

Mid-Year Ceremony Completion Speech, 2015.5

Adrienne Tran

I had this notion of the quintessential Brown experience. It was being part of an a cappella group, writing for the Brown Daily Herald, going to the Colosseum on Friday nights, and living in Perkins and ending up in a long-term relationship with one of my hall mates. But I didn't fit into any of it.

I started a separate club, and spent my Friday nights in conversations about philosophy. I didn't follow the typical path to graduate in 4 years; I instead took a leave from school to fill a gap I felt in my education. I wanted to find ways to apply Computer Science to real-world problems, and moved to Australia to research how I could use algorithms to optimize disaster evacuations.

Because of that gap, for me and for many of us, school was no longer a treadmill we were exhausting ourselves to finish -- rather, the juncture in our education gave us pause to appreciate the things that were present at Brown, that were rarely found in other places. Things like discussions where we could contemplate our moral responsibilities, while simultaneously being offered complimentary Kabob n Curry. The contrast between Brown and other places allowed me to tease out the extraordinary in life's commonplace.

I think often about what might have prompted this deviation from my original plan to graduate in four years. I have a hunch it was something unique about Brown which, ironically, motivated me to leave.

I remember at a first-generation college students lunch with the deans, someone in our small circle asked Dean Rodriguez why she became a Dean. She said that when she was in college, she would avoid deans. And not just deans, but also people generally. If she saw someone she knew on the street, she'd walk in the other direction.

Everyone laughed. But laughter only comes from encountering something we are not expecting. I laughed not because I didn't expect her scenario, but because I didn't expect something like that to be shared. Few people have the courage to let themselves be seen. But, many people at Brown do. It wasn't only Dean Rodriguez, many of my peers at Brown shared a willingness to own, and engage with their vulnerabilities.

This seemingly trivial moment brought me to realize what is present at Brown but seldom found elsewhere -- the authenticity, and the compassion with which people at Brown receive each other. That's not to say we are soft. After all, the purpose of university is to make you emotionally comfortable, so you can be intellectually uncomfortable. I left Brown because of the connective-ness I felt with my friends, colleagues, and professors, which gave me confidence to tread a different path to

augment my education, and I know I will carry that with me and put myself in intellectually uncomfortable situations after Brown.

Many of us have thought about life after Brown. For me, it was panicking to my best friend at 1am about my poor grade on my midterm and how that only logically entailed that I would be unemployable after college. It's peculiar how painful something is when we're in the middle of it, and how trivial it appears in hindsight.

We often say Brown students are not competitive, but we are. We may not be competitive with other people, but we are competitive with our ideal selves, because we haven't solved world hunger or cured cancer yet. I say this because I too, dwell on questions like "Will I build the next Apple?" "Will I make a million dollars and start my own social good foundation?" And what if I never do that in my life? This is one of the most painful reconciliations to make in a life well lived. But maybe it doesn't have to be quite so full of anguish if we thought differently.

This is how I've started to think as I've been writing code, applying for scholarships, and interviewing for jobs. What I have to keep telling myself when I get really psyched out is don't be afraid. I cannot be daunted by the possibility of my goals and dreams not coming true. I can only do my job. And continue to show up for my piece of it, whatever that might be.¹

Looking back at my time at Brown, I realized that my experience is the quintessential Brown experience. Everyone has the quintessential Brown experience, whether you have Brown moments or you spend your time elsewhere. Everyone has a different story. But whether you found yourself as a 0.5-er, or decided to make yourself an 0.5-er, something happened. Something happened between the moment we received our acceptance letters and today. Life showed us jumps and transitions, and we opened ourselves up, showed up for our piece, and accepted the detour.

The real value of those ambitious goals then, is arousing within us the will to aspire beyond where we see ourselves today. That will, moves us forward.² And has moved us forward- to this ceremonial day. This day is for you, for having the sheer human compassion and stubbornness to keep showing up.

¹ Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Your Elusive Genius*. [TEDTalk](#). Feb 2009.

² Sotomayor, Sonia. *My Beloved World*. [Vintage Books](#). January 7, 2014.