

I have a master's degree and no idea what I'm doing with my life.

The honest truth is, as much as I'm a person who thinks I defy social convention, as much as I think deeply and critically about the societal structures that exist and pressure us to take certain paths and be certain people, I've long missed one crucial step in that deconstruction process:

What the hell do I actually want?

And the more prestigious degrees I get, the more educated I become, the further I get away from that question.

What do I actually want.

Here's my story:

I entered the elite at age five.

From kindergarten to sixth grade, I attended The Rhoades School, a prestigious, private elementary school. In seventh grade, I started at The Bishop's School, a prestigious, private middle and high school. In 2010, I began college at Barnard College of Columbia University, a prestigious, private college with the double bonus of being both a Seven Sisters and a de-facto college of the Ivy League university. This past winter, I graduated from college with an offer of admission to the London School of Economics (LSE), one of the "most elite" universities in the world. I graduated with Merit, and a Distinction on the dissertation I wrote in 6 days, in November.

On the ladder of prestige, I've climbed about as far as a 23-year-old can. My classmates have gone on to medical schools and law schools, start-ups and non-profits, finance jobs and consulting jobs at the most influential companies in the country. The more globally-minded became Fulbright Scholars, the more socially-minded started Teaching for America.

Me? I'm sitting in an Airbnb outside Amsterdam that a friend has lovingly paid for. I'm micro-dosing on mushrooms, again. And I'm asking myself the question, What the hell do I actually want?

I took a gap year after college. A year and several months in which I worked at a job I hated, started another job I hated, fell in and out of love, moved five times, tried to kill myself, went to the hospital, got put on medication, and slowly climbed my way out of the hole that I'd been digging all my life.

And still, now, nearly three years later, I ask myself: What do I actually want?

I wrote this essay for the first time then, sitting in a trailer on my uncle's farm in Lopez Island, Washington. At the time, I had 21 months: December 2013 until September 2015, when I start at LSE. 21 months in 21 years when my life didn't have to look good on a résumé. I'm reminded of that line from *Fight Club* – “This is your life, and it's ending one minute at a time” – but I thought, No. Not for me. Because next fall, I'm going to graduate school. I'm not *really* living in a trailer, I'm sojourning here. I'm not *really* living on minimum wage, I'm vacationing on it. This has an end-date.

This isn't real life.

My real life comes with a gold sticker stamped *Ivy League*, stamped *Accomplished*, stamped *Elite*.

This, even now. Amsterdam, the mushrooms. This isn't my real life. I can go get a job if I want one.

So, what the hell do I actually want?

And it is astounding how few answers I have. There is one thing I know: that the life I was conditioned for is not the life I want to live.

Let's step back.

When we pass through an elite institution, we come to inhabit the elite. Our self-worth becomes tied to our diplomas. I can live in a trailer all I want, but that piece of paper marked Columbia University proves I'm still “better than that.” It proves I am one of the Best and Brightest.

The truth is, as we all know, it proves that I am one of the Richest and Best-Connected.

We the Prestigious are not truly the brightest. We are not even the best-educated. Calling what I got an “elite education” is only a half-truth.

Yes, it got me a spot in the elite. No, I did not receive an education.

The Bishop's Difference

My high school had this tagline, “The Bishop's Difference.” A catch-all phrase used to highlight how an education from The Bishop's School sets you apart from the rest. We are the seventeen-year-olds who quote Kierkegaard. We balance three sports, two performing arts groups and a hundred community service projects, speak three languages and still get straight A's and 2400s on the SAT. We never confuse “your” and “you're” and we know how to use an Oxford comma. We are a college admissions officer's wet dream.

We are also some of the most elitist, privileged, “entitled little shits” (to use William Deresiewicz' term) that the world has ever known.

I'm told I received an incredible education at Bishop's and I should be grateful. I am not. If I could go back and do it again, I never would have gone to school there. Yes, I met some inspiring teachers, the kind most schools don't have. I wrote essays on Moby-Dick and learned to speak French and traveled to India.

My best friend from high school is dead. An overdose. She was a psychopharmacology student and had been using for years. You do the math.

My other best friend suffers from crippling migraines induced by PTSD. Another friend tried to kill himself. Another friend suffered from severe depression.

And on, and on, and on.

What I got from my education was a disgusting sense of entitlement and an extremely narrow and warped view of the world. I didn't meet anyone whose parent wasn't a doctor, lawyer, banker or business executive. I didn't meet anyone who wasn't guaranteed success. I didn't meet anyone poor, and I hardly met anyone black or Latino.

The "Bishop's Difference," in whatever form it comes, doesn't mean you're qualified or intelligent. It means you inhabit a world narrowly sliced from the top tier of the socioeconomic spectrum. You're surrounded by future world leaders, not because they're brilliant, but because they were born into the class that keeps recycling itself as the top of the pyramid.

We go to Princeton and Stanford and Williams, we go to UCLA Business School and Harvard Law and the London School of Economics.

We grow up and marry other Princeton and Stanford and Williams graduates, we make six-figure salaries and move into big houses with ocean views just like the ones we grew up in. And the weirdest part of it is that none of us had to learn anything to get there. Our future was set because of our families and our upbringings. Our place in the elite was a birthright, not an achievement.

Pomp and Circumstance

My best friend from college and I both graduated a semester early. I remember her looking at me in our last week of finals and saying, "How the hell did we get here?"

And all I could think was, "Because time passed, and we kept breathing."

Everyone talks about graduating college like an accomplishment, and for some people, it is. For those who had to work their way through it, or pay for their own education. For those whose parents weren't college-educated, or who had to face insurmountable adversity during their time on campus. For all kinds of people whose stories I don't know and can't list, it is a huge accomplishment.

But the percentage of students for whom graduating isn't really an accomplishment is large, and it's growing. For me and for people like me, a Columbia University degree was just the next

step. An accomplishment like walking is an accomplishment for a baby. Yes, you did it, but you were biologically guaranteed to do it. Your getting here was a matter of *when*, never *if*.

It's four years later. Here's your diploma.

The only thing you had to do to get here was nothing.

Time passed.

Congratulations.

In the spring of my junior year of college, I first flirted with suicide. I was in a period of intense depression, and for the first time I truly wanted to be dead. I wanted to stop existing. I didn't get so far as to attempt suicide, but oh... I wanted to. I knew there was something skewed in my brain, and I was on the verge of dropping out of school to figure it out and try to heal.

But I never did. I stayed in school, miserable, depressed, and at times suicidal. I graduated eight months later. Congratulations.

Was I strong? Was I able to pull it together? Was it the *Bishop's Difference* in me that kept me in school?

Looking back, though it felt like a battle, I did not stay out of strength. I stayed out of fear. I stayed because I was supposed to. I stayed because the possibility of not being prestigious terrified me too much, because this was my born role in the Circle of Class and Privilege.

I stayed because I would rather die in the elite than live outside of it.

A Farmer with a Harvard Degree

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I had my first corporate internship. I sat at my desk in my Nordstrom's pencil skirt and thought, *What the hell happened to me?*

When I was fifteen and first started looking at colleges, I wanted to study film and philosophy. I wanted to spend my summers at an ashram in India or volunteering for an avant garde theater or working on a farm. I wanted to be all *Eat, Pray, Love* spiritual, all *Moulin Rouge* bohemian.

But I found myself in a cubicle, staring at an Excel spreadsheet every day to pad my résumé and make connections. I cried myself to sleep every night that summer, and I couldn't understand why. I didn't know what I was doing wrong. This was what everyone around me did. This was what you were supposed to do.

This was the whole point of every hoop I'd jumped through from age five to now.

What I didn't realize was that my internship was just another hoop. The more time you spend in elite institutions, the more blind you get to the hoops around you.

And they keep shrinking the hoops on you.

First it's get good grades, then it's get good grades in all the right advanced classes, then it's get into only one of the most selective schools, then it's get only one of the most selective internships, the best graduate or professional school, the highest-paying job. The list keeps going on. Your idea of success doesn't just grow up with you, it gets smaller as you get older. You're on a road through a field and the path keeps getting narrower, but you're terrified of stepping on the grass.

An education is supposed to open doors. It's supposed to give you opportunities. But for every new door opened to us, We the Prestigious force another one shut. Now you can be a lawyer and an investment banker, but God forbid you be a mechanic. You can't be a masseuse. You can't be a farmer.

Above all, you can't be poor.

Of course, you still could, but those things are out in the grass where you don't dare to tread. You're conditioned not to want them, to disdain them, to associate with those people only when necessary and never as people. You get your car fixed. You get a massage. You forget where your food comes from. You donate to the poor, you don't hang out with them.

Why? Because you're afraid. You're so cripplingly afraid of stepping off the narrow path to success, of missing a hoop and falling... into what?

Into the rest of the world. Into the void below the Bishop's Difference, below the Ivy League, below the top of the pyramid. You're terrified of seeing how skewed your worldview is. You're terrified of seeing the faces of every person below you and realizing how tenuous your position at the top actually is.

You're terrified of realizing how much of your life you didn't actually earn.

I Majored in Unafraid!

When I started college, they had this admissions pamphlet that read, "I Majored in *Unafraid!*" It was supposed to make you feel empowered, like you were free to explore your education and take new risks. This could not be further from the truth. Everyone I met in college was afraid. Elite schools are the most terrified places in the world.

I'm scared too. I'm scared of my life, ending one minute at a time in the void between prestigious commencement and prestigious orientation. I'm scared of drifting, but I'm not sure what it means to be grounded. For as long as I can remember, being grounded was simple: You were either working on your degree or on your résumé. Being grounded meant being tied to a piece of paper.

In the months since I graduated from my master's program, in the months since I dropped out of my second master's program, I have finally stepped off the ladder of prestige. I have no job. I

have a bit of money saved that my parents gave me to live on for school. I am running out of money. I am running out of reasons not to ask the question:

What. Do. I. Want.

In the years since college, I've had the task of unlearning my education. I'm picking apart the priorities I grew into that aren't mine, the dreams that would actually make me miserable, and the measures of self-worth that value the kinds of people I can't stand.

In unlearning my education, I'm relearning myself. I've had to rediscover the soul that got lost, and the results have been surprising. Namely, that all I did in college was get further away from myself. That all I did in grad school was cocaine. That all I've done since is pick apart a self that is utterly not my own, and look for whatever light glimmers underneath.

I've found that I want all the same things for my life that I did when I was fifteen. I want to be a writer and an activist because these are the things I love to do. They matter to me even if they don't get me anywhere else.

But even more surprising, I've found that the most important things I want are not things you can put on a résumé. They're not things you can answer with when someone asks you at a party, "What do you do?" Things like, I want to be a friend and a lover. I want to be good to my parents. I want to be close to my sister. I want to be close to nature. I want to love, and grow, and heal, and feel, and be happy.

What I want is to be human, radically and wholly human. The kind of rough-edged humanity that prestigious institutions sand off of you. The kind of humanity I see lost from the faces of the brilliant people I grew up with.

I've learned so much more of value from six months of living life than I did in twenty two years of so-called education. And not just about myself. I've learned more political science since graduating from LSE than I did getting my political science degrees, simply because I have the time now to read widely and think broadly and talk to people. I've had the time for all the things you're supposed to do in school, but never get around to.

But I worry that all of this still reeks of transience. I'm talking the way privileged kids talk after a two-week "community service" trip to Guatemala.

The truth is, I could go get a job if I wanted one.

Actual Education

When asked why I chose LSE, I joke that it was just cheaper than Harvard. This isn't entirely untrue. I can't pretend that the elite name wasn't a huge factor in my choice.

I told myself when I applied to grad school that my decision to go was wholly different. I knew exactly what I wanted to study, and why. I picked the school for its social science focus, for the specificity of the department I could study in, and for professors like Richard Sennett and David

Graeber. I also knew to learn outside the walls of the institution. I knew to learn not only from my professors and classmates, but from my butchers and baristas. I knew not to surround myself with rich people. I knew how to value other things.

I spent that year taking drugs in friends' rooms in East London. I shut off. I powered down. I was more on autopilot than I'd ever been, churning out essays and theses from some automatic two-hour stint in a library and cycling home to get high again.

I wrote my thesis in six days. I didn't touch the topic I'd come to school to study. I didn't even meet the professors I admired.

I didn't get an education. I got straight A's and two degrees, but ask me what I learned in grad school and I'd be hard pressed to tell you anything. I regret that. The only thing I don't regret was the professor in college who introduced me to the writings of James C. Scott. Everything else I could have done without.

Call me ungrateful. I am ungrateful.

Tell me there are thousands of kids who would kill for the opportunities I've had. That's exactly my point. Those are the kids who should be getting these opportunities, not me and the people like me.

But those kids didn't have SAT tutors and parents with six-figure incomes and the *Bishop's Difference*. I did, so now I have a Master's from the London School of Economics. Congratulations.

Now I have the uphill task of unlearning my elitist upbringing in the hopes that I can figure out how to live a life that won't make me want to kill myself. I have to figure out how to be happy.

And the only thing that's ever worked was stepping off the ladder. I went traveling. I fell in love. I met people. I met myself. I blew up any standard I had of what my life should look like. I followed only what felt right, down a rabbit hole of highs and lows and stagnation and growth like I'd never known.

This morning, I sat down on the carpet and asked: What do I want to do with my life?

And the answer was: I want to go outside and smoke a cigarette. Then, I wanted to come inside and write this.

The rest will come later. It will come when it comes.

In all my years trying to be the smartest and the most accomplished, I almost never thought about satisfaction. I certainly never thought of it as something to be devoted to, to take time for, to strive for. I never thought about building my soul the way I built my résumé. I think differently now.

I remember crying to my mom one night in college that I was worried about never getting a job. What if I don't make it? What if I'm a failure?

She said, "You can't be a failure if you're happy."

We the Elite have been conditioned to define success in such narrow terms, but it's just that: conditioning. We can unlearn it. We can learn something else, a whole new set of values. Education can be an opportunity, but we must stop attaching it to the promise of an elite.

On a systemic level, we must stop charging so much for tuition that school only serves to buy your way into the elite. We have to stop setting standards for merit that can only be met through money.

On a personal level, we have to stop being so addicted to status. We have to stop defining success and failure in terms of income and start defining it in terms of happiness. We have to remember that money is a tool, not a goal; a means, not an end, and a means that never directly causes us to be happy.

And most of all, we must ask ourselves to ignore the status. To ignore the diplomas, the jobs, the money, the prestige. We must ask ourselves the one question we likely don't know how to begin to answer: What do we actually *want*?