Paying the Price of Being “Almost Perfect”

By Cammy Nelson

There I was, sitting in a room filled with the foremost leaders of my generation and there was only one question floating through my head “what are we doing to our young women?”

I found myself asking this question on two separate occasions in two different major US cities just a few weeks apart. The first, a national leadership conference in Washington D.C. The second, a leadership institute conference presented by a major teen publication at their headquarters in New York City. These rooms were filled with women who, at a young age, already had resumes most can only dream of. Ask them questions about their achievements and you would be amazed and, as I was, incredibly intimidated. These women knew what they wanted and they were determined to get it... or at least that’s what it seemed like.

At both events, a speaker walked to the front of the room, a woman who was more distinguished and impressive than some of us could wrap our heads around, and introduced herself to the audience. We soon discovered she wasn’t there to tell us about her key to success or to share her definition of “having it all”. Instead, she lifted her head to the microphone and began to tell us, in stark detail, about her struggle with depression throughout college and what she wished she’d done. Instead of seeking help, she maintained the façade. The perception everyone around her carried was that she was as close to “perfect” as anyone could get. Admitting to her real struggle wasn’t an option. Talking to people about the fact that she couldn’t get out of bed some days didn’t seem like an acceptable discussion. Eating didn’t bear any significance and sleep was her activity of choice. School had lost it’s meaning. Now, looking back, all anyone cares to notice is the degree she carries, not the semesters when she very nearly failed every class.

While the details of the story were different between the two speakers, the stories they shared were the same. It’s not important to know whom the speakers were or even at what conferences I heard them speak, the important part of this story came in the minutes that followed their words. The speakers asked for questions and, one by one, hands were raised. It was then that I realized the real similarity that these young women I was surrounded by shared. As each young woman stepped up to the microphone the statements began to sound the same, “you are telling my story. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. I can’t breathe at school and I don’t know what to do. I feel so alone and I can barely get out of bed every day. I’ve always been an achiever and I feel like my saying anything would mean disappointing everyone.”

In that moment, I realized what was really going on, as I watched tears fall from young women who were desperate for someone to pull them up from under the water. On two separate occasions, I was surrounded by the young women of my generation who felt silenced by the perfection expected of them. It was about
maintaining the image of perfection at any cost, even their mental health... and I could identify with it.

While I have never struggled with depression, I did understand where these young women were coming from. We were all functioning under the belief that our worth was wrapped up in what we could achieve. Why shouldn’t we believe that? It’s what we’ve been hearing about our entire lives. We got involved in school, we became leaders in our communities, and we shaped our lives around working hard because that is what would help us win the awards and receive the scholarships that would set our applications apart and get us into the colleges we were “supposed” to go to. It was the smiling face and the image of perfection that would label us as the role models we were supposed to be. It was the two combined that would make us successful. The one thing that wasn’t an option was failure. We couldn’t break the box we had created for ourselves. You see, our walls were made of glass for people to look in at us and admire. That’s what it was about: what was the perception people had of us? It should be the “it” girl. People were allowed to push on our glass, but we weren’t allowed to say anything as we watched the cracks form and the glass weaken from the unbearable weight.

Our achievements brought us together in both places and it was our shared struggle, frustration, and suffocation that was revealed when we were given an opportunity to talk about what was really going on.

More than ever, today’s young woman feels an insane amount of pressure to be the girl who really CAN do it all, while maintaining a smile on her face. We are all well aware of the pressure young women feel to look a certain way, but what about the pressure we feel to BE a certain way. To be the girl our parents will be proud of, the girl our teachers will write recommendations for, and the girl with the resume that will get us the right job. What we seem to be forgetting in the process is the actual human being who’s trying to carry it all without breaking. I know what that feels like; I’ve been there. It’s hard, very nearly impossible. This idea of “perfection” has reached an entirely new level and it leaves no room for mistakes, struggle, or even a changed decision.

Perfection is getting it right the FIRST time around. Perfection is doing it all by yourself. Perfection is straight A’s. Perfection is a leadership position on campus. Perfection is getting it all done on time. Perfection is popularity. Perfection is a talent or athletic ability. Perfection is a romantic relationship. Perfection is meeting society’s expectations of beauty. Perfection is being in a good mood every minute of every day.

Perfection is isolating. Perfection is suffocating. Perfection is f***ing exhausting.

Again, I ask, what are we doing to our young women? Everything and nothing. My generation has grown up with an understanding of what it means to be a young woman without any kind of a realistic measure of what we should expect of ourselves. All we know is that failure is not an option. We hear the applause that
comes from our achievements and we feel the sting of embarrassment when we realize we can’t go it alone anymore. I don’t have an easy answer for what we should do or what kind of action we can take to make a difference in the lives of these young women. What I do know is the struggle I’ve personally had with telling people how I’m really feeling about stress and the constant pressure to be more and do more. After these two conferences, I know I’m not alone in that.

We can each do one simple thing, however, to make the lives of those around us easier: ask your friends and family how they’re doing and really, genuinely, LISTEN. It was the opportunity to talk and the knowledge that they were not alone in their struggle that motivated two ballrooms full of young women to open up and tell complete strangers their stories. Talk, listen, support, and be there. That’s all any of us can really do.

If there is one thing I want to tell young women after this experience it’s this: it’s going to be okay and you’re not alone. We all need help sometimes and it’s up to everyone to make it okay to ask for it.