

Not a Pep Talk: A Reflective Essay From a Third-Year Dental Student

If this were a pep talk for dental school, I would wax long and romantic about the dopaminergic effects of list-making. I would emphasize flashcards and how to take feedback effectively. I would maybe discuss time management and its role in success. Or maybe about how, unlike Al Gore, my inconvenient truth to reckon with is that a runner's high does exist and is not in fact an elaborate scheme to get me to exercise. Regardless of all that, this is not an inspirational discourse about being a dental student. Words on paper have always been a greater tool for me to express myself than words spoken, so I wanted to take time to evaluate in writing my experiences here in Iowa. As I reflect on my time in dental school so far, three things stick out.

The first and foremost is an incontrovertible truth that I believe with my whole being. And that is, there are not a whole lot of circumstances that listening to Franki Valli and the Four Seasons' "December, 1963 (What a Night)" at levels near auditory damage range can't improve. And if you disagree or are just not feeling it, the song is probably not loud enough. Give it another go. (See also "SOS" by ABBA, same instructions.) I could philosophize more about the musical genius that is that song, but I won't. It's one of life's great joys and that's a fact.

Second, when I think about my time in dental school so far I remember things like the borderline euphoria of the first sunny day in April after the long Iowa winter. I think about the smell of acrylic and pure rage born from the frustration of making my first interim crown in sim clinic. I think about the way the morning sun catches the falling leaves like glimmers of gold on my walk to school in the fall. I remember arriving at school in the dark and leaving long after the sun sets, feeling more like an automaton of dentistry and less like a human woman with outside interests and luxuries like free time. I think about the first time I became aware of the crime Midwesterners like to refer to as "breakfast pizza" and the subsequent disappointment I felt for the fate of taste buds everywhere. But really, what I remember is that there is more to life than

dental school. Things like the first sip of a cold Diet Coke, yoga, and how my garden looks in mid-July improve the good days and attenuate the hard ones.

Last and not as important as Franki Valli and the Four Seasons but still ought to be mentioned, is to be a goldfish. Before I came to dental school, I operated under the assumption that I had thick skin. While undergrad and working in retail did not disabuse me of that notion, about 3 months of dental school did the trick. I know this is something that is not unique to me and there are lots of evidence-based ways to deal with it, like improving self-esteem through journal writing or ugly crying in the bathroom. Mine is something I learned while watching the wildly popular Apple TV show “Ted Lasso.” In the show, the title character says that the happiest animal in the world is a goldfish because its memory resets every 10 seconds. While the scientist inside me recognizes that this is factually incorrect and just a popular myth, I can suspend my disbelief long enough to benefit from the sentiment.

In practice, there’s something to be said for letting your memory reset every 10 seconds. When I tragically, catastrophically, epically fail an exam, I let myself be a goldfish. When I spend my afternoon in endo, getting in everyone’s way and doing everything wrong, I let myself be a goldfish. When last month I power launched my interim crown that I painstakingly made with shaky hands on my very first crown patient into the trash accidentally with the air-water syringe, I let myself be a goldfish. Educationally, there are a lot of ideas and experiences to hold onto, but allowing myself to let go of all the other stuff is relieving, to say the least.

Despite having to seemingly reset my memory every 10 seconds, my confidence in myself and simply knowing what to do has grown more than I could have predicted. For example, there are finally days where I am marginally less nervous than the patient. Just imagining giving an injection used to feel like a near death experience, now it’s the most straightforward part of the appointment. I went from having a mild hypertensive crisis from giving a cleaning my first year to now extolling in calm detail the entire plot of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* while completing root canal treatment to distract a particularly chatty patient.

The amount that I have experienced in the last three years is unquantifiable but distilled down, what really matters is some good music and letting things go. Afterall, what is a little permanent hearing loss compared to unadulterated auditory pleasure?