

People-Pleasing, Perfectionism, and Ten Reasons to Reschool

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At the age of 28, after five years of educating public school kids, I realized that I was in need of some serious re-education myself. There were many things I still wanted to learn, but I never made time for them, due to my workaholic lifestyle. What's more, I began to see how that very workaholicism had begun during my school days, shaped by a school system that valued high achievement above happiness and health.

Hoping to understand school's impact on my identity, and to do my education over again on my terms, I decided to return to my childhood classrooms. In the fall of 2008, I would spend a week in each one, doing whatever the kids did in the classroom and on the schoolyard. In the spring of 2009, I would "reschool myself" by traveling around the U.S. and internationally, seeking out the kind of self-directed, experiential learning that would break me out of the achievement cycle and help empower me to become a self-sufficient grown-up.

This post is from the week I was repeating fourth grade and struggling with habits that have helped me achieve in the past, but that were blocking progress in my adult life.

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I've been drafting an official project proposal for Reschool Yourself bit by bit for months now, and intensively for the last week. As hard as I've worked, I've been unable to craft my countless notes into a cohesive, inspiring proposal. The very reason it's taken me so long to craft a full project proposal is evidence for why I'm reschooling myself in the first place.

I have invested hours and hours detailing measurable goals and outcomes, doing research to support my arguments, and shaping the proposal into the format that most funders require. The result? Writer's block in the attempt to communicate my ideas perfectly. Several drafts of lifeless rhetoric devoid of the passion that fuels this project. Exasperation with my inability to speak from the heart when I know I'll be evaluated.

School has trained me so well that I can't stop behaving like an overachieving student even when it doesn't serve me. And in adulthood, it doesn't serve me very often at all.

In fact, the two qualities that were keys to my success in school have limited my success as an adult: people-pleasing and perfectionism.

People-Pleasing

Early in childhood, I learned to sense what people — especially authority figures — wanted from me, and that I would be rewarded for giving it to them. Now, as an adult, the rewards for people-pleasing aren't so great. I often say yes to commitments just because I'd feel guilty saying no. I regularly sacrifice my own well-being for the sake of others, a story shared by many fellow nonproftiteers and educators. I unconsciously seek a "Wow" factor in the things that I do to replicate the affirmation that I got in school.

I know that I could be more effective, and generally happier, if I could just determine what I wanted to do, and then do it. It sounds simple, but after spending over 28,000 hours* in school doing what was expected of me, I'm out of touch with what I actually want to do.

* A conservative estimate of time I've spent in school from kindergarten through college: 6 hours/day x 275 days/year x 17 years.

Perfectionism

The need to do everything perfectly, or not at all, is paralyzing. I have a hard time making decisions, small and large, from what to order on a restaurant menu, to whether I want to go to grad school. I don't want to make the wrong choice, so I avoid making any choice at all. If taking action requires risking failure or rejection—as with an application, assessment, or interview—I freeze up.

Accustomed to following a clearly defined set of



Image by Rebecca Chaperon

guidelines, I also have trouble creating my own boundaries and structure. As a student, I learned to master the school game by closely adhering to its rules: do your assignments, and don't make any trouble. As an adult, when it's up to me to make up the rules myself, I tend to spin my wheels for months, not knowing where to start. When I finally do accomplish a task I've been delaying, I often berate myself with "You should have done this a long time ago," instead of congratulating myself. Consequently, I feel disappointed in or frustrated with myself literally most of the time. As my own harshest critic, I simply can't win.

I'm reschooling myself this year in order to break through people-pleasing and perfectionism, to be more effective and simply enjoy life more. These are ten things that I'd like to be able to do:

1. Infuse a sense of fun or play into every activity, remembering that most matters really aren't all that serious.
2. Set myself up for success every day with a realistic number of achievable goals.
3. Do things for enjoyment instead of for self-improvement.
4. Welcome mistakes, big and small, as a key part of the learning process.
5. Make decisions easily, confident that I can change direction if something doesn't work out.
6. Meet my needs for sleep, exercise, nutrition, and relaxation before doing anything else.
7. Erase "I should" from my vocabulary and replace it with "I could" or "I'd like to."
8. Be fully present and focused on the activity at hand, knowing that it's exactly what I want to be doing at the time.
9. Take more risks and have more adventures.
10. Be as patient and compassionate with myself as I am with other people.

The most important of these is the last one: learning to treat myself as I do others, sort of like the Golden Rule in reverse. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert describes a time when she rushed into an elevator, mistook her own reflection for someone she knew, and excitedly stepped forward to embrace that person before realizing her mistake. Later that night, she wrote down a reminder to herself: Never forget that once upon a time, in an unguarded moment, you recognized yourself as a friend.

That passage has stayed with me because I want, more than anything, to recognize myself as a friend. And come June, after an intensive year of reschooling, I hope to be able to say that I do.