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Welcome to our thirty-fifth edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

The Freedom to Fail

"Welcome to Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

This by line made famous by Garrison Keillor could be said of every city and hamlet across the country. We have products to make us good-looking, work-out videos to keep us strong, and grade inflation to keep us above average. In some quarters it has become standard practice to award trophies and prizes for mere participation. A recent news article related the story of a school that offered to send students "fake" report cards to boost their self-esteem, while the parents secretly received the real grades. To be thought average in any way seems to spell imminent doom in a world of celebrities, experts and icons. To be ordinary is just not enough in a world of awesome and ultimate superlatives. To fail is unthinkable.

Yet, history is replete with stories of those who were once thought of as failures, but who used their failings to make them stronger. Walt Disney was fired as a newspaper writer because he lacked imagination; Sir Isaac Newton's mother pulled him out of school to run the family farm, and he failed miserably; Charles Darwin was considered an average student, Albert Einstein a poor one; Harrison Ford was told he would never succeed in the movie business; Dr. Seuss's first book was rejected by twenty-seven publishers. The list goes on.

One of the goals of a classical education is liberty: being set free to be fully human. To be fully human means to experience joy and grief, toil and ease, success and failure. A human being who has experienced only joy, ease and success has missed the soul-shaping experiences that create depth, compassion and empathy. A corollary goal of classical education is the development of character. Strong character is shaped as much by failure as it is by success; it is cultivated in the ordinary moments of life perhaps even more than in times of elation or times of deprecation.

As we engage together as a school community in the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, it is important to pursue the truth about ourselves and our children. Having a realistic view of our own strengths produces a confidence that is more solid than a contrived self-esteem. Having a realistic view of our own weaknesses spurs us on to find ways to improve and to compensate. The pursuit of goodness is more firmly engaged when we realize the weak spots in ourselves and seek to correct them. Human beings who can hold their heads high in times of failure are beautiful human beings.

It is incumbent upon adults, whether parents or teachers, to protect our young. That protection takes different forms as our young pass through the stages of life. It is natural to protect a toddler from falling down the stairs. It is natural to deny our first-grader the privilege of playing on a busy street. It is natural to limit our teen's internet use to provide protection from predators. These are all good and wise means of protection that involve a legitimate curbing of freedoms.

There comes a time in the development of young lives, however, when protecting them from the consequences of



their own actions may only stunt the development of their character. There comes a time when it is wise and good to allow youngsters to suffer the winds of adversity while they are still in our care, and we can help them weather the storm. Whether the adversity takes the form of receiving a low grade, being cut from a team, or being shunned by a friend, these adverse circumstances and many more are opportunities for character formation. Sometimes, the greatest and most valuable freedom is the freedom to fail.

At Millennium Charter Academy, we hold high expectations for our students, knowing full well that there will be times when students fail to meet those expectations (as do we at times). Such times of failure are opportunities for serious conversation, carefully meted consequences, and most importantly, heart changes. Holding high academic standards and grading realistically means that some students will receive average grades, and others, who choose not to work hard, may fail. Truthful grading also gives rise to opportunities for growth. Life lessons that may seem painful now will equip a young person to deal with more difficult life lessons later on.

Our colleges and universities are currently experiencing epidemic proportions of student stress and even suicide. Students enter college expecting smooth sailing and are surprised when the sea becomes rough. They enter college thinking their opinions carry the weight of truth and are offended when someone disagrees with them. They enter college thinking that they are at the center of the universe and suddenly realize that spot is already taken. The greatest preparation we can give our young people is to guide them toward honest self-appraisal, to help them face their failures and weaknesses and to find confidence in their own individual strengths. We need to let them know that in some ways they will be strong, in some ways they will be average, and sometimes, they will fail. Then we let them know that, in light of all this, we love them and support them. In this, there is freedom.



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A good gardener knows that seeds sprouted in a greenhouse become seedlings that need gradual exposure to the elements before they can safely take root in the ground, a process called “hardening.” Seedlings that go directly from greenhouse to ground are likely to die under a scorching sun or stiff wind. And so it is with those we nourish in our homes and send out into the world. Some hardening is good and necessary to protect our “sprouts.”

G. K. Chesterton once quipped, “The most extraordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man, an ordinary woman, and their ordinary children.” We are not all destined for greatness, but we can exult in the wonder of ordinary days and do our best to support our ordinary children who will have hearts of courage to attempt extraordinary feats and wonders because we have set them free.

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