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Achieving Reform through a Growth Mindset

In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama attempted to galvanize his constituents with the phrase “Yes, we can.” Clearly, this strategy paid off, and Obama became the first black president. However, the application of this phrase did not abate after the election, as Obama now had the task of navigating international relations, social welfare reforms, and economic policy. To some, this monumental undertaking may have seemed impossible. But not to Obama, who epitomized the statement “Yes, we can” to achieve progress during his presidency. This can serve as a model to all those who seek advancement. Although some may struggle to embrace this attitude, with the use of a growth mindset, the statement “yes, we can” enables both personal development and universal reforms.

The phrase “Yes, we can” actually serves as a simplification of the theory of growth mindset. The idea, originally developed by Dr. Carol Dweck, emphasizes the capacity to improve through dedication to hard work. This contrasts those who have a fixed mindset, believing that success is based solely on inherent attributes, leaving no room for improvement. For people with a growth mindset, failure serves as an opportunity for learning, since they grasp the belief that yes, they can progress, instead of fostering the fixed mindset perspective that mistakes are an underperformance of their given traits, therefore rendering them reluctant to try. As such, those with growth mindsets tend to achieve more, leading to the belief that growth mindsets are preferable to fixed mindsets (“What is a Growth Mindset”). Obama encapsulates a growth mindset in his campaign slogan; regardless of any small setback, through the hard work of his proponents, yes, they can achieve victory in the election.

A growth mindset can be internalized, resulting in personal advancement. Data has demonstrated that students who utilize a growth mindset are better equipped to respond positively to criticism, have superior regulation of emotions, and heightened social proficiency. Additionally, children learning with growth mindsets are less likely to form prejudice and stereotypes, since they view discrimination as variable (“Growth Mindset for Students”). By implementing an attitude that prioritizes students’ ability to achieve, in other words a “Yes, we can” mentality, they adopt integral skills that allow them to more easily succeed in the future. Unfortunately, even for someone who is intellectually aware of a growth mindset, it can often be elusive. This has at least proved true for me. Recently, at a sports competition, I became absorbed with all the mistakes that I was making, resulting in a sense of failure that manifested externally as an asthma attack. The next day, when reflecting on the competition, I was still unable to dismiss my blunders as learning opportunities, so my asthma attack continued. All week, every time I emerged from bed I was consumed by my fixed mindset, believing that encountering the world only provided another opportunity for failure. All week I wheezed over this panic, and all week I crawled back into bed, defeated. Maintaining a fixed mindset is a severely unpropitious method to recovering from an asthma attack, so this viewpoint had to be shed. Eventually, after I had coached myself into a constructive growth mindset, I decided to reattempt that sporting event. This time, I entered with the resolve that yes, even with mistakes, I could succeed. This “Yes, we can” viewpoint manifested success; I was asthma attack free for the entirety of the event. Therefore, implementing a growth mindset can allow personal improvement both in key life skills and the activities we love.

Despite the efforts of those who have already leapt into reform with the hope that yes, they could achieve change, continued endeavors must be made by those willing to take up the mantle of the statement. Successes have certainly been attained. For example, since the dawn of the U.S., women have earned reforms including suffrage, domestic equality, and the right to education. This was only possible due to the toils of those who believed that they were capable of enacting positive change. However, the need for this mentality of growth has not evaporated, as the reformers of this generation must tackle issues such as wage disparity, sexual harassment, and reproductive rights. A mindset that emphasizes the ability to reform, instead of accepting injustice, is essential to accomplishing change. One particular teacher at my school, who is also a nun of the Catholic congregation The Sisters of Mercy, offered me wise words on this subject. Because of her devotion to the Catholic Church, this sister committed to a life of service, teaching, and preaching. Unfortunately, the Church has a history of intolerance towards women, and with the appointment of a new bishop in 2013, restrictions on women in Rochester tightened. This sister was now forbidden from preaching, one of her true passions. Although these unjust limitations contradicted the sister’s values, she opted to stay committed to the Church, believing that by campaigning from the inside, yes, she could achieve the equality she coveted while staying true to the organization she loved. This mindset directly contrasts another teacher of mine, who claimed that if someone does not like a feature of an institution, they should simply leave. However, fleeing at the first hint of trouble achieves nothing. Ultimately, the sister’s message, which adheres to a growth mindset, is far more conducive to producing positive change.

The internalization of “yes, we can” gives me extensive inspiration for the future. At the time Obama used it, he was forced to include the verb “can,” since there were no guarantees that he would succeed in the election. However, considering the statement today with the proper mentality, it is simple to reimagine “yes, we can” as yes, we will. Yes, I will. I will further myself. I will create positive change in the world. I will vanquish small and great endeavors, because I am empowered by the knowledge that I can.

Works Cited

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