

PUBLICATION

Words of Wisdom: Nobody is Perfect, So Cut Yourself Some Slack

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The stomach bug hit me like a freight train. My lawyer-husband left that morning for a three-day trip and my 11- and 13-year-old children were home with me. As I crawled into my bed, I dimly thought, "I should make them dinner and tell them to brush their teeth. I should call some friends to come and get them for a sleepover. I need to feed the dog. I need to work on my brief that's due on Monday." Instead, I just pulled the covers over my head and went to sleep with the fever-induced thought, "Surely, the world will keep turning without me for a while." I woke up, bleary-eyed, 14 hours later, dragged myself from bed and hobbled to the kitchen. I stopped short and had to snap a cell phone picture of what I saw through the haze – my 11-year-old daughter sitting at the kitchen table dressed in full survival-style camouflage, chowing down on a breakfast of key lime pie and sweet tea, holding a live chicken in her arms, watching "Toddlers & Tiaras." Our (no longer hungry) dog was sick, having eaten a rabbit for breakfast, and had to be rushed to the vet's ICU where she stayed for five days.

Nobody has it together all of the time. Sometimes my well-oiled machine breaks down completely and chicken feathers go flying and rabbits get eaten. But, when we choose very full lives with many plates in the air, sometimes a few will come crashing down. It happens to all of us. Nobody is perfect. But here are a few things I tell myself when I'm standing with a broken plate at my feet.

1. "I can't be good at everything." I say this with a smile on my face quite often when I do something really stupid. I wreck my car at least once a year. No one ever gets hurt, I just bump into things a lot. About five years ago I ran over a mailbox and came home with my bumper dragging. My husband looked at me and said, "Did you hit something again?" That is when the phrase originated. But please, use it liberally, because it works for a lot of situations: cupcakes from Kroger instead of homemade, when my secretary cannot read my handwriting, running a 12-minute mile, being late to pick-up from soccer three weeks in a row, when the dentist asks if I've been flossing daily, being on a first name basis with the IT Helpdesk because I call so often. Repeat with me: "I can't be good at everything."

2. "I'm going for 'best all around'." If you are a Type A personality like me, when you choose to do something, it kills you not to be the best at it. But reality hit me about 14 years ago that I couldn't be the best in the world at everything if I chose to: 1) be a full-time lawyer, 2) be a wife, 3) be a mom, 4) direct a choir, 5) sing in a band, 6) vacation frequently, 7) run daily, 8) etc. When we choose a really full life with many things that get our juices going, we probably aren't going to be the very best at everything. It was hard to realize that I would not be in the 3 p.m. pick-up line for my kids after school each day and I would never be a fast runner. I probably wouldn't go on an eight-week backpack trip across Europe or bill the most hours of any associate. But at some point I said to myself, I just want to be really well rounded. Think of yourself as an Olympic decathlete (someone who is really, really good at 10 different things), rather than a sprinter (someone who is the best at one thing). It will help you temper your Type A personality with the realities of enjoying many roles.

3. Get it "roughly right." When I realized how far I was from perfect, I came up with the concept (or perhaps excuse for my misgivings) that sometimes the goal has to be to get things "roughly right." So, it's 10 p.m., your child has a concert the next day at school, and you need to lay out his dress clothes. You're exhausted. Letting a plate hit the floor is sending your child to school in jeans on dress day. Being perfect is laying out the outfit, realizing the pants are wrinkled, getting out the iron and staying up until 11 p.m. putting creases in the pants.

Getting it roughly right is laying the outfit out and telling yourself on the way to bed that the wrinkles will fall out after he wears them awhile. Or, you have a big presentation the following day and you have been too slammed to put together an amazing PowerPoint. Letting a plate hit the floor is showing up for your presentation with note cards and winging it. Being perfect is staying until midnight with your secretary putting clever video clips and graphics into a detailed PowerPoint. Getting it roughly right is putting together a basic PowerPoint, getting home for dinner, and asking your children for some hysterical jokes you can use in your presentation so that no one notices the absence of fancy graphics.

4. "Children are tough and resilient, and adversity builds character." The most beautiful part of my life are my two amazing children. They are also where I want to focus my best time. But the fact of the matter is, I am not going to be there to pick them up at school each day at 3 p.m. I'm going to be out of town overnight on business sometimes. And, there will even be times I don't get dinner or breakfast on the table and they end up piecing together their own meal. That is not what I envisioned when I first learned I was going to be a mom. I pictured perfectly starched smocked outfits and organic meals made from scratch three times a day. But our wild life works for us. And they love to hear stories about my crazy cases and especially love a good story about when a judge admonishes me from the bench – their favorite is "Mrs. Crider, when you are winning, it's best to sit down and stop talking." They love coming to my office and spending a day raiding the Firm supply closet to construct a four-foot structure of binders and paper clips in the hall. For me, being a lawyer-mom is about quality time and sharing my love for what I do (and especially the great stories) with my children. My two are the funniest, most self-sufficient, resilient kids you will meet.

5. "If you hit the bull's eye every time, you've got the target too close." Recently, I took the senior leadership of our Baker Donelson Women's Initiative to Washington, D.C. for a two-day strategic planning retreat. The highlight was a personal tour of the Smithsonian American Art Museum by its director, Betsy Broun. She is nearing retirement after successfully leading one of the most celebrated museums in the world. Her accomplishment is remarkable regardless of her gender, but she did it in a male-dominated field. So I asked her how she dealt with failures along the way (i.e., plates hitting the floor). First, she was really honest about her failures. Then she quoted a great American woodworker and said, "If you hit the bull's eye every time, you've got the target too close." That broken plate around our feet is a sign that we aim big and are willing to take chances. That's a really good thing.

6. "Being passionate is more important than being perfect." I represent health care providers and I love it. I'm passionate about their businesses. When we develop our strategy for a case, I want my client to know that I care about their business and resolving our matter with a great outcome as much as they do. I want them to know that they can transfer the anxiety they have about the matter that landed them in my office to me because I am passionate about resolving it. When I add people to my team, I'm not looking for the person with the highest GPA or the best resume. I'm looking for the person with a fire in her belly who really cares about what she is doing. That holds true for most situations. My clients care a lot more about whether they have a passionate and practical legal team than if every citation in the brief is in the proper Blue Book form or if there was a split infinitive in a letter to opposing counsel. Children love parents cheering wildly on the sidelines at two games a week more than a parent there for all four games that week with a sour attitude (even though my children profess to want me to stop yelling at games, I know they like it). I am not perfect and I bet you're not either, but we can choose to spend our time on things about which we feel passionate. Nobody is perfect, so cut yourself some slack.