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# I'm Still Standing, But I'm Not Standing Still

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## I'm still standing, but I'm not standing still!

*Words of encouragement for the weary graduate student.*

By Janice E. Hawkins



When I made the decision to return to school for a PhD, I anticipated hard work, challenges, and a demanding schedule. Two years into my part-time program, **I proudly informed readers** of *Reflections on Nursing Leadership* that I was still standing and happy with my decision (Hawkins, 2014). Two years later, I'm not quite done. It's a long road, and I'm weary. But even with taking a semester off, I'm making steady progress toward the goal and starting to see a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel. For my fellow travelers in graduate school and the faculty members who teach us, I share my thoughts to encourage you on your journey toward degree completion.

### Enjoy the ride

There is more to graduate school than just the end point—receiving that degree. I have learned so many things along the way. Beyond the simple pleasure of learning something new, I have gained knowledge and skills that were immediately useful in my job. This has led to some unexpected opportunities. For example, my new skills and increased confidence in grant writing led to successful application for two small internal grants. One will support a study-abroad program. The other is a research grant from the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International to support my dissertation study.

On a much bigger scale, I am part of a grant team that was awarded funds to increase nursing workforce diversity in an underserved area. The overarching goal is to positively impact health care outcomes for this population. Receiving these grants and contributing to the goals they support are both professionally and intrinsically rewarding.

### Overcome fear and setbacks

I am convinced that a healthy amount of fear and the occasional setback are normal—even beneficial—for graduate students. At the start of each semester of my PhD program, I often am overwhelmed and feel inadequate to complete the requirements expected of me. I am afraid I lack the ability to be successful. But, of course, this is before I complete the assigned readings and access the resources.

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Indeed, I have discovered that, beyond the knowledge gained from completing assignments, the process itself is beneficial. I gain competencies as I work. My insecurities lead me to read more, ask a lot of questions, and seek out additional resources that help me be successful.

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I recently had a setback when the chair and a second member of my dissertation committee left the program. This caused some initial distress, but now that I am back on track with new committee members, I can see the advantage of having input and oversight from several expert scholars. Each brings different strengths to the committee. In the end, I will have a better product, and I will have learned something from each of them that will be valuable to me in the future.

#### **Wait until tomorrow**

When I start to get anxious about progress on my dissertation, the current assignment, or even the next sentence, it is usually better for me to wait until the next day to revisit it. Clarity sometimes comes overnight, in the shower, or on my commute to work. Rather than worry—OK, I still worry—I try to remind myself that things will be better tomorrow. Waiting provides balance and restoration.

Sometimes I wait on an assignment so I can spend time with family and friends. When my final comprehensive exams were scheduled too close to high school and college graduation for two of my children, I postponed my exams until the next semester. Although this set back my graduation date, it allowed me to give full attention to my children *and* my exams.

Of course, the opposite advice is equally true. Depending on the task, a better plan might be to do it today. I am my own worst taskmaster. I start early and end late. I set daily goals and push myself to completion. To make steady progress, some things *have* to be done today.

#### **Keep the main thing the main thing**

This is Stephen Covey's (1999) advice for highly effective people. I need frequent reminders of this. There are so many things I want to do, both professionally and personally, but I have to set priorities. I schedule blocks of time on my calendar to complete my schoolwork. Blocking this time makes it a priority and reminds me not to fill my schedule with other things. I keep a to-do list to keep me focused on the main things. I also have a mental "to-don't" list. There are things that I just don't have time for right now, and they belong on my to-don't list.

#### **Reflect on your goals**

Whenever I feel weary, I take a step back and remember my goals. My original reasons for returning to school are still true. This keeps me going. At this point, I am looking forward to seeing my back-to-school goal in the rearview mirror. But in the meantime, I encourage myself with the belief that objects in that mirror are much closer than they appear. [RNL](#)

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#### **Reference:**

Covey, S. R. (1999). *Living the 7 habits: Stories of courage and inspiration*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

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