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What Motivates You?

By **SHANNON DOYNE**

Peggy Payne, at age 62, is “still stewing” over not being chosen to spend the summer studying at the Governor’s School of North Carolina—in 1965. However, Ms. Payne credits this early rejection with helping her successful writing career. Have you ever had a disappointment or setback that fueled later success? How common do you think it is to respond to failure not with discouragement but a renewed “I’ll show ‘em” spirit?

In the Preoccupations column “[How Insults Spur Success](#),” Ms. Payne describes her own experiences, but also cites others’ examples of defying negative predictions about their abilities:

“It makes such a difference in your life when somebody tells you ‘no’ and you have enough survival instinct,” says Terry Vance, a psychologist in Chapel Hill, N.C. “It spurs you.”

As a college student, she says, she took psychological testing that supposedly indicated that she was too anxious for grad school. She proved those results wrong by getting her doctorate in psychology, and she has practiced ever since.

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Her husband, Robert Vance, says he got a “devastating” F on his first philosophy paper at Kenyon College. “I certainly wanted to prove to myself I could do A-caliber work” in that field, he recalls. He landed on the philosophy faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, teaching there for 35 years.

People tell these stories with evident relish. I’m not the only one wresting some success out of searing insult. When Jeanette Stokes — head of the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South, a nonprofit organization—spent a year at Amherst through a college exchange program, she says she told a professor that she was applying for a summer internship. She recalls that this man, an acquaintance, told her that she wouldn’t get it because she wasn’t good enough.

Turns out that she got it. She says: “I have been trying to prove that guy wrong my whole adult life.”

Students: Tell us about instances when being told “no” made you, someone you know personally or someone you admire — like an author, musician, athlete, political leader or other public figure—work harder to achieve success. Even if you have never experienced this, what personality traits do you think help someone transform a negative experience to a powerful motivator? What role does “survival instinct,” as Terry Vance characterized it, play in finding determination where others only see discouragement?

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