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# For Them

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# For Them

by

Oscar Pineda

A narrative written as part of the First To Go Community

Academic Resource Center

Loyola Marymount University

Fall 2012

# For Them

By Oscar Pineda

I was sitting in a very uncomfortable plastic chair, towards the right side of the stage, in the fourth row, amongst 600 or so of my fellow graduates on our football field in the blazing sun. I just remember someone giving what felt like a really long speech, and I was zoning out. Looking at those around me, I suddenly realized I was surrounded by many friends and many classmates I hadn't really bothered to get to know, and we were all there to say goodbye to our childhood. Then a notion suddenly hit me: I was growing up. That long moment I spent in silence truly helped me think about all that I had purposely avoided paying thought to my last year in high school.

Up until that point, everything seemed relatively easy. Sure, I had experienced unfortunate things, such as my parents' split, but for the most part, my entire life had been enjoyable. Waiting in that chair for my diploma, I became aware that my life was going according to plan. I had passed all my finals, received all my acceptance letters months before, and made the decision to attend LMU that upcoming fall. I had just had the best Grad Nite at Disneyland with my friends (despite being sick with the flu), and I'd had a great senior prom only a week or so before. Yet, the day of graduation seemed to come unexpectedly fast, and every moment I had experienced before it suddenly became a blur that seemed as if it had occurred long before. When I had my "little moment" in that plastic chair, it was just the beginning of many little moments I had where I just spent time thinking. That moment segued into a whole summer where I spent time learning to appreciate all those who helped me along my journey and whose support was going to lead me farther than I think I would have imagined for myself. During that summer, I spent a lot of my time trying to wrap my head around the concept of growing up and leaving behind what I had come to take for granted. The summer of 2011 was

the one where I feel I finally came to appreciate my life, my parents, and my family, all of whom contributed to preparing me for all the changes that were going to inevitably come my way.

The people at the forefront of all these thoughts were, of course, my parents. They were together up until I was seven years old. However, I was lucky enough that they remained friends, and I cannot picture a time when either of them didn't strive for the best for my brother and me. As immigrants from El Salvador, they only wanted me to go farther than they were able to in life. They worked hard to instill in me the belief that getting a valuable education was crucial for making it as far as I wanted to in this country. For as long as I can remember, they both placed a good deal of emphasis on it and about attaining as much knowledge as possible.

Some of my earliest memories that I have with my mom are of her reading stories to me, and later to my brother, as well, every night before bed. I remember lying in bed with her and listening to little rhymes and Dr. Seuss' funny lines and trying to memorize them each time. As cliche as it sounds, this was her attempt at trying to knock into my head the fact that reading was a great tool that I would use throughout my life. Eventually, when I started school and began learning how to spell and read simple words, she decided to stop reading to me and she switched the roles up; it became my turn to read to her and my younger brother. Of course this ability to read didn't magically come to me over night. It took a while for me to read a Dr. Seuss book that I hadn't already memorized the words to. But even so, these nightly readings are some of the first memories I have that I not only hold dearly but also that remind me of my mom's effort to instill in me the importance of having education.

You see, my mom was always on top of things. She was always trying to take an active approach to participating in my school. I remember she would always attend parent teacher conferences and she would go to listen to my teacher congratulate her on my academic

achievements, which overshadowed my chatter that sometimes interrupted their lessons. She was the mom who went on school field trips as a chaperone. She even cooked the turkey for my kindergarten class' celebration of Thanksgiving. Of course, she put a Salvadoran twist to it by making it in her special tomato sauce as opposed to simply roasting it in the oven.

I even recall a time in fourth grade when two teachers and my principal contacted my mom to ask for her permission to transfer me into a faster paced class. After my parents' split, I lived with my dad, and then when my mom was settled down into her place, I moved in with her. I also moved to a new school. And for some reason or another, the school decided to place me into a class where most of my classmates were English learners who struggled to grasp the material that was being taught in English. Eventually, my teacher realized that the lessons were moving at a pace too slow for my capabilities. She and the other fourth grade teacher arranged an experiment that had me go daily for an hour or so to the class next door and see how that class's learning pace compared to mine. The new class was a perfect fit for me, and it was only until they were sure that I would flourish more in the new class, that my teachers and the principal called the meeting to make the change permanent.

"No," was all I could manage to get out.

"But it will be better for you!"

For some reason, that is all the adults sitting in the meeting kept saying to me.

"But I don't want to leave my friends..." I recall that as being my best and only justification for wanting to stay in my class. A kid in fourth grade never wants to leave friends after a move to a new place. I had already done it once that year when I moved with my mom after my parents' split, and I wasn't ready to move again, even if it was just to the classroom next

door. But it was done; it had been decided that I was going to transfer classes. It simply became a matter of convincing me to be okay with it.

My mom took me outside the meeting and she tried to explain things to me. "Things will be better for you. *Vas a aprender mas*! You see, you're learning faster so they want to help. Your friends will still be there! Right next door, and you can still eat lunch and play with them during breaks."

My response: "Then let me help my friends here learn like me, too!"
Unfortunately, my offer to help my classmates wasn't a good enough reason to let me stay. I was moved to the classroom next door and that was done. Looking back, I'm really glad my mom allowed the transfer despite my pleading and tears.

My dad, on the other hand, was a different story. He worked as a stocker at a Ralph's grocery store and had had the graveyard shift for longer than I had been alive. This meant that when it was time for me to go to bed, he was already dead asleep resting for work. As a result, he could rarely participate in my nighttime stories, yet he, too, recognized the importance of education, and he emphasized this by sitting down and doing homework with me after I was let out of school. He was only a high school graduate, and sometimes we would come across assignments or questions that would stump the both of us. It was during these cases that he would try and figure it out with me. I remember one day in third grade when the directions for an insect project were ambiguous and my dad was not sure whether to do the project one way or the other, so he took the time and we did it both ways, just to be sure I would turn it in the way the teacher intended it to be. The directions weren't exactly clear on whether I had to either make a poster to show an insect and its relationship to the environment, or to make a diorama to show this instead.

"Well... let's just do both, to be safe. Ms. Lemmon can't be mad at you for doing both things. But if you do have to make both but you turn in only one, then she will be mad." That made no sense to me either.

So together we sat in our homey yellow kitchen for what felt like forever. He would watch me and just help me with things like cutting or by giving me little tips here and there. He told me to not expect him to do all the work because my name was going on it, not his (a fact that is completely untrue considering that I was named after my father). As for the project, my dad really didn't know much about the insect I had chosen (the butterfly) and how they related to their environment. So in terms of getting the information needed, he couldn't really spurt out information from his memory. This resulted in us going to the Culver City library and having to do research. Eventually, I made a small poster and I used an old shoe box to show my classmates how a butterfly lives in its environment. When I turned it in, my teacher gave me extra credit for making a poster and the diorama, because I only had to make one. But that is beside the point: the entire event not only proved to me that education can always be continued, but that I should never even consider giving up if I come across an obstacle of any sort while learning.

Even now my parents are making sure that I am doing my best at LMU. They both raised me to be independent but to not be afraid to go to them if I ever need anything. This continues to be the case. They went from raising me to cook for myself, clean for myself, and do my own laundry and now they only ask about school every now and then. For the most part, however, they leave me alone to make my own mistakes and figure the rest on my own. Basically, both have enough trust in me that their tuition payments aren't being paid in vain. They do, however, still play the roles of parents by reminding me to take care of myself first so that I can work effectively. It was my dad who told me when I was stressing out over finals that studying when

stressed hardly pays off. He claimed that I was spending more time focusing on what I didn't know and trying to force it into my brain and that by doing so I was only causing myself harm. He suggested to take breaks when this occurred and to approach studying in a calm manner. I have to admit this has helped tremendously my second semester.

If it wasn't for my parents taking such an active interest in my school during those early years when I was building my own values, I'm not sure I would personally consider education to play an important part in my life. I've come to the realization that my parents and I agree on more things than we disagree, and had they chosen to parent me with different values, then I'm positive I wouldn't even be where I am at this point in my life.

However, my parents haven't been the only ones who have impacted me. My extended family has played a role in inspiring me, as well. I'm very fortunate to be a part of a huge family. There are a lot of us scattered throughout the United States and back in El Salvador. But there are a great number of us who live in Los Angeles. It's kind of funny because we are all within walking distance from each other. I have family living in the building next door, some who live four blocks walking north, even more living five blocks west, and I have an aunt who lives five blocks walking south. But I even consider those family members who don't live in Los Angeles to have played a huge role in my life, as well. Even though some of them live in other states, we are always in communication with each other. In other words, my family is about as interconnected as they come. We may fight, we may bicker, we may even talk smack about each other, but in the end we all care for one another. This love we have has served as an even greater inspiration for me to go as far as I am able to with my life.

During my graduation ceremony, I wasn't the only one in my family who was graduating. My cousin, who lives next door, and my other cousin, who I'm 10 days older than, were also

sitting in uncomfortable plastic chairs of their own that day. This meant that there were a lot of people from my family sitting in the audience. We were allowed six tickets each but since my uncle worked at my high school, he was able to sneak in even more. In total, there were probably around 25 people who were a part of my family there to cheer for my cousins and me as we crossed the stage to receive our diploma.

"Congratualtions!"

"*Estoy muy feliz por ti*!"

"Whoa! Look at you all grown up and getting ready to go to college!"

"*Y cuando empiezas la universidad*?"

My entire family was proud. I could feel it. I'm not going to lie and say it didn't feel cool because it did. Everyone was happy that I was going to go on to a private university that was only a 15-minute drive away from home. How they found out was a shock to me. I had initially wanted to keep my decision to myself, my parents and a few close friends because I didn't want my family to think I was showing off or that I thought of myself as better than they were.

Only a month or so earlier, my dad decided to leak the news without telling me. But this little story actually began a few months before then, when I was filling out my college applications. During the application and decision process, I did not really involve him or my mom much because I wanted the school I would attend to be my choice. I only let him know I needed to pay for the application fees. He understood and paid. Once I was done with all my applications, I let him know where I had applied to and he said he liked my choices. My parents were quite aware that LMU was my first choice, and they also knew that it was expensive. When I told him that I had sent in my application, they each smiled and simply said, "Good luck."

The day I received my acceptance letter was one of the most exciting days of my life. My dad wasn't home, but I had to let someone know I got into my top choice. I ran back to school and let my friends and my favorite teacher know. When I returned home, my dad was there and he wondered where I was. I was so excited to tell him that I couldn't get the words out. Instead, I gave him the letter. He read it and simply said, "Congratulations." That was followed by a short speech where he let me know that he would do whatever it took in order to pay for school. My dad generally doesn't say much, so I knew that he meant every single one of those words he used to congratulate me.

My mom took the news differently. She cried. I called her as soon as I was done telling my dad the great news. She was busy so we couldn't speak long but she texted me after. Her messages were riddled with words that let me know she was the proudest mother in the world at that moment.

A few weeks later, before my graduation, my family had some sort of celebration where we all got together. I hadn't told anyone present at the party besides my dad and my cousin that I had gotten into LMU, but somehow everyone knew. I was getting congratulations here and there, and the party wasn't even for me. I didn't know what to make of it or how they knew, but I was excited that they knew. All of the adults were proud that out of the kids in my generation, I was the only one that was going to attend a university. Only a handful of my cousins had gone to a university before me, so the notion that another one of the *familia* was going to college was thrilling.

Eventually, I received my answer to who was spreading the news that I was going to attend LMU. My dad's coworker, Francis, was there and she was excited for me and just kept going on about how my dad was talking about the whole thing nonstop during his shifts and how

he was really proud of me. It turns out my dad kept bragging about “my accomplishment” and how it was one of his proudest moments. The news made me change my entire perspective about my dad. He wasn't just bragging to his coworkers but to my family members, as well, which resulted in the leak of my exciting news. Learning the extent of how proud my dad was of me, combined with support from my family, and that I would be attending my top choice, made me feel like my hard work in high school was worth it. It was then that I began to realize that my efforts were not just going to benefit me but that they were also going to be my way of honoring him and all the others in my family who didn’t have the opportunity to go to college.

My family all understood this. They didn’t think my dad was being presumptuous or anything like that when he gave them my news. They all wanted me to succeed and work hard and to “help them pay the bills when they were old as payback for all the money they spent on birthday gifts.” They all considered my accomplishment to be theirs, too. I wouldn’t have it any other way because it was their work that was part of the reason why I would attend a private university. In my family, it was my parents and their generation who first made the move to the United States in the 1980s, early ‘90s. They were in search of the great American Dream. They did move here with a few elders but not many because they wanted to stay in their homeland. Eventually, my parents’ generation began growing up and having kids. And like any other parents, they wanted what was best for us.

Even growing up, I saw how all the “tall people” would work hard whether it was in a supermarket stocking everything from the bread to oranges like my dad, cleaning large houses for rich people like most of my aunts did since they moved here, or as maintenance workers like two of my uncles who worked at the high school I graduated from. They all would tell me to appreciate my life because they had lived harder lives. Even they admitted their lives in the US

were still hard, but definitely better than the more difficult one they would be living otherwise back in El Salvador. They all reiterated the good old "hard work pays off, so work your ass off" spiel that one hears often but doesn't really have much meaning until it strikes a chord.

But to me it does. I attribute this to my parents. They gave me pretty much whatever I wanted as a child. They would make me wait sometimes, but once I got it they would explain just how hard they had to work in order to buy me a toy that I probably only wanted because I saw it during a commercial while watching *Rugrats.* They usually said, "I had to work for three WHOLE weeks to buy you this!" Obviously this was a lie and an exaggeration, but it worked. I learned to only ask for things I really wanted and to cherish them once I did. But as I grew up, and became more aware of the labor my parents put into providing me with all the luxuries I wanted, I realized that hard work does pay off. My parents both worked hard, not to go farther in life, but to give my younger brother and me a life with everything we could need and more. My own hard work was going towards going even further in life than my parents were able to, and I was going to do it not just for myself, but to show them that their hard work was appreciated.

Not only did I see my parents working hard, but I saw my aunts and uncles doing the same at their humble jobs. I thought that everyone just worked their butts off once they were old. As I began to grow older, I saw my older cousins commit mistakes such as dropping out of school, or not working to their potential. In turn, that made the adults question why they even moved to a new country in the first place. I began understanding that they worked long hours, made dinner, kept a roof over our heads, and bought us the toys we wanted, not for their sake, but for the next generation in our family. Their primary drive was to provide us the better life and to give us the values we needed to go even farther than they were able to. Their inspiration to me did not stem from a particular event or anything special like that, it was just their love and

understanding and overall their hard work in life that helped me gauge a better understanding of who they were and the kind of person that I hope to become.

When I got into LMU, I understood why they were proud. Their work had paid off. I have to admit I feel guilty that I thought they were going to see me being too "high and mighty" because my family isn't like that. They often joke, "Ooh Oscar... *Se cree mucho solo porque va a una escuela privada*! Ooh!" But I know they are just joking and they are really proud. They all ask me whenever they can about my studies and sometimes they've asked me to explain what I have learned just to see if "I have really learned or if I have just sat in a seat all year wasting my dad's money."

My family is simply the best. I love them all dearly and I will forever be indebted to them for the inspiration they have all given me. It is for them that I am here. It is for them that I work 25 hours weeks at a Starbucks with rude customers on top of taking 17 units at LMU. It is for them that I made the decision to take out a few grand in loans when my scholarships wouldn't cover everything. It is for them that I plan every day to make sure I stay on top of all my responsibilities. It is for them that I hope to one day settle down and have children to pass on their values to. It is for them that I walk out of philosophy class with a massive headache that is truly worth it. It is for them that I am writing this. It's for every single one of those people that I'm privileged to call my family that I will always have the inspiration I need to go as far as I could ever wish to go in life.