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Reflections from a Working Class, First-Generation Almost-Graduate

Sarah Heidebrink-Bruno

Amidst my seemingly endless doomscrolling on Facebook the other day, I was delighted to see some good news: my advisor's latest book was recently published and available to the public. Having spent the better part of a decade writing and revising her manuscript, she thanked a plethora of people for helping her work through the arduous process, including her mother, who read through every draft. As I read these words in her acknowledgements, I was struck by the differences in our realities. As hard as I tried to imagine it, I could not see either of my parents reading through and commenting on my writing, let alone my entire dissertation or a future manuscript. Like so many parts of my experiences in higher-ed as a first-generation college and now graduate student, my research does not easily fit into my parents' world.

This used to be a source of pain for me, although with each new layer of credentials, I've developed a pretty tough skin. It no longer shames me to "come out" as working class to my mentors and peers. What I once saw as a lack, I now see as a strength—I can understand and empathize with my fellow first-generation students in a way that my more financially and academically privileged colleagues might not. I can anticipate some of the unspoken resources that my students or colleagues might need and gently guide them to the offices who are equipped to help. Importantly, I can break down the stigma and shame for them so that they do not need to go through the same struggles that I went through when I entered higher education. Often, I find that I am the one called upon in my department to reach out and welcome incoming first-generation graduate students and offer them advice, based on my perceived successes. So by all accounts, I should be used to this by now.

But every so often, a moment (like the one above) occurs where I experience a tinge of sadness—a sense of not being fully seen and understood by those who once knew me best. In "Coming Out as Working Class," writer Justin Quarry recalls that, "being the first person in my family to eventually finish college, and one of only a few of us to leave Arkansas, I'd now transformed myself into an alien among even my own people." I see echoes of my own experiences in Quarry's disclosure. Is there a word to describe being a beloved member of a family, but also being an alien among my people?

As I near the end of my dissertation, I find myself writing and re-writing my own acknowledgements page. It's my go-to task when the rest of the process feels too overwhelming and discouraging. It is currently four, single-spaced pages: long and growing. I thank every person who has touched my life in both seemingly minute and profound ways over the past ten years. Although I find this task cathartic, I struggle to write an adequate dedication to my family. How can I distill the past thirty-odd years down into a few lines at the front of a manuscript that they will likely never read? The words get stuck in a bottleneck between my brain and my fingers.

I was recently chatting with a family member about his new career move, which naturally led to a discussion of my own job search and how difficult it is to find an academic position in this current job market. “But wait,” he said, “aren’t you already a professor?”

“No,” I explained, “I basically do the work of a professor with the pay of a student.” In retrospect, this was probably not the clearest answer that I could have given, but it was all I could think of at the moment.

But I realize that it isn’t really his fault that he didn’t know—so much of academia is steeped in mystery, even for those who are familiar with the inner workings of graduate school and beyond. For their part, my family members have had careers that are easy to recognize as “real work.” My father never went to college, but he can fix anything. He worked as a mechanic for 47 years before he retired; my mother was a homemaker when I was little and worked in a nursery school when I got older. I still remember when she went to the local community college to get her certificate. This memory stands out to me because at age 12 or so, I was proofreading and editing her papers, instead of the other way around. It didn’t seem unnatural to me then; I was lucky to be an avid reader and gifted writer at a young age and I was happy to share those talents with my mom.

It wasn’t until much later that I realized how unusual this situation was—when my college friends recounted the ways in which their parents paid for extra tutoring or coached them through writing their personal essays on their college applications and still took the time to read their college papers. Meanwhile, with each break, I went home to discover that I had begun the gradual process of fundamentally *changing*—morphing into some new creature whom my family still loved but could not completely understand. It was as though I had suddenly started speaking a new language at home, but my voice still sounded the same to me.

And yet, I loved everything about being in college. I loved reading challenging, new texts that expanded my view of the world and having lively class discussions. I loved my English classes, in particular, and felt a deep sense of affection for my professors who found a way to make these classes accessible to a range of learners. In short, I wanted to be that person in a student’s life, and I became determined to go to graduate school to earn my Ph.D. in English so that I, too, could one day open new doors for a future generation of students.

Four years later, I learned that applying to graduate school is unbelievably expensive for a person from a working-class background. Between applying for application fee waivers and working a paid research gig over winter break, I was able to scrounge together enough funding to pay for the chance to be considered as a graduate school candidate. But this was only the first of many unspoken truths about academia that I would soon learn.

I was fortunate to be accepted into a graduate program that offered tuition remission and a stipend. Although I could not afford to physically visit most of the places to which I applied, my current institution was within driving distance, so I excitedly scheduled a visit with the former chair and a tour of campus. In our email exchange, she asked if I wanted to meet with any of the faculty to discuss my research interests. Truth be told, I could not understand why they would want to meet with me then—I wasn’t even a student there yet, and furthermore, I had no idea what my research interests would be. How would I even respond to that question? I thought the point of my M.A. was to fig-

ure out what my specialization would be. As such, I told her that wouldn't be necessary. Secretly, I thought, it would not be *worth* their time to meet with me.

I have found in my conversations with my fellow working class and first-generation students that we have a different concept of time; namely, that time is at least as valuable as money.

Arranging meetings with professors, seeking guidance, asking someone to read through a draft of a paper, all of these tasks meant that I would be "taking" some of their time, a debt that I did not know how to repay. So I reasoned it was better to not ask. I did not realize that my lack of meetings came off as a lack of commitment, until much later when my former Chair confided that she did not think I was interested in the department, and she was surprised when I accepted their offer.

By the time I began my graduate studies, I'd learned how to live comfortably enough on a modest budget. I learned how to make several variations of rice and pasta meals that sustained me from paycheck to paycheck. And most importantly, I learned how to ask for help from people who were more seasoned than I was. I finally accepted the fact that it was not an undue burden to ask for my professor's time.

When I finished my Master's degree, I decided not to participate in the graduation ceremony. The cost of renting the gown alone was enough to deter me, but more than that, I was waiting for my Ph.D. to enjoy the pomp and ceremony. My parents came down to visit with the intention of taking me out to lunch to celebrate in lieu of the ceremony. Instead, my car broke down on the way to the restaurant and we spent the afternoon on the side of the road waiting for AAA to respond and bring a new battery. When the technician finally arrived, my dad argued that the old battery was still good and could be saved. I realized that I come from a long line of people who were never too financially comfortable, never above saving something that could, maybe, potentially, one day be useful for something. Perhaps this sense of frugality is deeply embedded in my veins, given the amount of discarded draft fragments that I have saved on my computer, lest I want to use a turn of phrase again one day.

Now, nearly a decade later, I wonder what my parents must think of this time in my life. When their friends ask them what I do, my family tells them that I am a teacher. I actually love this response, because it dilutes my experiences down into an easily understood profession among working class folks, but more than that, it represents what I believe to be the best part of myself. I essentially went to graduate school to be a teacher. Granted, being a professor also entails doing a great deal of service work, research, writing, and hopefully publishing, but at my core, I *am* a teacher, and I like to think that is the trait that they most clearly see in me.

In my dissertation acknowledgements, I strive to honor those who prepared the way for me to have the privilege to be the first person with a Ph.D. in my family. As a student of literature, I believe in the power of storytelling and personal narratives. In my acknowledgements, I write:

To my parents, I know that you might not think of yourselves as Writers (with a capital W), but every bedtime story, every conversation we had with my toys around the tea party table, and every time you encouraged my imagination led me to where I am now. I will always remember the time when I was in college and I was going through a particularly bad break up; you knew I loved getting

mail, so you sent me encouraging letters. Dad even included a draft of a short story he wrote about Jinx the squirrel. I still keep these mementos as reminders that during one of my darkest times, you gave me a gift that I have carried with me since then—a gift that I now strive to share with others. You gave me your words, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Works Cited

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