

## A WORD TO THE LOSERS WHO ARE ALMOST ALL OF US, AFTER ALL

WELL, maybe this isn't the place to say it, but I really hate the Big Tournaments.

Some people have the mistaken impression that competitive speech and debate is no big deal, since we players are fortunate to keep our failures out of the newspapers even more often than our successes.

But anybody who ever went into the big Tournaments with a notion that success lay on the other side of a pack of picky, peppery judges knows that Losing -- which nearly all of the contestants finally accomplish -- is just as much of a personal setback as running the wrong way for a touchdown.

The reason is pretty simple. When you finally lose that last round that kills your dreams, what is left is grief. Something died.

Oh sure, everyone tells you that competitive speech is no big deal. Your coach and your colleagues ask you to do something that is frankly impossible and possibly unhealthy. We ask you to work on that oratory, or learn to make that character come alive, or spend hours in the musty library all with a driving dream. And then, when the driving dream runs out of gas, we expect you to shrug your shoulders and say, "oh well, it's just a game."

But games cause grief, too. And perhaps it is worse in our game, because there is no scoreboard telling you that you are falling so that you can get prepared, and the axe finally falls outside of the playing field, sometime in assemblies where there is no place to hide. That long walk back to your seat after taking the third place medal -- there's no way to practice it. And even if you could -- would you want to?

So, let me give you some unwanted advice in lieu of the practice. A few minutes spent reading this might help if you

ever lose a dream. Then again, probably not. After all, it's your decision how much this grief affects you. No one else can do it for you.

### A Few Cliches

1. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THERE WILL BE NO PHYSICAL LOSS. This might be a good focus for meditation during the wait for the assembly. You might not have the focus when the time comes to remember that nobody dies when the results are announced. Fortunately, we don't turn the lions loose when the judges say "thumbs down." Consider -- what happens to the losers in the swine judging at the state fair? And you think you have problems!

2. SEE THE REWARDS. I may be perverse, but this works for me. Frankly, not having to work several more months on this crummy debate topic is an advantage. Letting that character go is like getting a mother-in-law out of the house! And just how many times can you make that oratory sound sincere, buddy? And if it's Nationals you're talking about (All you folks obsessed with nats, turn away -- but then you aren't reading this anyway, are you? You KNOW you can't lose?) um... well... I DO have other things to do with a week in June. Don't you?

3. DIFFERENTIATE. This is a two dollar word that means to not take a ballot personally. In this activity, we have the advantage of performing, more in some events than in others, but still, we are not OURSELVES when we are in front of the judges. Try to remember that the judge could really care less who you are, because it would be too stressful to judge if he/she/it did. Therefore, what the judge is evaluating is you in a different masque. Take off the masque after the judging and you are still whole.

4. GIVE YOURSELF SOME TIME, THEN WASH YOUR HANDS. After the big tournament, al-

low yourself some time to feel rotten! Twenty four hours, say. Then, go to a movie, or take a music bath, and bid the dead dream good-bye. It's healthier, easier, and every once in a while, a little self pity feels so bad it's easier to remember to avoid it the next time.

6. AND IF IT REALLY HURTS TOO MUCH, DIVERSIFY. If a couple of days have passed and the whipped dog still appears in the morning mirror, then take the hint. You've got too much of yourself tied up in this activity. By no means am I saying you should quit just because losing hurts. Instead, find some other activities, even competitive ones, that will give you a wider zone of confidence.

Ah, you say, down there in the black hole of despair; I can't do anything else. Pfu, my friend. The fact you could so intensely wish and work for a desired goal proves you have the drive to do other things well, too. I have a friend who, when her efforts fell short of qualifying for nationals by one place THREE YEARS IN A ROW, became a professional storyteller. She says it gives her as much satisfaction as any performance she gave in four years of competition, and what's more, she gets paid for it.

What is most satisfactory is that our activity spins off success in many different ways, much more than a mere sport can. Reflect on this: In your long pursuit in quest of perfection in the spoken word, what have you learned about poetry of words and phrases? That alone may be enough to open up another episode of your life.

6. AND IF ALL ELSE FAILS, GO DANCING. 'Nuff said.

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