

Good Thing I Failed High School

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"Hi Linda, I'm calling to say that I got the invite for graduation, but I'm not scheduled for rehearsal this Saturday, which means...I'm not going to graduate...I don't know what's going to happen. Don't tell anyone. Okay...bye..."

The mention of me not graduating was where I started crying: leaving that voicemail on Linda's cell phone, who's my classmate in high school. Eyes flooded, heart racing, knees to the floor with both palms pressed on my face and bawling like a child. I created figmentary "shields" to counteract the yelling I'll likely get from my parents: failing not one, but two, classes, making me ineligible for graduation—US Government and Economics, both subjects were. Weight on my shoulders and chest grew heavy; nerves trembling like guitar strings; hot summer days felt cold; and despite not looking like it, my face felt pale. However, after my tears gave way, I would find reasons, while remaining optimistic, for all this.

Born first-generation American, whose parents' culture prioritizes education, I developed niche—"geeky"—interests as a kid. I grew interested in logical reasoning early on, including arts as a creative expression. Along with developing this interest back when I was 7 years young, I'd recall thinking why showing up at school felt like entering prison: uniforms required, lining up when the bell rang, staying quiet, being subservient to teachers' commands, and so on. I was curious in making sense of the world, both in and outside school. Historically, my grades were acceptable—averaging a C at best. Not once was I crowned an honor student during my youth and teen years, securing arts as the main focus for me since 14 (video production). This costed me opportunities to socialize, but I wouldn't have exchanged it for the world.

I've dabbled with digital video since 2001: creating montages, camera operating, non-linear editing—expanding to deeper areas like frame rates, tape output, chroma key, and more. This opened up early paid, freelance work experience for me at 16. This self-learning venture resulted to a decrease of my focus

in school: attending classes and daydreaming about video project(s) I want to create; it was no surprise average grades became expectant of me (exception was receiving an A+ in video production class). Anyway, after my emotional episode was done, featuring myself alone in the house with our family dog, Diamond, who saw me weep this whole time, I should focus on such career path. However, something had to be done with my grades—missing credits.

No utterance in response to all this came from my parents, which surprised me...somewhat. Perhaps, it was that Parent-Teacher Conference back in November 2004: when one of the teachers said to my parents, “he’s so stupid,” for allegedly sleeping during his class. Yes, “allegedly,” as the truth remains, I was down with hay fever—nonstop sneezing and puffing of my face: leaving me looking drowsy and groggy. Walking into class one day, with this symptom, led to his conclusion that I was sleeping while class was in session. He never once believed me. Fast forward to today, with my parents still disgusted by his remarks, we signed up for after-school learning. My parents had no more say other than getting me to work, study, and finish soon: acquire the missing credits needed for graduation. Strangely enough, I enjoy self-learning—autodidacticism—and the pressure felt in this after-school learning was lower compared to my high school: contrasted with gaining a reputation from classmates that I always fail classes because I’m “too busy” making videos. Fine, but what mattered was getting this job done and not minding what my classmate(s) stereotyped me as.

The environment for my distance learning wasn’t much, having taken place at a high school: their student body consisted of bitter-looking teenagers, calling each other names, and hoping to pick a fight with someone. Witnessing one of them get arrested and carried away by police for injecting substance in him was a cool thing, telling me most of what I needed to know about their students. After their session was dismissed, the place trickled out as I would meander my way through these insecure students, as some would give me weird, sour looks. Entering through double-wooden, misty-windowed doors to their hallway, the indoors looked like a place few people frequented: walls looked clean, no scratches, condition of floor tiles having no cracks nor footprints, and classroom doors aged slightly. In general, the building wasn’t a newly built facility either but remained meticulously clean. Their classrooms were structured close together: similar to hospitals having tightly spaced rooms housing two patients. I’d enter in first when our head teacher showed up opening the classroom doors; and sometimes, while waiting, I’d chit-chat with other students, some being older than I was—around their late 40s, early 50s. We’d hold our class sessions at this building’s largest classroom: lines of desks arranged in a strange way, where left and right rows, by walls’ ends, faced each other perpendicular to the entrance door—with unoccupied floor space, midpoint, for walking; and teacher’s desk sat far left, corner-most of this room, facing frontward. When walking in, it’s normal seeing where the teacher sits before students’ desks and markerboard. In fact, desks looked immaculate with no marks nor graffiti. Ventilation was great with the air feeling clean and breathable whenever we stayed

inside. It was a great environment for after-school study.

I was hyper-focused and studious: every piece of homework done, graded, then on the next during our session. Last time I was this attentively sharp was watching, and writing a paper about, the classic film *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, making up credits for English class (junior year). Henceforth, these after-school sessions were self-paced, feeling no urgency, ensuring extra time spent went into checking my work and answers before submitting. While reading and studying my assigned material, I'd often sit at a desk away from everyone else; however, I'd be a few seats distant from two guys having done nothing, but chit chat every night I attended. I don't think they finished their work at all! As for my homework and graded tests, results were okay—lowest grade being a C on some, but I still persevered. Having signed for this after-school program in late June, I set a goal wanting to finish before September. I'd pick my studies up faster knowing that staying there forever wasn't an option; I went ahead in completing the remaining assignments at home.

September ended up being here, thus, not achieving my goal, but finished everything anyway. Nearing end of September's second week, I received my final grades: a B on both subjects, including an updated transcript—happening the day after my 18th birthday. Honestly, I study much better self-paced and in a low-pressure environment, with clean air no less, grasping the material better compared to classes I took back in school. Thanking the program's head teacher, this weight on my shoulders, previously filled with those discouraging remarks from classmates because of time spent making videos and not studying, dissipated slowly. It was about 8pm, and my parents picked me up from the school with new, updated transcripts on hand. This whole ordeal felt like I'm done serving an unpunished sentence: closer to release and able to live again. My parents were happy as they knew I'd pass my courses, supporting me this entire time since I started. Only task left was showing up at my now-former high school next morning and receiving my "passport" to freedom; I have already "served my time."

September 16, 2005

It's about fifteen minutes to 8am, and my parents dropped me off at this now-old high school of mine: waiting outside the building until school was in session. Using both hands, I held my transcript inside a big, but unsealed, orange envelope for final submission. I snuck inside the front building's corridor, which was an area students don't often hang around; neither did myself, when I was a student here. Keeping a low profile, while overhearing students chit-chatting, I glanced at class alumni photos hung on the left wall. While looking, I began thinking: having had a great time in high school, I'm happy to never live through it again. There was a bench behind me opposite the alumni photos I was looking at—both under circling stairs that lead up second floor. I turned around to sit at that bench for a few minutes, questioning certain moments in my high school days with some situations left unanswered. The faculty and

schoolmates were great, but deep in my heart, there were others I never want to reunite with again. Once the bell rang, the place cleared out suddenly. I then got up from this bench, walked past those alumni photos, and climbed up this corridor's three-stepped stairs adjacent to the one leading upstairs. Then, I entered in the hallway, made two left turns, slowly walking toward a black-framed, glass door opened inwards. I was at the Front Office. Before saying anything, I saw my academic counselor standing there leaning on the counter: friendliest pastor who was easy to talk with, no matter how bad Life got for you. He's there chit-chatting with his fellow coworkers, all who were women—two being mothers of kids who attended the school—and talking with them as if they were all waiting. I walked in and greeted my counselor with a "Good morning," and was happy to see me. I immediately lent him my transcripts: opening the envelope, he took a quick glance with no words said. He grinned after closing the envelope, then placed it on a tray of other documents. Then, he looks at me asking, "Now...is there anything else do you need? You're good to go!" I asked him, shyly, where my diploma was: he had it on hand, held behind his back, unveiling the "passport," and presenting it with a chortled laugh. I looked at him and all his workers with a big smile: nodding in gratitude, honor, and relief, with everyone happily applauding me. I was speechless, but thankful, and overheard one of them say, "What a great way to start the morning!" I concluded this visit by letting my counselor notify me if anything comes up, knowing I'm able to call him anytime during school hours for further concerns. However, before taking off in celebration that morning, I asked my counselor one more thing while walking out of the Front Office with him.

With treacherous concern, heard from the grapevine, I asked, "Is it true our school graduations are held at a cemetery? Has it been done there ever since?" My counselor answered in relation to costs and budget, which was odd since I'd have suggested graduating at the auditorium. I didn't have any further say afterward, but told him to have a great rest of his day, walking out of the school feeling liberated knowing that I can live Life, freely. However, while walking to my bus stop, I did more thinking before celebrating aloud: one of them being why it's permissible to celebrate a stage in life at an area where it ended for others. A "happy ending?" The area of choice for this school's graduation sounds unfair to students: hinting them, indirectly, we'll all be "graduating" once our lives are done, but is that necessary? Personally, I realized that's spiritually incompatible with me: I always perceived passed citizens—souls—as messengers, guides, and lessons to learn from. More-so, I'm a reasonable man: no matter who cruel someone is, or was, I'd never party on their grave(s). Anyhow, placing those thoughts aside, I got on the 96 bus line. This led me to its final stop at the bus station where I'd wait, then would hop on line 239 heading home.

Getting off at my stop and walking up the sidewalks going home, carrying this reward like a badge of honor, was where I'd bask in the fresh air. Walking by the bushes, plants, and trees in front of these houses looked like they all were applauding me for a job well done—early morning sunshine beaming with cozy

warmth. As I made it home, unlocking, then opening the front door greeted by our labrador mix, Diamond, I smiled and exhaled a sigh of relief. Our sweet dog was the only one home: my parents at work and sister in school, making this a great time going over what happened. While Diamond walked and followed me into my bedroom, I told her after plopping this diploma of mine on the computer desk, “We did it, Diamond! I’m finally done! I’m free! Yes!” She looked at me wagging her tail having said that. Come to think of it, what a turnaround three months makes: those tears I shed meant something. I’m glad to have graduated at the Front Office without classmates; and seeing others, besides my parents, who were also happy for me, made this moment even better. In addition to all this, I never took, nor had, any professional high school graduation photos taken of me—my senior yearbook ones only, but not myself in a cap and gown. Oh, and I never got a call back from Linda responding to my emotional voicemail; including any congratulatory messages/comments I’d post on social media—MySpace—about graduating three months later (two of them were happy, however). Great, and so my healing in becoming myself again continues, working on projects without judgement. While Diamond laid down next to me, petting her by my computer chair, where I then sat, was where feelings of satisfaction secured: trusting the process to success—“recovery,” if you will. Realizing this wasn’t done on purpose and not being scheduled for graduation rehearsal in a gloomy area, insurmountably blocked in my destiny, was truly historic: something to behold and treasure forever. This was a blessing in disguise that saved my spiritual health: good thing I failed high school.

Note

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