

Parenting Solo: Look At Where You Slipped

Written by Michelle Greenlee Harris, Columnist
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A wise African once said, "Do not look at where you fell, but where you slipped". That's a great saying because it means, "Don't look at your mistakes, look at what caused you to make your mistakes". I could have put that proverb to use years ago, but this time when I read it I was taken back to my daughter's early years.

When my baby was in the third grade she had a major math meltdown. She would tear up at the mere mention of fractions and long division. While a math deficiency is a family trait, her reaction to numbers seemed a bit over the top. A chat with her teacher revealed that my child, while always eager to participate, was crushed if she got the wrong answer. It seems that her embarrassment over the incorrect response overshadowed the correction the teacher provided. Hmmm, I thought that was pretty profound. Don't let the mistake overshadow the lesson.

It suddenly hit me that my baby had no idea why I was sending her to school. Apparently she thought she was there to perform -like some Broadway star. She must have thought she would be like the play Rent – open to rave reviews, have a successful 13 year run (if you include kindergarten) and leave audiences wanting more. As long as she was perfect she was fine. If she needed any help, she turned to mush - I didn't get it.

I remember telling her that she was not the only student in class that didn't have the right answer. She frowned as she considered the possibility. "You come to school to learn" I told her. "Don't get so wrapped up in getting the wrong answer that you miss how to get the right answer".

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When you take that lesson and enlarge it to adult size, maybe I did understand how she felt. I was so broken by the death of my marriage that I couldn't learn anything from it for years. I might as well have been sitting in that third grade desk, cheeks flushed with embarrassment, eyes filling with tears. Boy had I gotten it wrong. I mean this was a mistake that had to become a matter of public record.

Then came that moment. You know – that ah ha moment when the student and the teacher finally connect. Most of the time the teacher was already in place, waiting for the pupil to arrive. If only I could save my daughter valuable time and teach her how to get to ah ha, quicker.

That is part of her emotional inheritance – the map to ah ha and beyond. As she's preparing for college I see a mixture of nuh uh and ah huh. Sometimes she is still that third grader, face hot with embarrassment. But there are those magic moments now when the grown up shows up and she handles her latest stumble with grace – immediately searching for the lesson in the situation. That's when I think "Whew, she gonna make it!"