## Why are You Even Talking to Me?

I've wanted to write a blog for years, but I've always talked myself out of it. The main reason? A voice in my head asking, '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, finally writing one. So, what's my answer to that question?

Honestly, I don't have a perfect response. I'm a cis-het white man, and a first-year PhD student. My experiences aren't exactly unique; people who look like me are the majority in science, and I'm not far enough along in my career to offer profound wisdom. I'm tempted to say, 'But I'm not like the others, I grew up poor.' While that's partly true, hear me out, and I'll circle back to try and answer that core question.

Since I first applied to college, I've often felt like I didn't belong. This feeling is also partly rooted in truth. I never really cared about grades; my main concern was just passing to avoid failing or retaking classes. As you can imagine, my grades were awful. After high school, I knew I wanted to go to college but, due to laziness and apathy, I waited until the last possible moment before applying to the university in my hometown. I'm fortunate I didn't live near a university with higher admission standards because, for some reason, they accepted me last minute despite 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 easy. My attitude was, 'Why 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 learning about cosines and tangents, and my mind was blown; I actually struggled to follow along. Was my response to take advantage of this challenge? No. I had a blast following along in class and still had no interest in homework, but I managed to do just enough to study minimally and barely pass the class.

Maybe college would be different? Not yet! It's far too early in this story for the 'revelation' stage. Okay, I know I keep doing this, but to really understand why I question my voice and the point of all this, let's rewind again. Let's frame my childhood – who was this kid, or at least, what's the story I'm telling myself now about who he was?

The story in my head is that both of my parents were drug addicts. When my older brother was around six and I was around three, 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. Some people who haven't experienced anything like that are bewildered by this background, while others, like me, just see it as part of normal life. I want to be absolutely clear: I want zero pity about this story. Not in a 'pitiful person not wanting pity' way, but in a 'you don't understand, it wasn't actually pitiful' way.

I grew up living with my dad and older brother, visiting my mom every other weekend. When I say my life was filled with love, you truly have no idea. Do you know what having an older brother felt like to me? It felt like having a hyper-intelligent fairy godparent who occasionally (often) beat me up while wrestling over a toy or during an argument, or just because I was being an annoying little brother. When you see someone only four days a month, they can only have so much impact, but my mom definitely had a positive impact on me. While both my parents consistently told us they loved us no matter what and that we could be anything we wanted, my father spent most of his days in a recliner watching TV. In contrast, when I was with my mom, we would eat home-cooked meals and do things as a family. And let me tell you, having three people who love you and make you feel safe, even if it were in a warzone, is still better than most people had it.

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

Back to college. Things weren't much different at first. I liked most of my classes, attended most lectures, didn't study, and did minimal homework. Then, my father had another stroke during my first semester. He was in a coma for months and has been in a nursing home ever since. He can't communicate verbally, and his cognition is confusing, limiting other forms of communication. It was too late in the semester to drop classes without a refund, and I believed my financial aid wouldn't allow me to drop without one. Then I made the mistake of enrolling the next semester, lying to myself that everything with my father was handled and I could go back to class like nothing was wrong. Consequently, I was put on academic probation and lost financial aid for a year.

Eventually, I obtained associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees, making many more mistakes along the way (that's a story for another time). But there I was again, applying to colleges with unimpressive grades, and somehow, again, making it into a PhD program.

My challenges can't compare to anyone else's. I told you how lucky I was to grow up feeling safe and loved; I also told you about my crappy grades being a product of laziness and apathy. But I made it, didn't I? I've met countless people 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 towards classism and elitism. I feel jealousy towards the 'haves' while angrily placing myself among 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 it's also 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 the original question: 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 transparency can improve all our lives. I'd like to think I deserve everything I've gotten, but in reality, it often feels like I just come across as a genuine and likable guy, and maybe other people deserved the chances I received more.

Perhaps the people who feel they missed the opportunities I received will be able to compare themselves to me in a more transparent way, rather than blaming themselves. Maybe someone reading this was literally my competition for an 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 pure meritocracy, and luck and social connections play an important role. Maybe someone who provided me an opportunity is reading this and realizing they made a mistake, and will change how they select 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 I don’t like the whole concept of comparative intelligence), 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. Perhaps it's less about offering "sage advice" from a pedestal of achievement and more about providing 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.