

Letter to a Discouraged Student

By Raymond Gerson

Dear discouraged student,

You said that “the school system hung the label of at-risk student on me and made me feel like I am dumb and a failure.” What others say about you is not as important as how you feel about yourself. Don’t let others define you. Find your own limits and discover from experience what you are capable of accomplishing. Discover your own abilities.

There are many different types of intelligence. Everyone has their own special talents and types of intelligence. For example, some have a gift for music, teaching, counseling, writing, sports, comedy, etc. These require different types of intelligence. Also, our intelligence is not fixed at birth. We can continue to increase our intelligence throughout our lives in spite of obstacles.

Read the biographies of great men and women and you will see that many of them were once labeled by others as unintelligent or mediocre. Winston Churchill failed the sixth grade and he had teachers who thought that he was not smart. Helen Keller was born deaf and blind. She was unable to speak until she was taught to do so by Anne Sullivan. Most people had no faith in her ability to accomplish anything of significance. As an adult, Helen Keller gave inspirational talks to audiences all over the world. It is not the hand that we are dealt that determines whether we win the game but it is how we play the game that counts. Helen Keller was born with a difficult hand but came out a winner. Some people are born with a good hand and lose the game by wasting their lives.

There are many other examples of intelligent people who were considered “dumb” by others. Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison’s parents were told when their children were in elementary school that they were “dumb.” Abraham Lincoln was demoted from being an officer in the military to the rank of private because he was considered incompetent. Even though some people considered Churchill, Keller, Einstein, Edison, and Lincoln to be unintelligent, they proved to be intelligent and made significant contributions to others.

It is difficult to predict what others will accomplish in their lives. Who can predict what you are capable of achieving if you work hard in school and are determined to succeed? Success in school depends more on skill and will than it does on brilliance. Good study skills, combined with the motivation to succeed, can take you a long way in school and life. Will or motivation must come primarily from within you. Study skills can be developed and courses are usually offered at community colleges and universities. Many of these courses contain success strategies which can be used to achieve your goals not only in school, but in your life, and they are also available to high school students through college early start programs. I could have used courses such as these when I was in school to build self-confidence and to learn how to study.

In middle school and during my early years of high school I experienced self-doubts, insecurity, and a lack of self-confidence. Like you, I also felt discouraged.

When I compared myself to others they seemed smarter, more popular, and superior in many ways. I had no goals and I did not understand how my classes were relevant to my life and future. Needless to say, my grades were poor to average. IQ tests indicated that I was of average intelligence and this is how I perceived myself.

My parents were concerned about my poor performance in school and they spoke to a high school counselor about me. He told them not to encourage me to go to college. He said that I was not capable of succeeding in college and that I would probably perform at a mediocre level at anything I did throughout my life. Fortunately, my parents did not tell me this story at that time which I probably would have used as an excuse to quit school. I did not find out what this counselor said about me until I graduated with a master's degree and an A average.

I thought about quitting school many times when I was a teenager. I am so thankful that I continued my education in spite of obstacles and periods of discouragement.

Over time and through my life experience, I discovered that I had talents and I began to develop my strengths. I discovered that I was capable of making a positive contribution to others through inspirational writing, public speaking, coaching, counseling, and teaching. I love my work and it gives me fulfillment and a deep sense of purpose.

Don't give up on yourself. You were born for a purpose. Search within yourself and discover your own special abilities and how you want to use them to make a positive difference.

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Raymond Gerson has a masters in psychology and over forty years experience teaching personal and career development. Career counselor, job placement specialist, trainer, and former owner of an executive search business, he teaches college success strategy courses. He is the author of five books, including Create the Life You Want. Two of his e-books, How to Create the Job You Want and Effective Job Search Strategies are available for free at <http://www.raymondgerson.com> along with numerous articles on success and study skill strategies.