## Why are You Even Talking to Me?

I've wanted to write a blog for years and have always talked myself out of it. The main reason being, 'Who the f--- do you think you are? What could you possibly have to say that anyone else wants to read?'. Yet here I am, writing a blog, so what is my response to those questions? Honestly, I don't have a great response. I'm a cis-het white man who's in the first year of a PhD; my experiences aren't that unique, people that look like me are the majority in science, and I'm not even far enough in my career to offer sage advice. I want to say 'But I'm not like the others, I grew up poor', which is only partly true, but hear me out, and I'll come back around to try to answer this question.

Since I first applied to college, I've felt like I don't belong there, which is also partly true. I never really cared about grades; my main concern was passing because I didn't want to fail a grade or retake a class, so as you can assume, my grades were awful. After I graduated high school, I knew I wanted to go to college, but for reasons of laziness and apathy I waited months before I applied to the university in the town I grew up in. I'm lucky that I didn't live near a university with higher admission standards because for some reason they accepted me last minute even with my abysmal grades and 75th percentile ACT scores.

In classic millennial academic fashion, I was in some advanced courses in middle and high school, and had always found school to be easy. 'Why would I do homework? That's a waste of time, I want to climb trees and play video games.' Eventually my advanced classes actually became challenging, how exciting! I took pre-calculus and started to learn about cosines and tangents and my mind was blown; I actually struggled to follow along. However, was my response to take advantage of this? No. I had a blast following along in class, and still had no interest in homework, but I managed to do enough homework to study just the right amount to barely pass the class.

Maybe college will be different? No! It's way too early in this story for that 'great ordeal' or 'revelation' stage. Okay, I hate to keep doing this to you, but to really get at why I question my voice and the point of all this, let's rewind again. Let's frame my childhood, who is this kid, or at least, what's the story he's telling himself now about who he was as a kid?

The story in my head is that both of my parents were drug addicts, and when my older brother was ~6 and I was ~3, my parents divorced and both got clean. I ended up living with my dad, and then he had a stroke and we grew up on welfare. There have been people who never experienced anything like that, and are bewildered by this background, then there are others who, like me, just see it as part of normal life. I want to be clear, I want absolutely zero pity about this story, not in a pitiful person not wanting to be pitied way, but in a 'you don't understand, it wasn't actually pitiful' way. I grew up living with my dad and older brother, and visiting my mom every other weekend. When I tell you my life was filled with love, you have no idea. You know what having an older brother felt like to me? Like a hyper-intelligent fairy god parent that occasionally (often) beats you up while wrestling over a toy or some argument or you being an annoying little brother. When you see someone 4 days a month, they can only have so much of an impact on you, but my mom definitely had a positive impact on me. While both my parents consistently told us that they love us no matter what and that we could be anything we wanted to, my father spent most of his days in a recliner watching TV, while when I was with my mom we would eat home cooked meals and do things as a family. And let me tell you, to have 3 people who love you and make you feel safe, even if it would've been in a warzone, that's still better than most people had it.

Granted, this is the version of my childhood that I'm remembering as a 33-year-old. I could be wrong about a lot of this, but this is the story that I have (without asking for verification from anyone else that was around at that time). Without going into even further details, that was my life: being carefree. So, why would grades matter? Nothing bad ever happens? What's the worst that could happen?

So back to college, things aren't too much different at first. I like all my classes for the most part, I attend most/all of my lectures, I don't study, and I do minimal homework. Then my father has another stroke during my first semester. He's in a coma for months, and has been in a nursing home ever since. He can't communicate verbally, and his cognition is confusing so communicating in other ways is limited. It was too late in the semester to drop classes without a refund, and I was under the impression that my financial aid didn't allow me to drop classes without a refund. Then I make the mistake of enrolling the next semester while lying to myself that everything was handled with my father and I can go back to class like nothing is wrong. Then I get put on academic probation and can't use financial aid for 1 year. Eventually I obtain an associate, bachelor, and master's degree, making so many more mistakes along the way (that's a story for another time), but there I am again, applying to colleges with unimpressive grades and again somehow making it into a PhD program.

My challenges can't compare to anyone else's. I told you earlier about how lucky I was to grow up feeling safe and loved; I also told you about my crappy grades simply being a product of laziness and apathy, but I made it, didn't I? There are countless people I've met who have accomplished and overcome so much that I can't even comprehend the emotional, mental, and physical energy it took. Some people are born with a silver spoon and some people work their lives to obtain one, but if we're discussing how to obtain a silver spoon, both people should have a seat at the table. I unfortunately have a tendency to be classist and elitist. I feel jealousy towards the haves while I angrily place myself in the have-nots. It's not fair that some people got into a good school because someone taught them the importance of good grades, it's not fair that some people got prestigious opportunities because they knew where to look while I did not, but also it's not fair that I had healthcare as a child because my family was poor enough for government benefits while my low-income friends and peers had to choose between food and a doctor. It's not fair that I had a carefree childhood while SO. MANY. other children never knew what safety felt like.

So, back to why am I even talking to you? Why do I feel like I have something to say? I don't think I'm special, but I do think that transparency can improve all of our lives. I'd like to think that I deserve everything I've gotten, but in reality, it feels like I just typically come across as a genuine and likable guy a lot, and maybe other people deserved the chances I received more. Maybe the people who feel like they missed the opportunities that I received will be able to compare themselves to me in a more transparent way, rather than blame themselves. Maybe someone reading this was literally my competition in some opportunity I received, and they can decide more confidently that they deserved it more, or maybe they'll realize that the world isn't a meritocracy, and luck and sociality play an important role. Maybe someone who has provided me an opportunity is reading this and is realizing they made a big mistake, and will change the way they pick people in the future. Or maybe (hopefully?) that person is thinking 'I like this guy's transparency, I like what he's doing here, maybe I didn't make a mistake'.

And that brings me to the heart of it. I'm not special, and most of us aren't. I don't think I'm dumb (though the whole concept of comparative intelligence is a murky one for me), but I often feel lazy, and frequently, not nearly smart enough for the spaces I find myself in. But perhaps that's precisely why I'm talking to you. If my story, with all its perceived flaws, its strokes of luck, and its undercurrent of self-doubt, resonates with even one other person who feels like they're just winging it, then maybe that's reason enough. Maybe by sharing our unpolished, non-heroic narratives, we can collectively build a more honest picture of what it means to navigate academia, or life in general. Maybe it's less about having "sage advice" from a pedestal of achievement, and more about offering a hand-drawn map of a messy, ongoing journey. So, yes, I'm talking to you because I hope that in this shared vulnerability, we can all feel a little less alone in our imperfections and a little more entitled to our own, unique paths, however we stumble upon them.