

THOUGHTFUL THURSDAYS

Disappointment, Setbacks and Failure

As a naïve and confident 24-year-old, I applied for a Head of Department position. I was unsuccessful. A few years later, after I had become Head of Department, I failed in my application to be a Housemaster. I moved to a different school in a different country and was again unsuccessful when I first applied to become a Housemaster. I was finally appointed at the third time of asking. I was successful with my first application to a Deputy Headship, but in a fit of hubris I turned it down and had to wait another two years and make a number of unsuccessful applications before I came to Blundell's as Second Master. I was unsuccessful with the first three Headships I applied for. Recruitment firms might describe my route to the top as quicker than average. But the truth is, I have failed far more often than I have succeeded.

I have also missed conversions and tackles, dropped catches, made ducks, and lost more big fish than I care to count. I once wrote off a car that did not belong to me, and I have burnt the toast more than once. I have been dropped from teams, let people down, made poor decisions, ignored good advice, and eaten too many crisps.

I wish I was the man my labrador thinks I am.

Life is hard. Challenges are unavoidable. Suffering is implicit. Struggle is necessary. And yet, as parents, we all find it immensely difficult to watch our children suffer or struggle. It goes against every instinct. We want to protect them, to smooth the path ahead, to remove pain from their lives. Our intentions are noble, born of love, but the unintended consequences can be damaging.

Too often, our efforts to shield our children from difficulty rob them of the very experiences that build strength.

In this two-part essay I want to explore our relationship with disappointment, setbacks and failure. Role modelling a healthy relationship with these things is perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give our children.

MANAGING OUR DISAPPOINTMENT

A good place to begin our reflection is to consider the concept of parental disappointment. Rob Pluke, a preeminent child psychologist in South Africa, wrote a challenging book *'A son to be proud of'*. He speaks insightfully about his experience of parents who ask his advice on how they, as parents, can help their children to fulfil their potential. When Rob explores this a bit more deeply, he often uncovers that the term 'their potential' actually means 'my hopes and dreams'. A father who truly believes that their son will become a star sportsman "once they begin to grow in confidence" or the mother who believes that their daughter will become a doctor "if only they persevered with the Chemistry classes she finds so difficult," are projecting their hopes on their child.

Pluke will say that these are classic cases of misplaced parental disappointment –as long as we, as parents, continue to seek the alleviation of that disappointment from our children, we have

a problem. It is **our** disappointment. It belongs to us. It is our responsibility. It does not belong to our children. Often, we pin our disappointment on them and expect them to change in order to resolve our frustration – and they suffer as a result.

Let us not be too hard on ourselves. This emotion is rooted in love. We want the best for our children. But we often see “the best” through the lens of what we value and recognise, not through their evolving understanding of what matters to them. If I love cricket, it is completely natural to want my children to love cricket too – and to make heaps of runs and take lots of wickets. That would undoubtedly give me joy because it is a currency that I understand. However, I need to check my enthusiasm and remind myself that this is their life, not mine, and they must find their place in it and their interpretation of success.

We can share our values with our children. We cannot impose them.

Brené Brown writes, *“Too many people decide to live disappointed rather than risk feeling disappointed.”* Disappointment, after all, is the inevitable cost of caring deeply and hoping boldly. If we love our children, and if we hold high aspirations for them, then disappointment will, at times, follow. But we do have a choice. We can allow disappointment to meld into frustration and resignation, or we can choose courage: the courage to keep hoping and to see disappointment not as a failure, but as an essential part of the parenting journey

WHAT HAS CAUSED THE ELEVATED LEVELS OF PARENTAL ANXIETY?

My sense is that parents’ fear of failure has intensified in recent times; not a fear of their own failure, but rather a deep concern that their children may, in some way, fall short. “Failure” is a complex term, and perhaps deserving of a separate essay altogether, but part of this anxiety stems from a growing recognition that the world our children are entering is markedly different to the one we knew. For many years, it was assumed that each generation would enjoy a better standard of living than the one before. That assumption no longer holds quite so firmly. Almost two decades have passed since the financial crash of 2008, and the intervening years have brought waves of uncertainty: economic turbulence, political instability, environmental crisis and technological disruption. Whether we engage with this consciously, or it sits as a quiet concern at the back of our minds, we sense that our children face a more complex set of challenges than we did at their age, and they sense it too. That mutual awareness can be a source of shared anxiety.

If you are 17 or 18 today, you know that top university places are fiercely competitive, that the job market is evolving at pace, and that you are likely to emerge from higher education with a significant level of debt. And yet, in the face of all this, I believe this generation shows remarkable poise, determination and ambition. Gen Z is often caricatured unfairly, but in my experience, they are impressively adaptable and deeply resourceful, even if they go about things differently from our generation. The list of issues they must navigate; global warming, the volatility of financial markets, the digital world, housing costs, Brexit, Covid, these are not of their own making, and yet they are stepping up to meet them with imagination and resilience. So yes, anxiety is real, but so is courage. We should not underestimate either.

Against this backdrop, I am deeply sympathetic to both young people and their parents. It is perhaps then no surprise that one of the most significant changes in education over the past decade has been the increasing involvement of parents. Understandably, many of us find it harder to tolerate seeing our children in difficulty, especially when the world itself feels uncertain. The less control we feel over the external environment, the more we try to assert control in the one domain that matters most to us; the lives of our children. And let us be honest; parents who send their children to schools like Blundell's are often people who are used to being in control. That is not a flaw; it is a fact. But it does mean that letting go, even a little, can feel profoundly uncomfortable.

Alongside this there are, of course, other specific reasons why we parents have become more anxious, more risk averse, and consequentially more acutely concerned about the well-being of our children.

The **online world**, a foreign land to many adults, is the native environment of today's young people. As parents, we often approach this digital landscape with suspicion and concern, and not without reason. Immersion in a world shaped by social media has profound implications for the emotional and social development of children. Much of it is benign, even enriching, but there is growing evidence that we have, at times, underestimated the subtler and more pervasive effects of constant connectivity and social media exposure.

Parents are right to be alert to these risks. But it is also true that we are all learning, often in real time, how best to support our children as they grow up in a world that did not exist when we were their age. There is no blueprint, no perfect response, and the shared challenge invites humility and ongoing conversation. While we can and should take steps to protect children from overexposure, the ultimate goal is not sheltering but equipping. They will, in time, need to navigate this world on their own. And the good news is that many of them already are.

They are often less daunted by the digital space than we are. They adapt quickly, find community in unexpected places, and are often more discerning than we give them credit for! Our task is not to fear the world they inhabit, but to walk alongside them as trusted guides, recognising that while the challenges are real, so too are the opportunities for growth, connection and creativity.

Economics. In 2017 Kate Raworth published a brilliant book called 'Donut Economics', in which she set out an alternative model to the neo-classical economics which has shaped the western world. Neo-classical economics has always seen the goal to be the ever-increasing efficiency of the utilisation of scarce resources. There has been an assumption that through technological advancement and free-market forces, humanity will be able to make limited resources go further and further with inevitable increases in the standard of living. Many commentators have long pointed out that scarce resources are not just scarce, they are, in fact, finite. Therefore, the model of indefinite progress is wholly inadequate. It is said that economists, generally, are very good at explaining what has happened, but that the science has a dreadful record of predicting what will happen next! However, it does not take an

economist to predict that at some point our resources will run out and that what is required is for humanity to collectively learn to live within its means.

Raworth's "Donut" model challenges us to think differently; to balance the need for human flourishing with the ecological limits of our planet. It reframes progress in terms of sustainability and fairness, not simply expansion. That shift in thinking has profound implications for the next generation, who will need to navigate, and help shape, this evolving economic landscape.

As adults, we may understand this at an intellectual level, but we do not always live as though we believe it. The decisions we make often lag behind our convictions. But our children see the gap. They are acutely aware that the systems and habits we have grown up with are not sustainable, and they are already beginning to imagine, and in some cases build, something different. That can be unsettling, but it is also energising.

We should not underestimate how seriously young people are taking this challenge, nor how creatively and pragmatically many of them are beginning to respond to it. If necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps we can look forward to a generation of truly inventive economists, leaders and citizens.

Is Democracy broken? When we were growing up, democracy was widely regarded as virtuous and good; a cornerstone of the free world. Democratically elected governments overseeing free-market economies represented, for many, the pinnacle of political progress. But that model is now under greater scrutiny. The shortcomings of democratic processes have become more visible, and confidence in traditional institutions has been shaken. Young people are not immune to this; it affects their sense of stability and trust in the systems that shape their lives.

That said, discomfort is not always a bad thing. It can prompt important questions, sharpen awareness, and fuel the desire for something better. Feeling less safe or certain might, in some cases, be more honest than feeling falsely reassured. It may be that the current sense of unease is not simply a sign of decline, but a necessary prelude to renewal.

We are seeing young people engage with politics and global affairs in increasingly sophisticated ways. Many are deeply informed, morally alert, and eager to hold power to account. They are not cynical; they are searching. And in that search lies hope, not just for a more robust form of democracy, but for a generation determined to play a part in its renewal.

The Mental Health pandemic. There is undoubtedly a greater awareness of anxiety and mental health challenges today than in the past. Whether this reflects a genuine increase in prevalence, a shift in classification, or simply a more open culture around diagnosis and discussion, it is clear that we are far more attuned to the signs of poor mental health, and that awareness extends to our children too. This is, in many ways, a very good thing. Young people today are far more likely to speak up when they are struggling than many of us were at their age. The stigma has lifted, and emotional openness is becoming a strength rather than a source

of shame. Schools, families and wider society are more prepared than ever to offer support and listen carefully.

Of course, greater awareness also comes with its own challenges. With the best of intentions, we can sometimes become hypervigilant; quick to interpret ordinary discomfort as a sign of something pathological. A degree of anxiety about exams, friendships or the future is entirely normal, even healthy. It is part of what motivates us, grounds us and signals that we care. What we must be careful of is becoming anxious *about* being anxious; a cycle that can become self-defeating.

Perhaps we are the generation who have all spent some time in therapy ourselves and, predictably, the first question asked is: “So, tell me about your parents...” It is hardly surprising, then, that we are so eager to get our parenting *right*, sometimes to the point of self-doubt. Forget Jonathan Haidt’s *Anxious Generation* - perhaps it is time someone wrote *The Anxious-Parent Generation*! In truth, there is much to be hopeful about. The conversations are happening. Support is available. Empathy is growing. And, most encouragingly, our children are showing a maturity and openness that gives us reason to believe they will be well-equipped to look after both their own wellbeing and that of others.

In the second part of this essay I want to look at why disappointments and setbacks and learning to deal with them are so important to the development of children, but I will conclude the first part with a challenge to us as parents:

How do we role model dealing with disappointments and setbacks?

When our children observe us in moments of difficulty, what do they see? When something feels unfair, do we lash out in frustration or blame others? When we suffer a setback, do we look outward for excuses or inward for understanding? When something we had hoped for does not come to pass, do we bottle up our emotions and quietly simmer, or are we able, at times, to show our vulnerability and talk honestly about how we feel?

Of course, none of this is easy. It takes judgement and emotional intelligence to share disappointment appropriately with our children. I am not suggesting we should pour out every emotion or narrate every frustration. But if our children never see us engaging constructively with failure, setbacks, and disappointment, then how can we expect them to know what that looks like?

The truth is that none of us gets it right all the time. Even with the best of intentions, we stumble. But this in itself can be a powerful lesson. When our children see us making sense of our struggles, when they witness us regroup, find perspective, and carry on, they are learning. When they hear us say, “I was really disappointed, but I’ve had time to think about it,” or “I didn’t handle that well at the time, but here’s what I’ve taken from it,” they are seeing emotional resilience in action.

The key is not perfection, it is reflection. Our children learn as much from what we model in quiet moments as from what we explicitly say. The way we respond to difficulty, whether

with grace, grit, or even humour, sends powerful signals. They are always watching, not to catch us out, but to understand how adults navigate life.

A final thought...

Most of us, as adults, know that disappointments and setbacks are not terminal. Most of us know that the emotions pass and that we will find a way to bounce back and to find a way forward.

Our children do too. They may need some help – as we might do on some occasions – but, more often than not, they will work it out with some encouragement from us. If we rush in to ‘fix’ things then we deprive them of the opportunity to learn that they can cope, that the emotions do pass, that they can bounce back. We must have more faith in their self-efficacy and resilience.

Part II will look at how we need to change the language around failure and disappointment and also take a look from a pupils perspective as to why failure, and disappointment, are so important in their developmental journey.