

MY ADOPTED HOME

A- is an Asian F

Wednesday, April 18 2012

Marcella Purnama

You speak Glee? I know you know this infamous quote already. You don't speak Glee? It's okay, I know you know this prognosis already.

Symptoms?

Do you love to compare your grades with those of others?

Do you always want to know what others scored on that test?

Would you be devastated for a month if you didn't pass a test?

When you get an A- for supposedly A- graded subjects, do you consider it a fail?

Do you dislike sharing your knowledge with your peers, worrying that they might end up getting higher grades than you?

Do your parents have high expectations of you in terms of grades?

If you are generating these symptoms, here's the diagnosis. It's likely that you are (but not limited to being) Asian. Bias and generalisations aside, it is a widely known norm that Asians are more prone to being grade conscious, rather than excellence conscious. We learn not for the joy of studying, but to pass a test, and pass it successfully. Why? Is it a cultural thing, perhaps, or an individual thing?

As an Asian, I have experienced every symptom listed above. In high school, I loved to compare my grades with others. I would actually need to know what others scored on that test, just so I knew where I was standing compared to them. I have never failed a test, but I got a red mark once, and I was devastated for a month, crying for an hour while talking on the phone with my older sister who was overseas at that time.

When I received good marks, but I thought I could have done better, I would consider it a failure. When I knew something extra, I tended to keep it to myself unless asked, because I was just afraid that the one I told would ace and I would come home in despair. And my parents? They sure have high expectations, but in my case I don't think it's them who are more grade-conscious. I think it's me.

Coming to uni for the first time was a grade- shocking time because hey, I used to be a good student, and suddenly it was damn hard just to get a borderline H2A. I was so used to good grades that the first time I received 46% for my assignment, I broke a plate (no), ate a whole bucket of ice-cream (no), and stayed out karaoke- ing all night (not really). Well, okay, I imagined I was doing these things, but in fact I just went home and stared blankly at my papers, and after two hours of emotional distress I turned on the TV, and watched every chick flick movie in my hard disk. This camouflaged my tears perfectly.

When studying for exams, I listened to the song 'Win' by Brian McKnight over

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More often than not, the phrase "American college experience" evokes scenes from Animal House, Road Trip and Old School, of frat parties where doing keg stands, playing beer pong and chugging out of red party cups are standard must-dos.

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The aim of it, right, is to hit a ball into a hole with a club like device. Deceptively simple. In actuality, the ball is tiny and you're hitting it with an orange on a walking stick and the hole is on the other side of the world.

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and over again, reassuring myself that “I’ll never give up,” and that “I’m gonna win” over these 120 multiple choice questions, 9 short answers, and 3 essay questions that were attacking me from every angle possible. This was war. But halfway through my degree (in my second year, towards the end of my first semester), I have finally made peace with grades. Common sense kicked in when I watched the Bollywood movie ‘3 Idiots’. This is my favourite quote from that movie:

“Most of us went to college just for a degree. No degree meant no plum job, no pretty wife, no credit card, no social status. But none of this mattered to him, he was in college for the joy of learning, he never cared if he was first or last.”

As if it was made for me, the movie specifically tells me to “pursue excellence, and success will follow”.

I have never pursued excellence. I have always pursued that certificate of excellence. But even when common sense finally kicked in, it was quite a process for me to change my values and the paradigms that I have lived for the past 18 years. It still is. Why do Asians tend to be more competitive? A cultural thing, perhaps, but you do have a choice. You can either look at your grades as an Asian F, or just to be happy with an A- or whatever grades you have, knowing that you have done your best.

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