

ROTTEN APPLES AND REWRITING THE RULES

By Derek Cavilla



It was a seemingly normal day during the summer between my first and second grade. As I bounded down the stairs to head to a friend's birthday party, I was abruptly — and most unexpectedly — stopped by my parents and asked, “Which one of us would you like to live with?” Being seven-years-old, I not only thought it was a ruse, but figured I could outwit them by answering “Both!” But this was not acceptable, so, when pressed, I innocently answered “Mom.” With the riddle answered, I went to the birthday party; cake was served, songs were sung, and nary a thought was given to the odd question posed to me on the staircase. However, upon returning home, I discovered my father had moved out and my life as a child was thrust onto a new path — never at the request of either parent, but through a combination of circumstance and my innate desire to help make the situation as positive as possible. On my original path as an upcoming second grader, I was a studious boy who loved learning, worked hard, and enjoyed being known as the “smart kid” in my class. However, on this new path, I quickly took on new roles and responsibilities: not just student and son, but also caretaker, counselor, peacemaker, and teacher.

From the outset, I felt responsible for my father's departure since it seemed to me that the choice for him to leave was mine. Despite the fact that my mother told me that the dissolution of our family was not my fault, I still felt some measure of guilt and confusion. However, rather than succumb to these feelings, I focused on succeeding in school and helping my family survive our new circumstance. I knew deep down that my mother had the situation under control, but it gave me solace to provide reciprocal support where I could. With Mom working two (sometimes three) jobs, the help that I offered was not only welcome; it was vital in helping to maintain a semblance of regularity during some tumultuous years. No longer was I picking my lunch up in the morning; I was making it. Gone were the days of come home, paint, do homework, play outside, take a bath, and watch television. Rather, it became “How do I run this vacuum?” “How do I make my four-year-old brother go to sleep?” “What is the best way to remind my father to send the child support: mail or telephone?” Although these duties may appear difficult, they actually made me feel empowered. And more than just making me *feel* empowered, this sudden change in my life when I was seven helped me to develop two character traits that have served me well ever since: as a child, in college, and in graduate school.

Trait One: Tenacity

For me, growing up in a one-parent home presented a number of obstacles, such as coping with financial strain, emotional distress, and navigating the rigor of day-to-day survival with only one adult to support the home. Passing tests and pleasing my teacher was easy for me

during the school day, but coming home and having to screen calls while trying to explain to bill collectors that my mother wasn't home and that I had no idea when we could pay the amount in question was more confounding. Willingly doing laundry and trying my best to cook a meal without setting the house on fire was fairly feasible for me; however, being awoken at three o'clock in the morning to loud noises that ranged from laughter to arguing to partying was more unnerving. On the one hand, I was happy that my mom was home, but on the other, I was disappointed because I knew she would be gone again when I woke up in the morning. Although this was a far cry from my earlier childhood, where my biggest worry was whether to paint with watercolors or tempura paints, I actually enjoyed being counted on by my mother and brother. The effect of feeling appreciated as a valuable member of the family unit was contagious and grew exponentially because I saw that my efforts were actually helping our overall stability.

I quickly learned that sometimes life gets tiring, but if the end goal is truly worth it, the struggles during the journey are just part of the experience. Even in the face of uphill struggle, from unemployment, addiction, domestic conflict, and feelings of isolation due to the highly adult world in which I had placed myself, I learned to never give up — on anything. On one occasion, my mother and I went to the Welfare Office to ask for food stamps and to have our oil tank filled for the winter; however, we were abruptly dismissed after our three-hour wait because they felt we could make it on our own. Bruised pride is one thing, but when it is coupled with despair and uncertainty, it makes for a powerful motivator. On seeing the distress on my mom's face, I wondered how I could help. Could I, as a fourth grader, actually get a job?

Thankfully, in small town Vermont, I could. I reached out to a friend who delivered newspapers, got in touch with her contact at the *Valley News*, and became a paperboy. Each day after school for the next two years, my brother and I would ride our bikes to our newspaper drop location, deliver papers to about 50 businesses, and collect payments and tips that generally added up to about \$40 a week. This was a small contribution, but every little bit helped — not just for our meager household budget, but also for my emotional stability and continued optimism for a better future. It was early experiences like this that built my approach to overcoming obstacles: in a word, *tenacity*.

Essentially, once I set a goal, the rest of the game was just developing a strategy for how to reach the desired end in the most efficient and purposeful way. I made a plan, modified it along the way as needed, and never stopped until I reached the ultimate prize. During childhood, these tactics varied from simple things such as mowing the lawn to make my mom smile when she got home from work to mastering my multiplication tables to impress my teacher. This drive to achieve my goals is actually what brought me to graduate school in the first place because, for me, graduate school was actually a strategy. When I initially entered the education profession, I thought I would simply teach elementary school and enjoy summers off. However, I quickly learned that I disliked the current approach to teaching because it revolves around test scores and externally-imposed standards rather than the students and their holistic growth and empowerment. Due to the high levels of state and national accountability legislation, I was discouraged from taking creative approaches in my classroom and was forced to teach via rote memorization and test-taking strategies. In some cases, it was actually mandated how I setup my whiteboard and what page I had to be on in the textbook at a specific time on a specific day. It was from frustrating experiences like these that I knew I wanted to move out of the classroom and become more involved in policy and reform. However, I also knew I needed proper

credentials and experience. This need resulted in my current goal: earn a master's and doctorate in education.

The tenacity I first honed as a child served me well throughout graduate school. In order to maintain my financial and personal obligations, I not only taught, but also held a second job in order to supplement my teaching salary. I was also married and wanted to maintain at least a portion of my household duties and dedication to my husband. Sometimes, my assignments would amount to thousand of pages of reading per week followed by data analysis and writing thirty to fifty pages. I was tired. Not just physically, but mentally. Many nights, the last thing I wanted to do was read and write at a doctoral level — I just wanted a glass of wine and a pillow. However, I never took that option. Instead, I owned my decision to go to graduate school; grad school was going to serve as the launch pad into the next phase of my career. So, instead of wine, I had coffee. Rather than a pillow, I grabbed a highlighter, prodded myself through my reading, and completed my writing at the level I knew was expected from me. The feeling of satisfaction at the end of this process was stronger because I knew I had pushed through these rigorous tasks, even when completing them had initially felt physically and mentally impossible.

However, tenacity is more than barreling through a set path with all of your might. With a tenacious approach, the end result is always possible, but the path to reach it may need to be uncovered in an unconventional way. For example, in graduate school, I knew that I wanted my area of expertise to be Gifted Education. But when I began my program, I was told that there was no precedent for that and that I should choose a different area of focus. However, neither of the established specialty tracks of Curriculum Design or Technology spoke to my heart like Gifted Education. I knew that my doctorate was a one shot deal. So, determined to get what I wanted, I made my own plan. I found a professor in my university who had expertise in my area, we developed four independent study courses and two internships from the ground up, and I presented the plan to my department as an official course of study. The program coordinators were impressed that I went to such lengths to propose something that was meaningful to me *and* that still honored the tenets of the college's doctoral program. My plan was approved and I was able to specialize in my area of passion — because of tenacity. When told no, I did not take the response as the last word. Rather, I placed the burden upon myself to create something that I felt was both suitable and defensible as a viable option.

From relationship strife or financial strain to career apathy or struggle with our superiors, we have all experienced the unnerving feel of confusion, fear, and/or rejection in some way — it is simply part of the human experience. However, developing the grit required to overcome these uncomfortable feelings is quite empowering. A willingness to be tenacious often pays off in the end, especially when we don't get distracted by bumps along the way but work to always keep our eyes on the big picture. For me, this lesson was not learned in a classroom: it developed from the responsibility that I cultivated and took pride in as the child of a single parent who depended on my success. No one in my family could afford for any of the others to give up on each other, neither financially nor emotionally. By not cracking then, I got stronger and was able to shoulder as much as was needed — most often with a smile on my face. Tenacity continues to serve me well as a post-graduate student, husband, friend, and working professional, but it only remains a positive character trait when paired with a very distinct counterpart: *balance*.

Trait Two: Balance

Although I was raised by my mother from the age seven, my father was not entirely absent. In fact, it was visits with him and his remarkable family that served as the counterbalance to my often-strenuous childhood. Essentially, when my father picked up my brother and me to either go hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire or to visit my extended family in Massachusetts, it was like going from a black and white Kansas into a Technicolor Oz. Through years of interactions with my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins — as well as my father’s spirit of exuberance and zest for life — I learned that time to reflect and simply experience life for its inherent beauty is necessary to maintain the stamina needed to traverse a challenging path. In childhood summers, my day-to-day, brown-paper-wrapped package of home and school was replaced by sparkly, bow-wrapped surprises from my father: a surprise ticket to the hottest pop star’s concert, my first-ever vacation, or simply going to the store and buying a cartful of supplies to make an ice cream sundae worthy of a blue ribbon at the state fair. The point is that my father taught me that an oasis in life is not a luxury — but a necessity. Why work so hard and diligently if there is no time to enjoy the fruit of one’s labor? Of all the lessons I have learned, this is the one that I continue to hold most precious.

This mindset played a significant role in my ability to balance the stringent requirements of graduate school because, without fail, I always reserve one day of every week for everything *except* work and school: Saturdays. This sacred day usually revolves around having lunch and reading a pleasure book while sipping a glass of wine by the lake with my husband. My most challenging decision on Saturday is what to order first: chips and salsa or a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Arduous? No. Necessary? Yes.

This respite allows me to recall the reason I chose to attend graduate school in the first place: how can I continue to grow so that I can teach young people how to empower themselves? How good of a teacher can I be at any level if I cannot continue to inspire my students? If I don’t plant a seed that will be felt by my student’s great-great-great grandchild have I truly achieved my goal of creating societal change? These are the larger questions that I keep at the forefront of my mind in order to achieve my personal goals — and I think about them not while laying in bed at night or while trying to enjoy vacation with my family, but on Saturdays. When my nights are long or the dream-crushing sound of my morning alarm comes too soon, I keep going because of the satisfaction of knowing that on each precious Saturday I can rest and recapture the equilibrium required to continue my quest.

* * *

Students survive graduate school in many ways: caffeine, endless hours of reading, visiting the statistics or writing lab before a major paper is due. All of these are valuable tools, but the most important is your worldview. We have all heard the adage, “when life gives you a lemon, make lemonade” — but losing a parent to divorce and navigating the waters of a tumultuous childhood often felt like something worse than a lemon. It felt like a rotten apple. With worms in it. However, human nature is a funny thing. Although our first instinct may be to throw the apple at the wall or out of a moving vehicle, it’s actually what you do with the apple at that point that defines you — and can free you.

When the road splits, cracks, or feels like it is slipping away from underneath of us, it’s important to remember where we come from and what we carry with us. What drove us to

choose graduate school in the first place? Who are you at your core? Who do you remember for the ways they touched your life, and how do you want to be remembered in turn? It may be the intertwined traits of tenacity coupled with balance — learned not only in school or from our teachers, but also in our homes and from our families — that help each of us to reach our goals: first of completing graduate school, and then, using what we have learned along the way to leave an indelible mark on our little patch of humanity.

Derek Cavilla earned his M.Ed. in Teacher Leadership in 2013 and is currently pursuing an Ed.D. in Education, both from the University of Central Florida. He is the instructional coach at a public charter school and supports the intellectual and affective needs of elementary students using a focus on gifted education strategies. Upon completion of his doctorate, Derek plans to work on educational policy at the state and national level.

© 2014, Derek Cavilla. Licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license.



This essay is part of the “All I needed to survive (and thrive) in grad school” essay project. <http://survivegradschool.weebly.com>