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## Higher Education

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I never questioned whether or not I wanted to go to college – I was going. In my junior year of high school, I purchased the CollegeBoard book of the 100 top colleges with my own money. I would sit on the floor of my room on Saturdays from the time I ate breakfast to the time that my stomach snarled from being empty once again. Eager-filled eyes read each word as I flipped fervently through the entries. Every page held a new possibility for the school that would be the launching pad for the rest of my life. I had a 1-subject notebook with a muted red cover where I noted the defining characteristics of the schools that enamored me. Some colleges were starred directly in the book because I couldn't finish reading the page before deciding I had to apply. Others were doubled starred and phrases such as "Sunny and inviting" and "Coolest professors" were highlighted in pink, my favorite color. College was no longer an abstract concept. It became a certain destination which I was determined to reach.

There was no doubt that I could hold my own in applying to selective schools. A 3.7 GPA, involvement in student government and clubs, and recommendations ripe for the picking; everyone knew that I was a contender. The atmosphere of my academically-charged high school instilled a drive in me to excel in my classes and, to be honest, to get better grades than my friends. Or at least not be the one with the lowest grades. There was something about competition that drove us. We knew we were more than the letters at the upper right hand corner of a paper or the weighted point values. We were souls, friends, daughters, community members, loving and catty people. Yet it was so inexplicably seductive to push a little bit harder for a few more points – those few points that put us ahead of the classmates that we kept so close like military spies. I cared about learning, but I also cared about being an elite student. Whether we were more friends or enemies, when the test was handed back and the grades were posted on Blackboard, we could set school aside to just be people.

We all had a similar process to applying for college. You selected your schools that you were interested in, figured out which ones were a sure thing, which were a stretch, and which would validate every half-waking moment you spent reading Voltaire and make everyone who doubted you eat their flatulent words. It was "the college path." The only major difference between me and my friends in affluent Irvine, California was a college fund. Their parents had set aside funds for their college educations: UPromise accounts, bonds, and disposable income to burn meant that tuition costs might have required some sacrifices for them (fewer vacations, perhaps) but nothing too drastic. Through research I knew that there were scholarships offered by private organizations and the schools themselves, but I also knew that I would likely have to take out loans for peripheral expenses even if I snatched a coveted full-ride scholarship. I had no delusions about what it would take to pay for a higher education, just like I had no delusions about what it took to get in.

While I was savvy for my seventeen years, I was befuddled as to where to begin to secure thousands of dollars in funds in my own name. I could balance a checkbook and make a budget that included my lunch money and recreational expenses like movies and Winter Formal. When I ached for medicine for my cold, I walked to the store and bought it. When I needed new clothes at the beginning of the school year, I took out my bank card. I never asked my mom for money; she cut me off after getting my first job at Wild Rivers at age fifteen. If she had told me that I would be on my own once I started working, I never would have started. Fantasy aside, I knew what financial pressure was. This was a financial avalanche. At the thought of paying for college, I felt a little bubble of sadness form within me and make its way from my heart to my mind. Like a stroke, it left me paralyzed, wondering if college was called higher education because it was out of my reach. College was within my grasp, but tuition was an uncertainty that left me standing on the tips of my toes, arms and hands extended fully, but empty.

I could tell that my mom wanted me to go to college. She never had to say anything in particular. A few months had gone by since I purchased the CollegeBoard, and I'd finished the book by then. She stood in the kitchen in her work clothes one afternoon. I had completed my personal list of exemplary schools, which happened to be mostly private schools. There were a few that weren't, like Cal Poly San Louis Obispo, but I also knew that the prospect of moving six hours away made it a less desirable suitor. Dropping my long-jump-dream-pole with a thud, I decided that I wouldn't mind going to Cal State Fullerton instead of the schools I had researched. It was less expensive, didn't sound bad from what I had gleaned, and it had a pretty good reputation. Like usual, she was tinkering around the kitchen, wiping down counters and shuffling around the mail that she had picked up on her way in from the car port. I walked in from outside, still mulling over the idea of applying to a Cal State that I had not planned on. The edges were sharp as I turned the idea over and over in my head.

"Mom," I started, "I think I want to go to Cal State Fullerton." I wasn't sure what I expected until I was shocked by her response. "Do you think I can afford that?" she snapped, her eyes afire. I didn't realize it then, but she was so mad because she was embarrassed. She knew that she wouldn't be able to produce the amount needed, even for a state school. Even for a school that wasn't what her baby wanted. As much as I smarted from her words, it clarified the truth that I would have to put myself through college alone. It should have been obvious to me from the way my life already was, but it wasn't. Maybe I was dreaming that help would come for college. Maybe I was dreaming in the same way that I'd dreamed that I would go to Claremont McKenna or Occidental College. Maybe it was time to be realistic.

Mr. Venable was my high school counselor. He actually met with me and my mom about my college options in addition to meeting with me privately

multiple times. Thankfully, she never discouraged me from pursuing any school again, but she didn't morph into a cheerful partner in the process either. The SAT was expensive for me, but I signed myself up and paid online. My friend had given me her used SAT books from the Princeton Review SAT Prep. I didn't have the training classes that had accompanied her reference books, but they offered helpful test tips that I felt privileged to have access to. My test was scheduled for a Saturday morning at a location in Irvine. I didn't drive at the time, so I needed a ride and I asked my mom. Her tone made it clear that it was an imposition on her schedule as she told me that she was busy. *Busy*. I was trying to take a test that was essential for my education, for my future. She knew I couldn't walk there! She reluctantly dropped me off, but made me get a ride to work after the test from a friend. Her mom took her and her sisters through the Chick-Fil-A drive thru once she picked us up because it was her priority to take care of her family's needs first, and I was 20 minutes late to work.

To be fair, I appreciated my mom's effort to become informed about the college race which she knew nothing about for my sake, but it didn't lift any of the burden from me. There was simply more to know than what she could glean in a one-hour meeting with Mr. Venable before rushing off to work. Application fees, campus tours, financial aid, housing details, moving. After over a year of research and work, I came to a point where I realized that I was not in a position to take it all head-on. In the collision, I would be destroyed. Part of my wisdom was recognizing what was beyond me.

"I'm going to Orange Coast College," I told classmates and teachers. "I'm going to do the Honors Program and transfer after 2 years." "The Honors Program?" they would respond. "That sounds like a good plan." They seemed to understand that the only reason I was going to a community college was for financial reasons without me saying it. It shouldn't have mattered, but of course it did. I got used to the idea of living at home, staying at my same job at Custom Bodies Fitness and starting college. I believed that I made the best deal with defeat that I could. OCC had the best transfer rate in the state, and it wasn't High School Part II like Irvine Valley College down the street from me.

I graduated high school in June of 2006. Two months later I attended my first semester at OCC in August. Two years later I began working full time at Premier Business Centers as an administrative assistant in August of 2008. August was the month of new beginnings, or endings. Paying for school and having enough money for recurring bills such as my cell phone had always been difficult while working part time. With this new job, even though I was going to make more than I ever had, I would be covering my own medical and dental insurance, car insurance, and other bills that made working full time nothing more than another context in which to barely survive. I agreed that my mom needed to save for retirement and that she didn't have unlimited resources; I just felt that

after all I was doing to try and move ahead, the least she could do was stop digging potholes. I now know that she did nothing of the sort, but I don't regret the anger I felt toward her as I struggled to cope with my deteriorating facsimile of a college dream.

The fall semester of 2008 was the first semester of OCC classes that I missed. Foolishly, I had thought that I was busy when I worked 25 hours per week at two different retail jobs and took three classes. The spring semester, I worked at Premier all day then headed over to OCC on the 405 freeway two nights a week for classes that ran from 7:15pm to 10:00pm. I never drank coffee on a daily basis until then. Daily for me grew to be three to four cups per day, interspersed between the morning, afternoon, and evenings before class. Sometimes I'd have another cup if I had homework to do after class. My morning alarm was heinous.

The two year plan grew to six years. Six years. I wasn't in the Honors Program for the first five years that I was in school for no reason except for my forgetfulness coupled with preoccupation. The plan had sounded good when I told high school inquirers; yet even my compromised dream of attending community college had failed in a way. Almost everyone that I still spoke to from high school had long graduated. Some went on to grad school, some had careers and others had families. I was happy for them as best I could be while fighting the obvious pain that I had hoped to be there by then as well. At age 24, when I graduated, I had a professional career not related to my major, a 401K, an Associate's Degree in English, and admissions letters from Point Loma Nazarene University, Whittier College, and Loyola Marymount University. My most important asset was life experience, which is fitting because my literal assets were cancelled out by credit card debt from school and living expenses. Somewhere in between resenting difficulty and a grateful heart came an appreciation for having a story to tell. What made me most proud was that I had cut down the tree, created the mulch, formed the pulp, spread it on the screen and written each word on the dried, finished product.

I didn't apply to any universities in Orange County, so moving and quitting my job were essential. Even if I had, I would never have stayed at Premier. Leaving that 40 hour per week cage to be a full-time student was a vignette that I'd played in my mind for four years. When it finally happened, I rejoiced that I would be able to be a "real" student again. Unfortunately, that meant taking out federal student loans before leaving OCC. At that point in my life, though, I had already financed a new car in my own name and knew how to handle the process. Time had matured what was simmering at my surface at age 18.

Placing the commitment deposit for LMU was the apex of my higher education career. The campus was beautiful, and I felt at home in the several

times that I had visited. It was a Promise Land of sorts. Once again, I faced federal and private loans, and I knew exactly how to proceed. When I was denied a student loan from Wells Fargo, I tried several others. All others, actually. With two different cosigners, I was denied from each.

My heart ached at the realization that I would have to make tuition payments, support myself, and try to be a student. My definition of a “real” student – what I’d hoped I’d be once I stopped working full time – was one that didn’t work so much that school became an afterthought due to energy depletion. I haven’t seen too much of that definition at LMU anymore than I did at OCC. The number of jobs that I’ve held each semester since transferring to LMU is an awful accumulation story: the first semester I had two jobs, three the second, and four this semester. I begrudge the necessity of nights when I sleep for a full 8 hours because I know that something important for one of my classes won’t get done. Health has become the loving antithesis of productivity. My best efforts to keep up with coursework are no more successful than running after a missed, speeding train. I’m left wanting to collapse on the tracks to whatever consequence that may bring more often than I prefer to divulge.

There are numerous days when my life as an LMU student feels like another facsimile of a dream. But it is more accurate to realize that dreams aren’t ideal. A dream that remains a thought can have free vacations and achievement without strife. A dream that protrudes through the psyche and releases itself into human life must contain all of the rubies and coal of reality. I have everything that I wanted then, just in a different and more difficult form. I have interesting professors and readings that are worth my time. I have opportunities to engage intellectually and grow spiritually. It’s all there when I have the time to receive it.

I’m learning that anyone who can take 15 units, faithfully work 3 jobs and have a 3.9 GPA is a real student. I never questioned if I was a real employee when I worked for Premier, so it doesn’t even make sense for me to question what I do at LMU. Yes, I wish I worked less. I said it, and I will never stop feeling that way. I also wish that I didn’t hate mornings so much and that I had more time to bake cookies. I wish for those things shamelessly, yet my life is robust as it is. This wonderfully exhausting time is one that others would be willing to sacrifice their lives for. That I’m sacrificing sleep and sanity (the latter was likely never firmly in my grasp) for an education is a gracious trade given what I’ll receive in the end and what I’m receiving now. The blessing of producing and evoking thought, of growing in faith because each day looks impossible is a barbed wire-wrapped gift that elevates my threshold for what constitutes coal. Such is my experience with higher education.