

My right hand dragged my mouse in circles, attempting to draw a filleted triangle. My left hand alternated between typing in dimensions on the numpad and reaching into my bag of Chester's Hot Fries. My mind was in a trance after having listened to "Try Everything" from Zootopia for the twelfth time in an hour. I rushed to complete the robot's climbing mechanism. There were two days left to qualify for the Robotics World Championship, and I just kept on clicking, and dragging, and typing, and clicking...

"Diego's Parts of Shame." Those words written on a piece of cardboard taunted me; they were a reminder of the eighteen defective parts I had created, all of which hung on the wall. Eighteen persistent failures. I, a sophomore leading the computer-aided drafting department, had failed three times more than the team combined.

As a third grader, I was captivated by Dory's advice to "just keep swimming." After all, that mantra led me to the top of a timed multiplication game in math class. All it took was continuous studying. I did the same set over and over, until the numbers were engraved into my mind. The method to succeeding became repetitive. The key to succeeding *was* to be repetitive. The math wizard appearing on my teacher's Smartboard proclaiming me a math magician after each game reassured it.

Persistence became universally applicable in the mind of eight-year-old me and lingered until I came into Calculus, junior year. As I walked into class, I spotted a bright yellow sign with the mocking words: "INSANITY: Continuing to do the same things but expecting different results." We took a quiz on the previous night's homework. Easy, I did all of it. I was confident for the wrong reasons. The score on my quiz shocked my eyes. 9/15. What had happened? I had done the work. I even memorized the questions. I tried again on the next quiz. 7/12. I continued to work harder. 5/8. I was failing consistently.

I was consistently failing. Those modest failures chipped away at the reliability of persistence. And then it hit me: I was epitomizing the yellow sign I saw everyday.

In computer science, we were learning about loops: snippets of code that continuously repeat until they meet a condition. There is a type of loop, an infinite loop, that iterates nonstop. I was an infinite loop. I realized what I had lacked in my daily life was the simple act of reflecting and growing. I incessantly completed my tasks and responsibilities throughout the day, but never took the time or patience to become self-aware. I was simply memorizing and rinsing and repeating the same flawed process every time. That was the true ugliness of persistence.

Tenacity. It took the same work ethic as persistence. No — it was beyond that. Tenacity is repetition with an adjusted trajectory after every failure. It means that when I am struggling at teaching my three-year-old sister to write the alphabet, I teach her in a different way. It means that if I lose in *Fortnite*, I change my strategy and techniques. It means that if my procrastination habits get out of hand, I change my lifestyle.

That year in robotics was the worst. We didn't win anything. But I evolved. My junior year, I was unstoppable. I made no contribution to the "Parts of Shame." I took the advice from Zootopia and "tried everything." I even replaced my hot chips with coffee. My ability to learn and reflect helped us win three prestigious engineering awards, two regional competitions, and a ticket to the World Championship. My tenacity doesn't stop there. Perhaps I will engineer advanced neural networks that mirror my approach to new challenges. Perhaps I will help design the next Falcon Heavy that reaches Mars. One thing is certain: I will always fail, but I will always grow.