

I recently wrote a post both on my X and LinkedIn feed talking about one of the greatest taboos in the academy. It started thus:

One of the things we never talk about in the academy is the state of our mental health. We imagine we are immune because of our education, status and position in society. So, we hide under these lies about us and slowly sink into a mire.

In this post, I recounted the fact that as academics, we believe that we are the cream of society, yet we struggle with many more demons than we ever imagine. We struggle with heavy teaching load, research requirements and lately, having to bring money into the University coffers. This is what I summed up in the following words of what the academy can make us become when I said:

Through the day, I have had my me-time. I have made the choice to be productive. As a machine, I know what production means at the end of the day. With student dissertation and assignment deadlines, I must push myself whether well or unwell. I am happy I have been productive, but at what cost? The academy lies to us that it cares. IT DOES NOT CARE. It makes machines of people who believe that the more students they churn out, the more efficient and effective they are. We become more inclined to our lives' solitude and forget to take care of ourselves.

In thinking about these words, I see the stark contrast I had with an earlier post as I wrote my PhD in which I said when I finish my PhD, I want to return to the things I always wanted. I talked about the anxieties that I faced, and sometimes the fears. I will be honest, one time one of my supervisors fell so sick she had to undergo surgery. I feared the worst would happen even when I put on a tough face believing she would come out well. I always had this fear that my supervisors would not see the end of my writing, so I threw many hours into what I was doing.

The person who tells you that the PhD journey is smooth is simply lying to you. Why? While we have our expectations, we have our battles to fight: our families tag on us. For us with children, our children make us feel useless that this 'damned thing' has taken us away from them. Marriages go through a trying time on this journey, and if not careful, they're bound to break. Our work places don't generally know why we need another degree yet we are producing just fine. Then, there are the people that always remind us that we have not finished (sometimes even when our time is not yet up). The PhD drives us away from people. We start being more selfish and individualistic, forgetting that there is a life out of this thing. When we come back to it, many times we honestly cannot easily fit in.

There will be times when you will fight with yourself. You will wonder why you undertook this journey, and there will be tougher times when you feel you want to let go. I always tell graduate students: We did not die, you won't die. While I say it now, if you said it to me years ago, I am not sure I would smile about the idea. It is only when we have gone through the fire that some of these things start making sense. Truth is, that is not always the case. I remember how, at the peak of the Covid 19 pandemic, my brother alone in Stellenbosch wrote me a message of how broken he was a good friend had died. Her name was Dr Catherine Anena. I was struck! While I had been dumbfounded by this news earlier in the day, I could not ever fathom that David knew this person. I was hit hard because she and I had talked a few days earlier, and that she was looking forward to being back. She did not make it. David

packed his bags, headed to CPT and came back to Kampala. He only went back to Cape Town for the ASAA Conference in 2022. Since then, he and I have made a pact to take time off and just the two of us go out, talk about our lives without holding anything back, and be free in each other's space. We have been intentional all these years about this!

Graduate education, worldwide, is a mess. It is full of thorns and thistles. We think we know where we are going only to realise we have not even taken the first step in the right direction. Folks, people commit suicide during their, especially, PhD years. Some people just get so anxious, and cave in to their anxieties. Some feel totally unsupported either by their supervisors, graduate coordinators (one ugly job and tag I take in SLLC), workmates, bosses, family, community. There is also a truth we may not want to think about: we lose some really close people on the journey. For me, a woman I have come to call mum was diagnosed with renal cancer, something that totally threw me off the course. It is these realities that we have to face every day as students (sometimes, it spills over for us faculty).

This brings me to an important thing: a PhD should not be a do or die thing. Why? While we need you to complete your PhD and MA degrees, we need you to stay alive. We need you to enjoy the fruits of years of hard work. I remember how I struggled to get back to my daily routine when I submitted my thesis for examination. I had beaten my body up so badly that sleeping at 8 pm seemed like a crime. It just simply did not feel right. I remember how my former Principal, Prof Ahikire, told me my problem was that I had just submitted my work. She asked me to take it slowly. I developed a high blood pressure issue when I should be relaxing. All of a sudden, it felt like there was nothing to live for anymore. It was like the baby I had birthed had taken all my life with it. Trust me, that feeling of unworthiness is there.

A story I share with people a lot is that because of personal tragedies, I sank into a depression on my journey. All of a sudden, it felt useless continuing on this path. I remember that while I was able to go through one phase without significant help, I sought help for the second. I simply put up an SOS on the MUASA platform, and the current Principal guided me to someone. I am ever indebted to the person she guided me to. He never told me what to do, he simply listened, advised and told me to make some decisions. I never went back to him. Later he met me and asked why, and I told him what I'd decided. He smiled and said, I knew you'd make the right choice.

It is hard to tell you, 'I've been there,' especially because many times, the PhD leaves us scarred. It may not show on our faces, but deep within, we know what we have burnt to get the coveted Dr title. But then, we are not you. Our experiences may be quite different from yours, and that is perfectly fine. However, you're not alone on this journey. And, because you are not alone, always seek help. This help begins with the networks you create around and for yourself, the people you talk to, the stuff you listen to. These networks go a long way in reminding you that you are not a machine, but a human being that will have the highs and lows. They will remind you that you can break down and get back again. What am I saying: Before things go out of hand, talk to someone. If talking to someone seems not to help, TALK TO SOMEONE, and seek professional help. It does not mean you've lost your mind, it means you care about yourself and the networks you have built. Remember always, you are not alone. There will always be that one person you ought to get to, break down about the tough moments, and go take a drink in the good times and simply throw this PhD and

graduate studies weight off your chest. In essence, do not forget to live your life even in the middle of the graduate school crises of your journey.

So, like the generations of people that fought this battle and journey with me, those who made those prayers, those who taught me and reminded me countless times to finish or submit THEIR thesis, I will make the same Star Wars statement to you all: May the force go with you!

Thank you very much.