

A Perfect Circle
Lowell House Speech by Jennifer Tu

Perfectionism. Body image. Daily comparisons with others... I have struggled with all of these things, and my eating disorder was just one manifestation of a consistent mental health issue. Back in 1976, when you could still count the number of anorexia patients every year at HUHS on two hands, it was diagnosed in adolescent women by “severe weight loss which is self-induced, amenorrhea [loss of period], and a specific psychopathology.”¹ In high school, I would have fit this exactly. Even now, I am still recovering in some ways, grappling with a desire for self-control, constant anxiety about how I look, and obsessive thoughts of dieting and exercise.

However, I want to share with you, not so much the specifics of my experience, but rather, the treasured insights that germinated from recovery. These three lessons aren’t from the Internet or magazines. They come from face-to-face time with loved ones, who have shown me how to cope, and, on a deeper level, what it means to be human.

Lesson No. 1, from Baba (爸爸): “Beware of Photoshop, and remember Jennifer Lawrence and Kate Winslet.”

“Forget about the models, J,” my dad tells me. “Just remember my favorite actresses: Jennifer and, what’s her name? The lady in *Titanic*? Oh man...”

Even if he can’t always recall their names, Baba lightheartedly reminds me of how Jennifer and Kate take pride in their figures. He also likes to send me YouTube videos, which reveal how most of today’s media result from countless hands at the makeup station and hours at the computer. When I feel insecure, his straightforward observations of celebrities point to reality, in which everyone is *fearfully and wonderfully made*.² There is no reason to compare myself with people who don’t even exist (especially when there’s an adorable, real dad who loves me).

Even so, I couldn’t help it. It didn’t seem enough to say “accept yourself just as you are.”

Lesson No. 2, from my brother Tony Tu: “Know the person you want to be and the traits you truly value.”

My big bro is one of my greatest role models, the person who first sparked my interest in medicine and who is still the confidant with whom I can talk for hours on end. He’s also my harshest critic and beater of dead horses, who relentlessly reminds me that happiness can’t come from a sharp jawline, slim legs, or a curvy torso. No, what actually matters, at least for me, is inside: a sharp and flexible mind, a passion for caregiving, and a pure and faithful soul – in Scriptural terms, “*the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.*”³

This is powerful stuff. Even so, both my brother and I keep struggling with self-esteem and mental health on a daily level. It’s hard to take a step back and reflect on our inner states, especially when burnout looms on the horizon of busy, ambitious lives.

But does it have to be so complicated?

¹ <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1976/4/21/anorexia-nervosa-pthe-young-woman-reaches/>

² Psalm 139:14

³ 1 Peter 3:3-4

Lesson No. 3, from Er gugu (二姑姑), my aunt: “Yi pie, yi na, jiu shi ren (一撇一捺，就是人).”

It's so simple: with just two strokes, the Chinese character “ren” signifies a person. In a competitive world full of challenges and disappointments, it can be hard to just be a human being, to treat oneself and others with respect and dignity, to struggle with doubt and fear but still share hope and joy. Er gugu acknowledged this during my recent, brief visit with her in Nanjing, and she gave me another quasi-Confucian, calligraphy-related tip: “the secret to drawing a perfect circle is to make it imperfect.” By leaving a little hole, building in a small defect, one can achieve what looks like a flawless stroke in the big picture. In the same way, by accepting personal shortcomings and weaknesses that don't really matter, we can progress toward being people who are “perfect” in the areas that do, and we can draw closer together in “Communitas.”

These lessons may bring up more questions and concerns, and they may not relate with everyone in this room, but the people they come from really know me: the child I have been in the past, the young woman I am now, and the adult I want to become. Their insights have helped draw out something beautiful and life-giving from what has been a long, complex struggle in my life. Though mental health issues may come up again in the future, I trust that friends and family, as well as professional support, will be there. I hope that in any difficulty, you too will find loving people who embrace your imperfections, and wise words to consistently remind you of who you are: a simple human being, a precious, perfect “circle.”