

Struggle's Reward

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By Dr. Derek Conte

I remember struggling as a child to master anything I wanted to be good at: Erector sets, baseball, math; in college it was: theatre, fencing and more baseball; finally at 39 and seeking a life change, I began taking pre-med courses in preparation for entrance into chiropractic school. While many things have come easy to me, there have been numerous challenges as well. I was raised with the mindset (as many in my generation were) that if you quit on something, you were mentally weak and lacked character. So, even though I was born with talent, I always persisted when things became difficult.

I remember a daunting pre-med calculus class in the winter of '95. I was almost 40 and out of college for 17 years! I really had no clue what was going on. I talked to the professor in an effort to pick up something that might give me a foothold and he said in his very grave New Delhi voice, "Work HARD! Work HARD!" I went to tutoring classes to divine some of the mathematical hieroglyph until they threw me out. On my first test, I got a grade of 20% out of 100%: the worst test performance of my life. I was dazed.

In this academically superior New York State University, I was surrounded by young classmates half my age and I could hear their groans when I asked questions that bored them. When I seemed to reach the height of embarrassment, one young man laughed and snickered to the others who laughed in return. My heart was either going to break or explode. Controlling myself, I simply rose from my chair and quieted the young man with a glance. He never snickered again. I knew I wasn't slow, but I needed a breakthrough desperately. The professor again said to me, "Work HARD! Work HARD!"

Little, by little, it came to me. My mid-term grade was acceptable. On the weekend before the final exam I sat outside at a small table under the warm spring sun doing equations for hours and then: WHAM! "I GOT IT!" I didn't make a single mistake on a problem after that. My final grade for the class was B-. I was prouder of that grade than the two A+'s earned for the Biology and senior-level Vertebrate Zoology classes I also took that term.

Now that my brain was 'turned on' again after such a long academic layoff, I was ready for physics, organic chemistry and the entirety of the chiropractic doctoral curriculum. As before, I continued to seek tutoring until I felt completely in control of newer (to me) languages like biochemistry, neurology, anatomy and physiology. Ultimately, I had the honor of graduating second in my class and went on to teach other chiropractors and students as well.

There is no shame in the fact that I have sometimes struggled, as we all do, but rather a sense of honor and accomplishment that struggle brings...whether we win or lose. The honor is in struggling.

Dr. Derek Conte is co-founder of Chiropractic Specialists on Concord Rd. in Smyrna.

*Visit his website: drderekconte.com Also facebook: **Chiropractor Smyrna GA | Derek Conte DC***