

Last year, two good friends started a blog called “Alternative Commencement,” as a space for seniors to share their own parting thoughts with the Class of 2014.

Today, we’re gathered here for an “Alternative Commencement” of our own. And I want to share my reflections from that site, as well as new ones I have made since, to illustrate how everyone’s path through Brown changes, regardless of when we graduate.

In the Fall of last year, I gave a speech during orientation to welcome the first-year class to campus. The speech was meant to introduce them to Brown and mitigate some of the fears they may have starting college—so, I used Legos as a metaphor for my time at Brown.

(I was, and still am, excited about that metaphor). Here’s an excerpt of the speech:

On the front of Brown’s box of Legos, there’s a promise of what Brown could be: a perfect picture, with taglines and slogans. "No Core Requirements!" "Pass-Fail Classes!" and "Peer advisors for every first-year student!"

As we open the box and take out all the Legos, we find that there's no set of instructions that will tell us how to build our final product.

We discover pieces that we didn't know were included in the box, like a secret study space or an awesome professor.

It will take some time to lay out all these pieces and come up with an idea of our final product.

But when we feel that we have a good sense of what to build, we can start putting the pieces together, and make something of our own.

Legos felt like a particularly wholesome way to describe the chaos that is freshman year at Brown.

It was accurate in many ways: finding friends, trying out new activities, looking for the right department to call home. I made great friends in my first-year hallway and in extracurriculars, and I took a First-Year Seminar in Public Policy, which eventually became my concentration. I credit a friend with pushing me to try out student government, where I ended up spending maybe a little too much time (instead of doing my school work).

All of these Lego Pieces came from exploring and seeing what Brown had to offer.

The part that was not all that suitable for a welcome speech, however, is that life often gets in the way of building your perfect Brown experience.

In the second semester of my sophomore year, my dad died of cancer.

Before his death, I flew home every weekend for months, to be with him, and with my family. But his condition deteriorated more quickly than any of us expected.

I returned to Brown a few weeks after his passing, and despite the supportive environment, my life was completely different. Nothing at Brown had changed, but I had. It was hard to be alone, but talking to people and pretending I was fine was almost as frustrating. Writing papers was tedious, and I was disconnected from my classes. I lost my sense of curiosity, my drive, and my passion.

I took a semester off, and I started a job on the Obama campaign. I worked harder than I ever thought possible. At that time, I thought I was running from my grief.

But I wasn't running, I was healing.

I spent months of 16 hour days working on a campaign that I believed in, and it was something that I knew my dad believed in too. Diving deep into something, and finding a new passion, was the kick that I needed to get me back on track. In a way, working that hard made me feel connected to my father, and it gave me a path forward that I had lost.

I lived at home, and I was, and still am, incredibly privileged to have the support and love of my mother. With the help of my family, deans, friends, professors, I came back to campus. I was curious again, and I was driven again. I had made new friends, found new passions, and jumped back in.

As I reflected back on that Lego speech, I realized how inaccurate it was.

As students here, we never decide for ourselves what our "Brown experience" will look like. It is shaped in part by the choices that we make. Maybe more importantly, it is shaped by our life experiences and what happens to us while we're at Brown. It is shaped by the others that we encounter and by the friends that we make. It is shaped by the times that we fail others, the times that we fail ourselves, and the way that we learn from those failures. It is shaped by our ability to take a step back from the day-to-day stress, and search for the ways that we've grown and changed.

Although everything around us can often feel out of our control, one important choice that we do have the ability to make is the choice to continue growing.

There was no time that I stopped healing. It is a continual process. Now, 2-and-a-half years later, I have decided for myself, that rather than being weighed down by my father's passing, I can grow from it.

I concluded that first speech by saying "life at Brown isn't about the plan. It's about building your experience as you go, and learning from the process." I still stand behind this part of my speech. As a senior, I know this is true for me, and regardless of what led all of us to graduate in December, for all of us in this room too.

The unexpected experiences are much more important than what we expect and what we consider easy. They help us challenge our own plans. They help us learn more about ourselves.

And they send us off to our next experience with a few new Lego pieces– but we never know what we can build with them until we're there.

Congratulations to the Class of 2014.5!