

From failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm

“One more life saved!” This is a sentence I commonly heard while working at the hospitals back home in Brazil, every time a surgery was finished. It didn’t matter what kind of surgery, from the simplest to the more complex. The phrase was repeated so frequently by doctors, nurses and nurse assistants that it ended up losing its real meaning to me.

Nevertheless, life always finds a way to give us that wake-up call and to teach us some lessons. One day, at the end of a surgery, I couldn’t say, ‘One more life saved.’ Even unsaid, its real meaning suddenly broke into my mind. The incident occurred during my first mission with an international NGO in post-tsunami-hit Indonesia. It was my first day of work and the first patient I saw entering the hospital.

The patient, already in his 80s, had typhoid fever and was very debilitated. It did not matter; I just couldn’t say that commonplace sentence. I was frustrated. After all, I, as an overconfident medical doctor, was sure that I had traveled half of the world to save lives after that huge natural catastrophe. I knew that if I were at any other better-equipped hospital, I would be able to say the popular sentence at the end of that surgery. The only problem was that I was not at any other hospital.

Some days later, still depressed by the incident, I had to go to the main city of the region due to dental problems. After 6 hours travelling by car, I finally got to the guesthouse where I was supposed to stay. The telephone rang the moment I crossed the door, and the call from the coordinator was for me.



“Nana korobi yaoki” - Fall down seven times, get up eight -

Japanese Proverb

“The team is having some problems with a pregnant woman’s labor. We have reserved a place for you on the next UN humanitarian helicopter flight. Go save some lives!”

This last sentence echoed in my ears like a roll of thunder. Would I be able to do it? One hour later, I was already back in the field, a cesarean section was done and mother and child were alive and kicking. Finally, I thought to myself: ‘Two more lives saved!’

The new mother wanted to give my name to the newborn. Hearing this request, all previous frustrations vanished from my mind and my spirit became light like a feather. Only my tooth continued heavily aching for some more weeks.

In the field of global health, I learned, it’s important to not give up at every failure or frustrating experience. Sooner or later, successes will come and cross the way in front of us, and when they do, they will come in double. As Winston Churchill once said: “Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”



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