

This month's blog:

Don't Move the Goalpost, Annihilate It

By Jennifer Harrison

We all know the story of The Tortoise and The Hare. The quick bunny who scampered like a maniac toward the finish line while his hard-shelled competitor chose the slower, steadier, and – ultimately – more effective method of easing on down the road to victory. It's a tale about going at the right pace for oneself, the one that serves the purpose most effectively.

But how many people know that there was a third character in the tale? (...Ok, there actually wasn't, but for our purposes, we'll take some creative liberties.)

The third character in this remix was a human. Not a young human, necessarily, but, say, around the transition-to-adulthood age. Just for argument's sake.

The human happened to be taking a stroll on that lovely autumn day, inhaling the scent of wet earth and listening to the crunch of fallen leaves beneath their Uggs. Chuckling at the scampering animals that passed a few minutes apart. First a bunny, then, later, a turtle. Taking in the beautiful day. The human walked only as quickly as their needs dictated and aimed at a destination they had set for themselves.

So, why don't we ever hear about that third character when the story is told? Because the human wasn't part of that race. That race was for the animals who wanted to race and had set a goal to cross their specific finish line. The human, however, had a totally different mission. The human's particular finish line was experiencing the path the way that was appropriate for them, beholding the day and the journey in their own particular manner.

And they were doing it brilliantly, by the way.

Racing is great and sharing a finish line can be fine. But not everyone wants to – or needs to – or should – participate in a common mad dash toward a pre-prescribed end. Marching to our own beat at our own pace and toward our own destination is truly the best way to be successful.

It is the same with our students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Their goals are as varied as the people who strive for them, a "win" manifesting in any number of iterations. There is no one right goal, no singular sign of triumph.

It's time we rewrite the narrative so we can celebrate everyone's individual experience, whether their end game is college, employment, a family, living independently, making a new friend, making a meal, or making a bed. It all marks success, it is all a 10 out of 10.

"Moving the goalpost" means changing the rules mid-task so someone finds it difficult to win. I think we need to tear the goalpost down altogether, to reframe success so it honors who is doing the work and how amazingly they are doing it.

British disability inclusion and accessibility strategist and consultant, Dr. Shani Dhanda, suggests several approaches to avoiding the comparison game and focusing on personal goals and growth. These modes include:

1. Watering your own grass. Dhanda states, "when we focus on other people, we lose time that we could otherwise invest in ourselves." So instead of assessing the vegetation on the other side of the fence, we should tend to our own lawns. And even if someone else's is greener, ours is still great to lie back on and daydream!
2. Accept where you are. Denying or fighting your circumstances is not only useless, it feels pretty awful. Acknowledge where you stand so you can then point yourself in the right direction!
3. Be your own ally. Give yourself pep talks. Recognize all the great things you can and have done - then put a check mark in the "win" column! Nothing makes us compare ourselves to others less than appreciating who and where we are.
4. Compare yourself with you. You are your own best motivator - look at the great things you've done and then challenge yourself to do even more.

Sometimes, it's not ourselves who are doing the comparing - and coming up disappointed - but others. This becomes even more apparent on high schools' College Decision Day when a certain percentage of the student population is thrilled with their future and the rest are left disdaining theirs. This is where parents and professionals can help flip the script: instead of announcing college decisions, how about we all announce next years' plans? That way, all students can stand up proudly and let their classmates know that they may be going away to college or joining a college transition class, they may be going to work or they'll be working with DVRS to gain employment in the future. Success looks different to everyone - let's not present a small box into which everyone's goals are expected to fit.

Finally, we should remind everyone that future success has little to do with how much ivy is creeping up the walls up one's dorm; according to psychotherapist Dr. Dana Dorfman, "research...indicates that factors such as self-awareness, relationships, and effective communication are greater indicators of future success than the college one

attends.” We need to recognize that everyone’s success is different and everyone’s path to that success will reflect their individual journey.

Take that, #DecisionDay. And take that, Hare, too.