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Exceptionally Flawed: A Story About Expectation and Truth

Maria Del Sol Nava

Exceptional: *ADJECTIVE*. Used to describe someone or something that has a particular quality, usually a good quality, to an unusually high degree. (HarperCollins Publishers)

Flaw: *NOUN*. An imperfection or weakness and especially one that detracts from the whole or hinders effectiveness (Merriam-Webster)

I have a vivid memory of sitting with my father on the back steps of my house. I must have been about 8 years old where he asked me for the first time, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Immediately I thought of all the possibilities: ballerina, firefighter, teacher? He told me that I could be anything I wanted to be, as long as I worked hard, never quit on my dreams, and focused on my education. All my life I was told I had to do my best, to give 110% to everything that I do to reach success. And there have been times in my life, despite me giving it my all, when I have failed. It didn’t make sense to me how you could work twice as hard and still not be enough. Stories of success and exceptionality are fed to students like they are the rule, not the exception. I grew up in inner-city Los Angeles. I grew up watching movies like *Stand and Deliver* and reading books like *And Still We Rise* as examples and motivations that we could persist through anything instead of analyzing the systems of oppression in place that put people in these traumatic experiences that made them build resilience. It was on us, the individual, to do the extraordinary and be the exception to the rule. These stories can be damaging to students who don’t feel like they can live up to those expectations. What happens when students face failure for the first time? Failing gets harder and harder when the weight on your shoulders is heavier.

The weight I carry is significant. I am a woman. Someone who comes from generations of strong women who were expected (and often limited) to become wives, mothers, and caregivers instead of allowing them to have and

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pursue their aspirations. Being a woman of Mexican descent comes with its own set of expectations from a culture ingrained with misogyny and colorism. I am a first-generation U.S. born and a first-generation college student. My parents made their way to the United States with the intention of starting a family that would have access to a better education. All my life I had not known that we were poor because my family always had enough, even if we did not have much. I held the burden of being my family's ladder to move up in the world and had high expectations of myself to do just that. Being the daughter of undocumented immigrant parents, I often found myself keeping my head down, blending in, and avoiding conflict as to not draw attention to ourselves because making a mistake or ruffling feathers could jeopardize my family's safety. I recognize the privilege of having been born in this country. I acknowledge the access I have had to higher education and other opportunities that my parents hoped this country would provide. I sit here today in a master's program and with a bachelor's degree, fulfilling the dreams that my parents hoped for me. In many ways, I am still carrying the weight of that even if circumstances have changed.

Growing up, my dad would emphasize the importance of school and hard work to pursue our biggest dreams. I saw the sacrifices that my parents made to give us these opportunities, and I wanted to be exceptional for them. So, I dedicated my whole life to trying to be the best. All of my individual accomplishments felt like a direct result of my hard work and dedication, and to an extent a reward for following the rules – something I was taught would place me on a path for success. When I arrived at college, I realized following the rules was not enough to succeed. In fact, I did not even know what the rules were. My first year as a student at Middlebury College proved very difficult. For the first time in my life, I faced so many challenges and did not believe in myself. I remember writing my first college paper and crying when leaving my professor's office hours because I felt like my work wasn't enough. I remember sitting in the dining hall with some of my new classmates and listening to them talk about their recent summer trips abroad. I felt like I had missed something, I had nothing to contribute to the conversation. I spent my summer in a college readiness program and up until that moment had never left the country. I struggled to adapt academically and socially, feeling the weight of imposter syndrome, and never feeling like I quite belonged. However, when I called home, I hardly mentioned the struggles I faced because I feared my parents would be disappointed, because I wasn't living up to being exceptional.

When it came to finding my major and thinking about my career, I struggled too, not because of a lack of options, but because of a huge responsibility that I felt for my low-income family. I kept hearing the voices

in my head: we need more women engineers or find a career where you can make money. There were times when I walked into a math classroom and was the only person of color. There were times when I was overlooked and insulted by my peers and professors. I remember sitting in my Intro to Microeconomics class and some students were talking about the poverty line as if it did not exist. Did they know they were talking about my experience? The only reason I was at Middlebury was because of the scholarships that I received. I felt invisible, unseen, and uncomfortable. I chose Math as my major because it felt like the only field where it didn't matter how much I knew, and I didn't have to come up with original thought that would be influenced by my identities. I stripped myself of the parts that made me different and tried to blend in to be able to succeed. Consequently, I planned to pursue a career in finance, which fit the mold of what I thought was expected of me.

For most of my undergraduate experience, I felt like I was surviving, never thriving. I was miles away from the exceptional person I was told I was meant to be. I felt flawed because everyone around me seemed to be doing much better than I was, even though I was working twice as hard. I failed at least one exam in ALL my math classes, despite attending every class and doing all the homework. I stayed up late working on problem sets, trying to reteach myself concepts I did not understand and then would fall asleep in class due to the late-night studying. I failed to take care of myself and my wellbeing and continued to fail in so many other ways.

The Fall of 2016 was the hardest semester of all. I was taking my hardest course load this semester, getting ready to study abroad the next, and I had gotten admitted to a program that was meant to connect me to top employers around the country. I spent some of my weekends away from campus trying to land summer internships. As a first-generation college student, I wanted to take every opportunity I could because I didn't know if it would be my last. I wanted to make sure I was on track for my success, and instead I ended up burning myself out. Traveling and interviewing, usually doing more because it was what I had to do. I could not go to my parents and ask their friend to give me a job at their company. Not to mention that it was the same semester of a presidential election, and I was having a few severe medical complications. I pushed myself to my limit, crumbled, and forcibly pieced myself back together again, all for the sake of attaining these unrealistic expectations of success. It was an inevitable cycle that became a routine: wake up, push, crumble, piece back together, sleep (hardly), repeat.

Amid what became routine, I dealt with pivotal moments in my college

career and microaggressions that challenged and hurt me. However, I did not know how deeply these moments had impacted me until I entered my first professional job as an Admissions Counselor at my alma mater where I faced more obstacles. I felt like I was continuing to negotiate my identity in different ways. I was told on various occasions that I could not bring my full self to my role. I was told that I felt too deeply, my emotions were unprofessional, and I took things too personally. But how could I not feel for the students who shared part of themselves, their trauma, their hardship in the application process? How could I not feel like I was looking in a mirror when I read their stories? How could I sit there and allow for us to keep admitting students like those who inflicted harm on myself and others? I feel honored to have been a voice of reason at the table where these decisions were made. Although, it was still difficult to navigate those spaces nonetheless, I used that privilege to make a difference and advocate for those that follow in my footsteps. And I slowly started to rediscover the parts of myself that made me, me.

I admit that I have also perpetuated this exceptionalism in the roles that I have inhabited. I think about the college Admissions process at a highly selective institution, where we look for the best students who are academically curious, engaged outside of the classroom, and more. We expect the absolute best, especially from our students from underrepresented backgrounds. And then the cycle of exceptionalism continues. They get to places like Middlebury where they are challenged, often for the first time in their lives, and don't know what to do once they fail. I also think about the ways in which I navigated my role as a counselor and was automatically seen as the exemplary outcome for what a college degree could grant students who look like me. I remember the ways in which parents of Latine students would look at me with a sense of pride, because they could see their children within my success. How lucky am I to be seen in that light and how heavy for the students who, like myself, are given single stories of success and high expectations to achieve.

The experiences and education that I've encountered on my journey, have helped me understand myself better. Something that I have learned on this path is that the context of our lives and the salience of the identities may shift over time, but our stories and lived experiences do not. There are certain things that will not get fixed no matter the level of education that I attain. I am 26 years old, and I am still a member of a mixed-status family, I get calls from uncles asking if I will write them a character letter for their immigration trial. I have cousins whose DACA status continues to be put in question by the people of power in our country. There is generational family trauma that continues to affect family dynamics. The attainment of

a college degree does not automatically translate into upward mobility. All the complicated and messy parts of our lives do not go away simply because one of us breaks some barriers.

There were countless times during my undergraduate and professional experiences where I felt excluded and unsuccessful. And yet I was able to accomplish things that I did not know I was capable of. I wrote a thirty-page thesis in a foreign language and graduated as the only Latina with a Math degree in my graduating class. I am part of the 2% of applicants that were awarded the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship which has lifted the financial burdens of higher education and given me the ability to pursue multiple degrees. I worked extremely hard to get more students from the Southwest to Middlebury during my time in Admissions, many of whom held underrepresented identities. While my story holds many things to celebrate, I am still learning how not to hold myself to the highest standard of exceptionalism and am trying to find grace in my flaws and mistakes.

As you continue your journey, things will get messy, but there will be successes too. Life will hit you hard and you will fail. Both are truth and a part of the journey, because not every story is full of success at every turn. I own my story, the exceptional parts, and the flaws. I hope my story helps to liberate you from the expectations you think you need to achieve and helps you find power in all that you have already accomplished.

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