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From Frustration to Finding One's Self

Abstract

Christopher Saucedo is a first-generation undergraduate student at California State University, Los Angeles. He is an artist, designer, and avid fiction writer studying English. From an early age, frustration at school and at home led to being held back when he knew he could do better if only he could discover how to demonstrate it. Though his life goals have suffered many setbacks, he has persisted thanks in part to the determination of his mother and her ambition to see him make it in higher education, even if she was not able to see him make it in the end.

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CHRISTOPHER SAUCEDO

From Frustration to Finding One's Self

“Welcome, all my first-generation students!” The professor opened up the course with a cheery demeanor that tried to convey a sense of positivity and joy in seeing all of us in this same room with her. I say *tried* because I did not feel the joy that others in the room were feeling at the time. I felt apprehensive about the whole thing. It was like I had walked into a meeting that I was not invited to and now was listening in on. I wanted to remain covert because I did not feel that I belonged. What was this whole thing about anyways? What was it supposed to mean? What is *first-gen*?

This is still a new concept for me.

I grew up passing on a lot of opportunities. Decision making was hard for me as a kid. I had a lot of responsibility foisted upon me by my mother before I even knew what it meant to be responsible. From a young age I read well, was taught about money, and knew how to use all sorts of tools. My mother pushed me to do all that I could do with the resources we had and to not waste anything. My parents were very well educated, just not academically. My mother got all her skills from her high school, some college, and her father. My father managed to squeak by for years before finding a job as an ESL instructor. But even though neither of them finished college, we were well-off for a long time. In the 90's you still could be. I did not know how to recognize the potential of opportunities then. It was one of those things my parents expected me to figure out on my own; or maybe they were too busy. They both worked and had a fixer-upper house to rebuild, as well as two loud children.

We didn't talk about generational stuff in my family. My father's family had a long history of estrangement going back generations. My mother's family only knew their lineage as far back as my great grandfather. We did not talk about wealth transfer, or higher education, or anything like that. We were all very focused on the now. Except for me; I was focused on the future. So much of my time was focused on the future that I wanted to be there already. I was frustrated because my life was not meeting my ideals, and my parents were too busy to support me when I needed them. School did not meet my needs either. Frustration turned into outbursts in class, then to medication to control me, then remedial classes; none of it helped me feel stimulated or supported. It made me feel like an experiment. Worse, I felt like a burden. I could feel my mother's disappointment flowing over me. Her sadness in having to medicate her son whose only problem was that he didn't fit in with the rest.

When it came time to evaluate me, the school said I was floundering when I should be swimming. They suggested I be promoted to encourage my growth. I did not understand. They put me in classes where they *slow you down to catch you up*, and now they wanted to advance me to Junior High? Possibly two grades? It did not sit right with me. I had so many friends and others I would be leaving behind. Why would I get to go ahead, and they wouldn't? So, to my mother's disappointment, I said no. She had been setting me up to succeed all this time, but still I did not realize it, and I let another opportunity pass. My frustration grew. Soon after,

my father became too sick from Multiple Sclerosis to function, and I became man of the house.

I was 13.

For years after, I struggled to find myself. By 15 I was convinced I was an adult. By 18, I was convinced I was a failure. My mother was relying on me to get into college on my own merits—we had neither the money nor the support at that time. I was expected to excel, but I performed poorly in high school; so much so, we decided that the SAT's were not worth the money. My mother had told me I had to get into a college that we could afford, so I could only go to junior college. My father had attended Cal State LA, but his disease had rendered him unable to finish just three classes short of a bachelor's degree. I was expected to find a way to do more with less. But what was significant about my junior college experience was that for the first time I was allowed to take as many opportunities as I wanted at one time. So instead of choosing a single subject I crammed as many different subjects in as I could. My mother pushed me to find what I wanted, and I could do anything now that I was an adult. Acting, music, art, science, English, history...they were all there for me to try.

And try I did, for a long time.

It was through all this trying that I discovered the joy of travel, and even though we were bleeding through our savings, my mother and I found ways to send me abroad and it changed my perspective. I wanted something now. I wanted to see more, to learn more, to do everything. And even when things turned for the worse for my family, I still had the drive to push on. I pushed, even when my mother wasn't there to push me on anymore. I finally found focus and wanted only those things that made me feel challenged. I wasn't going to pass any opportunity that I didn't have to anymore.

Now it is 2023, and I am looking through my newly minted Cal State LA email. I had made it, finally. I got here on my own merit. But what is this? *Study Abroad Program Available. For first-generation students?* I had never heard of this. Is this for foreigners? I cautiously weighed my options; it was in my major. Would it be wrong to take it? Do I deserve such an opportunity? I have to try. I submit my request and a few months later I am sitting nervously in this classroom. I want to make a good impression or no impression at all. There are graduates in this class. One of them knows me. I'm somehow memorable and I've only been here an hour. I learned what it means to be first-gen. I'm doing something no one in my family has done before. It's interesting to know that I can still learn something new. A lot of new things. New perspectives. I settle in. This was a good choice. I am glad I didn't let my trepidations get the better of me. The younger me was never emotionally free enough to make choices like this. All those years of trying and experimenting paid off in the end.

I made it mom. I'm going to be okay.