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P Equals Pass: Reflections of a Perfectionist on Surviving the Professoriate

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Abstract

P Equals Pass describes the author's trajectory as a perfectionist from childhood through graduate school and the professoriate. As a tenured professor, department chair, and single parent, she shares personal and professional events that led her to reappraise her priorities. With an audience of other black women academics in mind, the paper recommends a number of steps to dismantle crippling perfectionism.

Background to my Pursuit of Perfection

When I was a young girl, my parents introduced me to a world of black greatness from an early age. We had paintings of Maasai maidens on the wall of our wood paneled living room on the white side of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. There was a painting of Frederick Douglass on one side of our fireplace and W.E.B. DuBois on the other. I was so fascinated by the latter that I remember doing a report on him when I was in elementary school. Having been labeled a ‘nerd’ and an ‘oreo’ by the bullies at school, I was attracted to his message of black intellectualism (DuBois, 1903a). By the time I understood that his message of vanguardism was elitist—and tinged with a colorism that discounted those with dark skin like mine (DuBois, 1903b)—I was much older and had already internalized the message: I must be more than average; I had to always be at my very best.

I strove for A’s in middle and high-school, then was remarkably proud of my B average at Oberlin College because I knew I worked my butt off for it and it was the very best I could do. That elite predominantly white institution (PWI) served me well, but I opted to attend graduate school at the preeminent historically black college/university (HBCU), Howard University where I relished in not being a minority for the first time in my life. As a master’s student in African Studies, the only difficulties I encountered during the program involved funding. Indeed, a key lesson was that I wasn’t so special when there were thousands of other brilliant black people just like me everywhere you looked. Outside of school, I worked a day job in my early 20s where over four years I was promoted from being an administrative staff to an international project manager because of my attention to logistical detail. However, it was as manager on that literacy project in South Africa that I tired of hiring people to do meaningful work that I believed I was qualified to do. I invited one of the consultants to lunch and asked about her path to that position, and that conversation led me to pursue a doctorate in Anthropology at Duke University.

Cracks in the Perfectionist Façade

Duke is where the wheels began to fall off. The pursuit of perfectionism in the first semester of my doctoral program led to a stretch of six straight weeks without sleep. Sure, the program was demanding and required late nights studying, but trying to learn the new language of a discipline that felt so foreign to me was the cause of my insomnia. One day I told my mother when I had last slept; the next day she took me to her acupuncturist. The sister (i.e., black woman) acupuncturist saw me 5 days a week initially. Then we dropped down to 3 days a week. Then once a week. Eventually I was seeing her once a month until I departed for fieldwork. That woman – and my mother – probably saved my life back then. My sleep normalized over time, but even to date remains imperfect.

I conducted my dissertation fieldwork in Cuba, and tried to put into practice what I had learned about ethnography in the classroom. My project focused on how the renewed focus on tourism in the country after the fall of the Soviet Union affected everyday Cubans; my primary finding was that it replicated pre-revolutionary understandings of race and belonging (see Author 2011). In the course of my fieldwork, I met a young man who worked at the hotel where I was

staying. He regularly helped me make sense of what I was learning at night in the streets of Havana while I transcribed my notes poolside in the daytime. Eventually we fell in love and married.

But the marriage began to crumble before it even began. He told me within a few months that he had begun cheating on me when I returned home to prepare for our Havana wedding. While working on his immigration case, we limped along in an international marriage for a year, before he told me about the latest women (yes, plural) that he was cheating with when I visited over winter break. I returned to the U.S. early and clearly remember laying in the fetal position in my dark apartment for days without eating since the thought of food nauseated me. This was definitely not the perfect marriage! At some point, I peeled myself off the floor to make a doctor's appointment to address the pain I had been experiencing in my bladder since returning home.

While at the doctor's office, the nurse asked me how long it had been since my last menstrual cycle. I had no idea. She asked if she should run a pregnancy test; I must have said yes because when she returned to the room, she said "Congratulations!" I literally had no idea what she was talking about, so she clarified: "You're pregnant." I sat stunned, and when I was left alone to dress, I called my mother from the examination room. I might have called my sisters too. When I got to my car in the parking lot, I thought to myself 'Oh yeah, maybe I should call [my then husband] too...' I don't remember many of the details, but we ultimately decided to give it another try. There is no such thing as a perfect marriage after all...

I finished my dissertation a little later than was the initial plan due to a first trimester of beastly morning sickness. Since both of my parents have doctorates, they each told me as I finished the doctoral program at Duke: "You don't have to get an A on this one, you just have to pass!" I smiled and heard it as their way of telling me that I didn't have to stress so much or push so hard, as had always been my way. I had planned to defend my dissertation in the spring semester and walk in the May commencement but ended up defending in August. Not too far off track for a perfectionist... The following month, though, I noticed my (then) husband sounded strange when he called from Cuba to wish me a happy 35th birthday on the morning of September 12. When I asked him about it, he said we could talk about it another time. The next day he told me he was in a relationship with another woman and was divorcing me. He married that woman in October. I gave birth to my daughter in November.

Dismantling Perfectionism

So I have been raising my daughter now for 15 years, and she is the one who taught me the lesson I hope to convey in this essay targeted at other black women academics: "p equals pass." My parents tried to tell me, but I had to learn the hard way. In a marathon, you exert the appropriate amount of energy at the appropriate times. Sometimes you jog; sometimes you kick hard. *The bottom line is that me at 80% is the equivalent to most people at 100%. Nobody else can tell the difference. I don't have to give everything my all so now I don't.* How did I learn this lesson? Let's fast forward to my current position.

In June of 2006, I packed up my Ohio apartment and moved with my 14-month-old baby across the country to Colorado. I had been hired away from the lovely small liberal arts college that had awarded me a teaching dissertation fellowship when I returned from fieldwork; plans had been in the works to keep me on for a tenure-track position when the University of Colorado called. Though my sister had lived in Denver when I interviewed (with my nursing baby in tow!), she warned me that she and her family were moving soon so not to factor them into my decision to take the job. Despite the fact that I would be far from any network of friends or family, I accepted the position.

Those early years are a blur. I did the best I could at teaching and came up with a plan to publish no less than one article a year in addition to converting my dissertation into a book in time for tenure after year six. I was a good colleague and fit in well with the department—and we should all know that the question of ‘fit’ is often a defining one for us black women in the ivory tower. I smiled, was friendly, and adeptly spoke my mind in meetings without ruffling feathers. I accepted invitations to dinner with senior faculty that I now know were not offered to other junior faculty. Without revealing the emotional labor involved, I expertly wore “the mask” (see Dunbar, 1913). Still, everyone knew that I was on a timer when I was on campus because I had to make the 30+ minute drive to pick my child up from daycare by 6:30. And so it went until March 17, 2011.

It was almost spring break, and I would be up for tenure the following academic year. I was teaching a graduate seminar on race that involved some difficult conversations. The night before, I recall mediating an ugly discussion between two students on the course blog. That same night, I had also gotten a menacing call from my student loans who were ‘trying to get blood from a turnip’ (so to speak). It was spring so I had thoroughly cleaned the house, and it was Lent so I was doing a Daniel Fast with my church.

That afternoon, as I prepared to take my 6-year-old to the dojo for her martial arts class, I felt dizzy and lay down for a bit. Now, I haven’t mentioned that I occasionally had been having dizzy spells over the years ever since that sleepless era in graduate school, but it was part of my norm, so I didn’t pay much attention to it. I had mentioned it to my doctor a few months earlier, but we were focusing on some other health issue at the time; the dizzy spells had been going on so long we figured it wasn’t urgent. That St. Patrick’s Day, it took longer than usual for the dizziness to pass, but one couldn’t be late to the dojo, so I splashed my face with water and tried to get it together. Like all good mothers, my policy was, keep the kiddo on her schedule no matter what!

During the drive, my vision was fuzzy. In particular, as I approached a stoplight at a major intersection, I realized I couldn’t tell if it was red, yellow, or green, so I pulled to the side of the road. A man driving behind me approached and asked if I was okay. I don’t remember answering him. He called 911 and my daughter gave him my details from the back seat. I was on the phone with my most dependable friend. I told her where I was and to come get my daughter. I was alert enough to know I didn’t want her riding in an emergency vehicle to god knows where while her mother was taken to the hospital. Fortunately, my friend arrived at exactly the same time as the ambulance. I was taken to the Emergency Room, where I recall cursing out a doctor

because he was ‘stabbing me in my neck’ trying to put some kind of tube in me. I remember my friend blocking my daughter from seeing me vomit over the side of the gurney when they met us in the ER. The diagnosis: I had had a heart attack.

Mind you I am (or was at the time) a slimly built semi-vegetarian 41-year old who doesn’t smoke or have any underlying conditions. The doctors were completely mystified as to why I would have a heart attack. I stayed in the hospital for two weeks. Every time they determined I was fine; I would get those old dizzy spells just as they were preparing to check me out. So that became the new question: ‘why is she getting these dizzy spells?’ The CT scan they ran on me when I was first admitted revealed nothing. At the end of the two weeks, they put some kind of dye in my bloodstream and did a 3-D CT scan, which revealed a benign piece of adrenal tissue that had attached itself to my bladder. Apparently, whenever pressure was released from my bladder, my blood pressure would first soar, and then crash which had put a strain on my heart over time. By the end of the summer, they had done surgery to remove the tissue, and I was on the mend.

The University granted me a medical leave for the Fall semester. I was angry that my department chair had advised me to pause my tenure clock during the leave. I wanted my case to be reviewed as it was, but my chair suggested I use the recovery time to finish the one last publication I had submitted to a major disciplinary journal that required revisions. I conceded and went up for tenure the following year. I now look back on that as my first formal acknowledgment that “p equals pass.”

Since returning to work from the medical leave nine years ago now, I have heeded that mantra and shifted my priorities. Now I protect myself from any semblance of stress. If working on a committee will put me in prolonged contact with someone with a toxic personality, I politely identify a different committee on which I’d prefer to serve. I have become the posterchild for black women teaching white folks how to clean up their own messes: ‘How about I serve as a consultant on this, but I don’t think it should be up to me as the only black person in the department to serve on every committee related to climate [or diversity]. Sound good?’ Whereas my life until my daughter was born was about pressing the gas to the floor and demonstrating black excellence at all costs, she was now the only item on my agenda that really mattered.

I should note, however, that while my daughter is my highest priority, I make no secret of my imperfections as a mother. Raising her alone since birth, I recall closing out my toddler’s cries after our bedtime struggles by locking my bedroom door, then weeping on the floor of my master closet until I could handle motherhood again. By the time I emerged, I would find her asleep outside my room where she had cried herself to sleep. As she has grown over the years, I have done my best not to impose my old expectations of perfectionism on her. Like most parents, I have no idea if I have made the best choices in that regard. My parents used to strictly enforce homework time and how much my sisters and I were allowed to watch television. By contrast, I figured if she had done all of her homework and allowed me some peace, how much harm could a little tablet time do? Interestingly, now that she is in high school, we have kept that policy and she remains a straight-A student even in her Honors and A.P. classes despite having a job and

being involved in competitive athletics. My goal has been not to stress her out, but I admit that I sometimes wish she would step on the gas just a little bit harder. She may have learned my 80% rule a little too well!

5-steps for Perfectionists

I am sure it is medically and politically incorrect for me to conceptualize perfectionism as an addiction, but that is how I experienced it. At the very least, it was a personality tick that led me to compulsively try my hardest all the time until I found myself in the hospital for all of those weeks. I wish I could say my shift in mentality from perfectionism to “p equals pass” happened cold turkey; instead, it required a series of steps:

1. *Look around!* Dear Reader, I know that working hard and doing your very best are how you have achieved all that you have accomplished to this point in your life. You have likely held yourself to a higher standard than others because our parents taught us that ‘we have to work twice as hard to get half as much as white folks.’ But I invite you to look around. Are you working twice as hard or five times as hard as everyone else? How would it affect the world around you if you worked little less hard than you are working now—would anybody notice? Wouldn’t diminishing your energy output by a couple of factors still find you doing more and better than those around you? Once I allowed myself to take to heart the meme that once circulated wishing for “the confidence of a mediocre white man” (Shaw, 2016), I decided to give myself grace to make some mistakes, even big ones (but since I’m not a white man, I have no problem owning up to those mistakes, and even asking for help fixing them!). I encourage you not to let the imposter syndrome from which so many black women academics suffer constrain you (Doggett, 2019). No one else is perfect, why should you be?

2. *What is important to you?* As described above, finding myself hospitalized with a heart attack as slim, semi-vegetarian, non-smoking, 41-year old made me reevaluate my priorities. Getting tenure and doing well at my job were still important but making sure my daughter grew up with her mother was all that really mattered. Anything—and I mean *anything*—that threatened that became secondary. Each person has to figure out what is important to her. When you are clear on that, you will figure out how to protect enough of yourself to ensure the primacy of your priority.

3. *What can you delegate to others?* After figuring out what is important to you, this is the step that will allow you to put yourself first. It is hard for a perfectionist to give up control and trust others to do what she believes only she can do. If this is you, I encourage you to remember all of those times you stewed with resentment because you were left to do everything yourself. Interrupt the stewing before it starts and ask for help! And once you’ve asked for it, don’t micromanage. Tell your support team what the end goal is and let them work out the details. My daughter is actually the one who taught me how to do this: She used to clean her bathroom with the door open and I would pipe in from time to time with “don’t forget the mirrors!” or “did you use toilet bowl cleaner?” By the time she was 10 she had begun to close the bathroom door while she cleaned. Later, I would look in on her work and find everything clean enough. It might not have been exactly as I would have done it, but (a) it was done, (b) I didn’t do it myself, and (c) both my daughter’s and my peace of mind was maintained in the process.

4. *Getting to 'good enough.'* Given that many excellence-minded black Americans were raised with the above-mentioned dictum that we have to work harder to achieve the equivalent of other groups, talk of 'good enough' feels like an affront to our ancestors (see Swanson 2020). I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that we aspire toward the average (or white male mediocrity). Instead (to use a metaphor that resonates with decades of #blackgirlmagic), I am saying that we don't always have to run at a full out sprint—do your best, but you don't have to pull a hamstring running through the tape when everyone else is just getting to the curve. Make sure have some left for the next race, Sis!

5. *Breathe!* It seems like this step should go without saying, but my own experience teaches me it doesn't. During graduate school, the brief period while I was married, when my child was young, and in the difficult times when there were more bills than money, I would go through long stretches with tight knots in my stomach. Once I started doing yoga, I became more cognizant of my breath. I learned that the knots came when I was 'sipping' air rather than breathing in and out fully. I still find myself with knots in my stomach occasionally. My job at those times is to stop holding my breath! I then force myself go for a walk, turn on some music, sing while I'm cooking... whatever I need to do to shift from holding everything in my head to letting it out through my body. Usually the change in gears, gives me more energy to address whatever had been stressing me.

Conclusion: Be True to Yourself

Though I may have retired from perfectionism, since I turned 50 last year, I have shifted gears once again. I now deliberately 'let my OCD flag fly.' That is, I no longer try to keep my obsessions and compulsions tucked away so that no one else could see them. One might ask why I embrace obsessive compulsivity given its label as a psychological condition, while disavowing perfectionism? As I experienced it, perfectionism was central to my identity. It was non-stop and I was never happy no matter how well I did something, whereas I find I can obsess compulsively in spurts then I am finished – whether perfect or not. Like a dog digging in the dirt, I can dig and dig and dig until something leads me to stop. I am not trying to create a perfect flower garden like my old perfectionist self would, I am just digging because it serves me somehow.

For example, my family has a beach vacation every summer where we all come together from different parts of the country. Every member of my family is an alpha and wants to be in charge, but no one is much for following through with details. I, on the other hand, don't particularly need to be the alpha all the time, but I have the utmost respect for details. After several years of watching us spin in place for months, stressfully finalizing plans just before the trip, I finally started asserting my OCD. I began wrangling the family during the winter holidays about our plans: when do the kids' summer activities end and when does school start? I would begin looking at beach houses to rent in January and gave my sisters options to think about by February. Once we made a decision on a house, I broke down the payments by household over the number of months until the vacation, sending messages on when everyone's money was due electronically each month to the family member who had put the house rental on her credit card.

I outlined all of this on a google sheet that was shared among family members that tracked everything (of course, I was the only one who ever used it!). In the absence of our family vacation in summer 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis, I have proposed that we continue pooling our money in a savings account so that we can buy *our own* beach house that we can use whenever we want to, as well as rent out to others. In other words, I am letting my mind dig all the holes in the ground that it deems necessary and allowing myself to execute those narrowly focused hair-brained ideas with the support of others. I do not require perfection in the execution, but I see to a thorough execution of the idea.

When I interviewed for the departmental chairship, I told them of my detail orientation and how my leadership style involves bringing a collective plan to fruition with the support of the team. I was explicit that as an outsider, I have no intention of doing all of the heavy lifting myself. I will help them figure out where they want to go, then draw from the skills I have gained at delegating to get them there. Having completed funded research in the past year, the bigger trick will be to balance my new role as chair with getting my next book project into the hands of a publisher while my findings are still relevant. As always, I will do my best at both—but hold no illusions that things will go perfectly.

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