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How to Start Over without Losing Your Beginning, Middle, or End

Abstract

Miranda Seche, a recent graduate of California State University, Los Angeles, reflects on her father's educational journey as a first-generation college student and its impact on her own. While sharing her new understanding of the hardships first-generation students endure, Seche also questions the lack of emphasis on the positive and empowering aspects of the first-gen experience, what she frames as "first-gen euphoria." Through reflection on family expectations, cultural pressures, and the myth of the "perfect" college path, Seche explores what it means to fail, recalibrate, and find purpose on one's own terms.

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How to Start Over without Losing Your Beginning, Middle, or End

The first time I attended college, it was a disaster. I decided to go out of state, partially to gain some independence, and because they gave me a sizeable scholarship that made it affordable to attend. As my parents dropped me off, I felt excited. I had worked hard to get into college and everything was falling into place. It didn't matter that I felt uncomfortable on campus. That I didn't feel represented amongst my peers. I expected a learning curve. But it seemed the only one on this curve was me. It was certainly not home. It was hard to put that feeling into words; my parents would ask after me on our weekly video calls, but all I would say back was



that I was fine. The truth was, I was spiraling. I felt like a fraud. My parents and I worked so hard to get me here, and I was already failing. When fall break rolled around, I couldn't wait to come home and never go back.

Growing up, my dad always stressed the importance of higher education. He was the first generation in his family to graduate from college, something that he emphasized opened doors for him that would have otherwise remained closed as a man of color living in America. For him, a college degree was more than just a piece of paper; it was a way out of the low-income neighborhood he and his mom lived in. He hustled for that

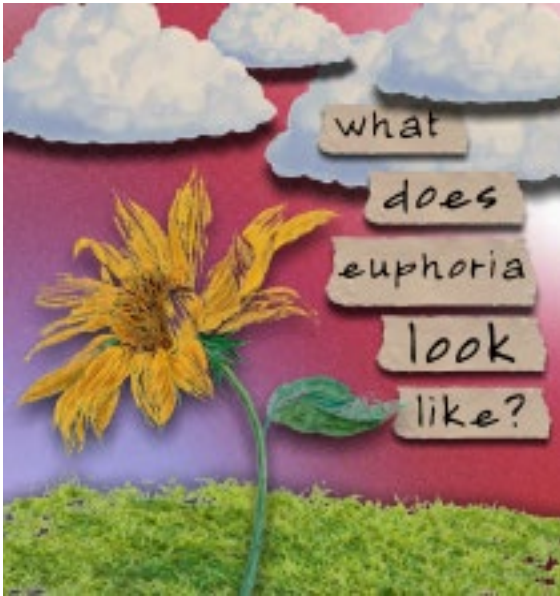
degree, working two jobs while attending as a full-time student. He worked his ass off his entire life for his mom, for himself, and later, for me, my mom, and my siblings. He did all of it so one day he could look me in the eye and tell me that I would never have to do the same. Of course when I was younger, I didn't realize any of this. While my parents worked, our grandpa would take care of us: pick us up from school, make us dinner, and stay until our parents came home from a long day at work. And still, my dad would make time for bedtime stories and goodnight kisses and fill my head with dreams of an adult version of me at Harvard or Brown. He truly believed I could do and be anything I wanted because he was going to make it so. His dreams of the Ivy League and law schools never came to pass. To come back home after my first semester at a university, intent on giving up on college altogether, felt like I was throwing all of my parents' hard work back in their faces. Why couldn't I crack college? Why did everyone around me seem to have it all figured out?

I thought I made all the right choices: I studied and I fretted and I got the best grades I could in high school but it wasn't enough to succeed in college. That same high school put into my head that community colleges and Cal States were subpar. In my dad's quest to provide the best chances for me and my siblings, he ventured to predominantly white and upper-class neighborhoods in which we lived on the outskirts but still attended the same schools. As senior year rolled around, my classmates scoffed at the possibilities of attending a Cal State and, god forbid, a community college. They weren't worried about tuition or scholarships. Instead, they spent their time gossiping about people's choices of not attending college, of going to a community college, or to a Cal State, or starting work right away. It wasn't until we went our separate ways that I realized how toxic it all was. Shaming someone for moving toward their future—no matter what that looked like. When I came back from that first semester at university, I needed to re-evaluate everything: my motives, my dreams, my goals. I was attending college because that's what you're supposed to do, and I was doing it for my parents. But what about me? Did I want to go? Did I even have a choice? The better I understood my answers

to these questions, the more I understood that this wasn't the end of the line for me. I've always loved school. Maybe I wasn't always crazy about the teachers or the amount of homework, but the excitement of learning something new, of being handed a book you've never seen before, of reading something so profound you had no choice but to let it live in your brain, that I loved. Two years later, I was submitting my application to California State University, Los Angeles. That's when the first inklings of euphoria began to sink in. In a way I was starting over, but I didn't want to forget about my past experience at college. I wanted to learn from it, to cradle that girl who looked at herself as a failure and show her a new beginning.



The first time I heard the term “first-gen euphoria” was in a writing workshop I attended this summer. I had recently completed a spring course in narrative practices of healing centered around first-generation college students and their voices. That class introduced me to the manners of struggles first-gen students face: impostor syndrome, anxiety, survivor's guilt, and the list goes on. Through sharing these experiences, these authors built a sense of community that was magnetic. I hadn't realized that many of the feelings that I faced during that first semester of college were shared by so many people. It felt like relief to know I wasn't alone, that these struggles were not representative of me as a person, but the institutions that make it impossible to navigate college or university. In reading about the obstacles and barriers intertwined with the first-gen experience, it got me thinking about what other experiences could be shared. The strengths and positives that come from being a first-generation student seemed to fall to the wayside. I certainly never heard my dad talk about them. He was always focused



on the end goal: to get out. Unintentionally, he influenced me to think the same. My dad had already done the hard work; he gave us a better life than he had. It was up to me to me to pay it forward. That's why it felt so crushing to come back home from that first semester of college with my grades in the gutter. I had taken a step forward only to take 2, 3, 10 steps back. But if we're so focused on always being in motion, making sure we're prepared for what's to come, how can we even have time to feel the effects of our accomplishments? I just graduated and my mind is already on how I can use my degree to find work and create the life I want. It's barely settled in that I actually have a bachelor's degree, that I graduated

from college at all. I need to take time to be proud, but that feeling has never come easily to me. It's muted, stuck behind a wall that will not break. We've always been taught not to brag, to be humble in the face of praise, but when did that turn into not acknowledging achievements at all? Maybe all this pressure and striving to belong has scrambled our brains to always be pushing for better from ourselves, never even realizing when we accomplish the best. So how does the euphoria break through, and what does it look like?

There are many answers this question, and for some, the answers haven't been found yet. For me, I think the euphoria comes from being able to get back up, to keep going. A new college

application, navigating another campus, opening yourself up to opportunities such as a workshop in collaboration with international students. But so far, nothing has compared to donning that cap and gown and sinking into a sea of thousands of other graduates. Waving at your family as you walk the stage and watching their faces light up with pride. And though I've mentioned pride doesn't come easy, seeing it in my brothers' and parent's faces inspired me to feel it for myself. I did it. I really did it.

