

Beyond the walls of fear

“O Captain! my Captain!” I cheered victoriously as John Keating’s students climbed onto their desks to (literally) stand in solidarity with him. Mr. Keating may have been fired — wrongly accused of instigating the death of a student — but he had left an indelible mark of courage on the young boys he had so vivaciously taught. As the end credits of “Dead Poets Society” rolled, I thought of college. In a few months I would be leaving behind the comfort of my home and faced with the same choice as the boys from Welton Academy: I could either stick to the script I had clung to thus far — the assembly line of advanced classes and good grades and dozens of extracurriculars — or I could take inspiration from Keating and live freely, passionately, and accomplish amazing things all the while. Under the folds of my blankets, I felt no fear. I knew what I wanted, needed, to do. I channeled my inner Thoreau and vowed to go confidently in the direction of my dreams — and never look back. But courage in a quiet room carries an empty tune when brought before the cacophony of the world.

As an incoming freshman, I had high expectations of Duke. I anticipated it would be as magical as its Hogwarts-style buildings felt, would give me the fresh start I so desired and simultaneously catapult me into the person I yearned to become. I couldn’t wait: a supercharged version of myself combined with the freedom to take any class, be part of any extracurricular, that I wanted? Yes, please! Instead of flying brooms and superpowers, however, I was met with the slap of stone-cold, muggle-infested reality. Sure, the campus was beautiful, the students were smart, the teachers were good, the classrooms were big. But as I waited for Duke to become the catalyst for my metamorphosis — to transform me into that confident and daring maverick I knew I could be — I was met with silence. My silver platter of personal evolution never came. I felt cheated out of a second chance — this was supposed to be my year to break out, to break

away from the academic pipeline I'd been following blindly since middle school — and I resented Duke for it. In retaliation I decided to rebel, aiming to wreck any hope of Duke assisting me in finding my way. By doing what I'd always done: abandoning passion for a plan. Beneath the facade, I knew the only thing I was wrecking was me.

As a prospective computer-science and economics double-major, I set my sights on marquee careers in marquee industries: investment banking in finance and software engineering in tech. I set off on these tracks in which — I believed — commitment brings near-guaranteed success, doing everything I was “supposed” to: join the preprofessional clubs, attend the meetings and workshops, get the certifications, learn the languages. All I had to do was to follow the formula and hope it led me to one of the big names on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley. But it came with a cost.

Such a staged lifestyle left no room for creativity or originality, morphing me into a walking algorithm. I no longer had to think or feel or choose; I just did, robotically pinballing along from one commitment to the next. I felt no stimulation, no purpose beyond the events and interviews that filled my days. It wasn't that my heart wasn't in it; my heart was numb to it. This life wasn't mine. It didn't help that I had already realized I had no interest in Wall Street. Tech was more appealing, but software engineering specifically did little to inspire me (what even is it?). Despite my disdain for this lifestyle I'd chosen, I felt it necessary to continue. Moving on meant relenting in my self-inflicted war with Duke, letting go of the one chance I had to spite the university that had trampled my hope to be more for myself. So I put my head down and trudged on.

As the summer neared, I began applying to as many internships as I could, hoping there would be one lucky “You're hired!” to come my way. But the days passed by with only rejection

notices to keep me company. Somehow I knew the good news wouldn't come. My interviewers could tell the sentiments expressed in my applications were full of empty words. I went home empty handed, my foolproof plan failing me before I could begin.

Away from the whirlwind of campus life, it was easy to see Duke was not the devil I had framed it to be. I had expected Duke to mold me into the version of myself I wanted to become, and I waited passively for that change to be realized. But it didn't — how could it. Such change could only come from me, and I was too afraid to accept that. So instead I numbed my torment with denial. I made a scapegoat out of my tuition (a very expensive scapegoat...) and blamed Duke for my inability to change. I constructed a cage of expectations in which I could protect myself from the dangers of exploration — and consequently isolate myself from all the opportunity that came with it. I forced myself to pursue the carved-out paths to success, as I thought this was the only way I could ever make it. I told myself I was not smart enough, strong enough, courageous enough, to do it my way. I let fear pull me apart and stitch me into the image I wanted the world to see, because I was scared that being myself could somehow invalidate my accomplishments or knock me off the path to success. I conformed — and suffocated in the process — for the sake of playing it safe.

We all struggle. Whether it be health issues, finances, expectations, or the flaws of our university, there are so many things that threaten to restrict the opportunities before us. But our hardships themselves are not the problem; we must find a way to live with them, to summon our grit and fight on. Rather, the problem is allowing ourselves to live **for** them. I often avoid doing the things I really want to do — such as tossing around a frisbee with friends or embarking on a spontaneous day trip to IKEA — because I'm afraid my poor health would detract from the joy

of the moment. In rejecting these opportunities, however, I both eliminate any chance of enjoying myself and enable my situation to dictate my decisions.

For your sake, do not make your struggles out to be bigger than they are; do not turn them into a makeshift shield of excuses to psych yourself out of doing what you need to do for yourself. Maybe you have to choose a certain major or pursue a specific type of internship because you need to make it out of here with a stable job in hand (as a member of a single-parent household in which the parent was just laid off their job, I feel you). Maybe you need to take three(!) semesters of a foreign language or are otherwise bound to a schedule you don't enjoy much. Despite all the burdens you carry, however, there are still ways in which you can discover pieces of yourself.

There are pockets—little pockets of your time and energy and passion—that you can devote to something that is uniquely you, something you will enjoy so hard it won't matter whether it benefits your career. Heck, I'm a computer-science major writing for the Chronicle — it doesn't make sense. But it doesn't have to. Because it's me. So, go ahead: find a desk to climb onto. Your worries and calculations and fears are too small for you up there. Envision the multiversal you that you aspire to be, and then take the leap. Who knows—maybe you'll spread your wings and surprise yourself with how far you fly.