation.

If you want success and know how to get it, why take unnecessary chances? Why risk failure?

Because, as research shows, actual learning comes by making mistakes and figuring out what went wrong and how to make it right. In a world of high-achieving but vaguely lost new graduates, the importance of not always doing well or being told you are doing well is gaining currency. Recently, David McCullough Jr., a high school English teacher and son of the historian David McCullough, signed a book deal based on his popular commencement speech, “You Are Not Special,” which was widely viewed on YouTube. What young graduates want today, Mr. McCullough said in his speech, is the accumulation of accolades rather than genuine intellectual reward: “It’s, what does this get me?” The book, according to a publicity statement, will argue that “life is a great adventure to swallow whole rather than a checklist to complete.”

Though I alone was responsible for insulating myself from challenge and failure and meaningful reward, an entire system buffers today’s children from such possibilities. Overprotective parents, schools dedicated to acing exams, a college preparatory system that offers zero capacity for error (unless it provides pathos fodder for the application essay) — all of these elements make it hard for the ambitious child to risk a misstep. There is no room for failure, let alone soap opera afternoons.

Today, perfect children check off boxes at all levels. At a Manhattan preschool last year, word spread about the magnificent child who had won acceptance at 12 — 12! — coveted kindergartens. “How did she manage it?” parents were heard to whisper. And then the answer was passed along the same gossip chain. “When asked to jump, my daughter will not only jump, she’ll ask, ‘How high?’ ” her mother explained.

I don’t doubt this child will bound her way to great heights. But suppose she doesn’t want to be an acrobat? And will her need to excel and exceed subside as she makes her way up the academic food chain?

A novelist I know who teaches personal writing, typically to older students and recent immigrants in continuing ed programs, related a telling account of a class she taught to today’s superstars at Wesleyan. In all her classes, she starts her first seminar with an exercise. Students ask one another five personal questions, then they get to ask the same of their teacher. The exchange helps create the kind of intimacy conducive to a writing workshop. But at Wesleyan, the first student who raised her hand asked, “What do you expect from us in this class?”

In the high-stakes world of accomplished children, a B+ is akin to failure, and failure is not allowed. Is it any wonder that a generation of accomplished students increasingly resorts to dishonesty on papers and exams? Large-scale cheating schemes at the elite Stuyvesant High School in New York City and at Harvard University reveal a growing willingness to compromise standards to maintain the facade. Meanwhile, the lessons taught are lost on their intended recipients — or a very different lesson is learned.

My own epiphany — more like a break, really — occurred senior year of college. I was mid job interview with Quaker Oats, explaining why I wanted to work there (it had something to do with Crunch Berries). Suddenly, I saw myself from a distance. Is this what I’d gone to four years of college for? What happened to my dreams of writing, of public service? I ended up interrupting myself by saying, “I’m sorry, I’ve made a mistake — I actually don’t want to work here.” Then I walked out.

At that moment, I knew I needed to do something completely different, something I had no idea I wanted to do — no, something I actually didn’t want to do. I needed to get off track, to completely challenge every assumption I’d ever made about who I was and what I wanted. I had to do something that would quite possibly make me miserable. It could end up being a terrible mistake.

On the spot, I decided to pick a country off the map that I had zero interest in, one with a different religion, a different ethnicity, an unknown language. A place where I knew not a soul. Somewhere I couldn’t go about my usual routine, diligently checking off boxes.

Within a week, I’d bought a one-way ticket to a small city in northern Thailand.

And only then did I finally learn something.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/brown-alumna-recalls-what-she-failed-to-learn.html?_r=0>