

A Student, in Summary

by Ryan Ten

For the entire time I was a student at the University of Virginia (2016–2020), I kept a journal, updating it almost-daily with details of what I had done or experienced, with the final entry falling on May 18, 2020, the day I moved out of my dorm for the final time. I even kept the diary up, though far less consistently, during summers. It serves as a testament to my life at the university, and I want to share selected passages from it in order to show what my experiences were like as a member of the Class of 2020. To paraphrase the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, some of those experiences were the best of times, and others the worst. But I definitely loved my time at UVA overall, and will forever cherish these and other memories, good and bad.

If any names of non-notable-people are mentioned, I have changed or omitted them, for the sake of privacy of those involved. Also, these entries have been trimmed to only the relevant passages, meaning they aren't reproduced in full.

On August 26, 2016, I moved into my room in Gwathmey, dorm of the International Residential College (IRC) as a first-year. I would live for my entire four undergraduate years at UVA within the IRC. I begin with the entry I made on that date:

Saturday, August 20, 2016

Today was one of the most emotional days of my life, with a whirlwind of emotions surrounding these events. It is a wise mother bird who realizes that her hatchling will one day leave the nest, and learn to fly on his own. It may be hard; it may cause her agony, for she certainly, if given the choice, would take at least one more day with him, as her child. She'd doubtless gladly push off that day, no matter whether or not she was a procrastinator at heart—and I do mean *no matter*.

But time trudges on, like an engineer-less locomotive with no conscious awareness of its destination, purpose, or even mere existence. We mere mortals are powerless to stop its advance. In this realization, however, I find serenity, rather than dread. Yes, those halcyon days will come to an end, yes those precious “wonder years” will fade, committed to that fate no matter how much they're loved, or cared for, or even remembered. Memory certainly preserves them, in some form, but it too shall pass.

But it doesn't matter how soul-crushing the depression is, or how useless it seems to fight against the inevitable, but we do it because we choose to do so. In that moment, in that decision, we rebel against the great abyss, with no hope of forever forestalling the end of the journey, but because we choose to *be*, because we choose to find meaning, in that we do win, and we become significant, and though knowledge of our deeds and our lives may be lost to the future, those things aren't lost to the present, and they mean something now.

So enjoy life, my great friends and family. Cherish it all you can, for as much as you can, for as long as you can.

Thank you, Mom and Dad. I love you both, and I can't wait for you, all my friends, and I to all see what life has in store for *all of us*.

My mom is a procrastinator at heart, which is why I make reference to procrastination in there. It was a day of some sadness, sure, but it was also happy. I was nervous to enter uncharted territory, but I eventually adjusted.

I like the fact that the optimism on display mixes with some darker elements, meditating on life's meaning while acknowledging my even-then long struggle with depression. It feels honest. It feels real. It also looks toward the struggles that would come.

Tuesday, November 8, 2016

Time is 5:28 PM. I'm watching CNN in Newcomb, and I'm fairly confident of how the election will go, but I can't be certain. CNN is election-mongering as usual, milking every moment they can. I suppose that's supposed to be expected, though.

It's over. The people of the United States have spoken, and they have expressed their wish to have Donald Trump as the next President of the United States. I have always believed that the popular will ought to dictate everything, and I shall not stand down from that claim. If that is what the people wish, then that is what the people shall get. I will not, however, go gentle into that goodnight. Well...no, that's unreasonable. I cannot, however, imagine the next 4 years under a racist, sexist, misogynist, KKK-endorsed, climate change denying conspiracy theorist who has access to the nuclear codes. The very prospect of that scares me. It rocks me to my core, shows me the ugliness that still persists in American society. Tonight the United States has doubled back on over 60 years of gains for civil rights and religious liberties. The U.S. is a bigoted nation, let there

be no question about that anymore.

CNN's Van Jones said it best when he asked how we could possibly explain this to the next generation, those being brought up in this culture of hate, who are being told not to treat others disrespectfully, when our President does exactly that?

I suppose it's fitting that we have a reality-celebrity president, since that's the way our culture has gone anyway. It's over. He won. I've gone from sadness to acceptance in somewhat record time. There's nothing I can do. Nothing but hope. I hope my children, whomever they may be, can live to see beyond today, live to see a United States not torn apart by all of this.

So, yeah, I was not pleased with the way that the 2016 election had gone.

I had stayed up late, with fellow residents of the IRC (many of them minorities now threatened by the new administration) as the results came in, as Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin went red. It was around 3am that they called it, and we knew who the 45th President of the United States would be.

As the next entry attests, the whole world seemed to have changed.

Wednesday, November 9, 2016

Today was a hard day for many of us. Grounds felt different; a specter of sadness had fallen upon it. The majority of students here voted for Secretary Clinton, so that wasn't unexpected. I did not attend anything; there were rallies denouncing President-Elect Trump across the country, it seems, New York and California especially. He was, to many of them, "not [their] president." I feel their pain, I know how they viewed today, a day which, in the minds of Democrats, will live in election infamy. Here on Grounds, there were support meetings, where people could go and talk about their feelings in regards to the election. I didn't attend any of them. I needed to deal with this on my own. I went on Facebook, which was a big mistake. I don't know if I'll ever be able to look at some of my "friends" the same way ever again.

It will be a long road ahead, and it will take a long time, but I have faith. I have faith in the American spirit, in what we've done so far, and how we cannot let progress be pulled back and eviscerated by a Republican majority. We have to ensure that *our* America – and "our" refers to *everyone* – is truly ours, and remains on her path to improvement of the lives of the people. We must never forget that which binds us, which we all hold dear.

May God bless the United States of America.

My Introduction to Fiction Writing TA actually canceled class that day, and I heard some others did, as well. That probably contributed to my opening paragraph, but it definitely did feel like something was in the air, regardless of his decision.

The final entry I want to share from that time is not actually an entry at all, but a post I made on Facebook that I saved within my journal on November 11. I wanted my friends to know that I was there for them, to do my best to help others stave off the anger, depression, and hopelessness I was already feeling.

Friday, November 11, 2016

After a tumultuous past few days, I wanted to share my thoughts on this election:

I haven't made a post yet about the election, because it has taken some time to process all that's gone on. I also didn't really know what to say. What I have seen on this very website this week made me question my faith in people. I saw anger, I saw confusion, I saw fear. Fear for what this election might mean for our country; fear for what this election might mean for us; fear especially for what this election might mean for the wonderful and inspiring human beings in the LGBT, Muslim, and Hispanic communities, as well as women and other minorities in general. I have no right to speak about any of those aforementioned groups. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual male. I will not experience the results of this election in the same way any minority group will. I will not feel any sort of backlash for who I am. Make no mistake, I completely understand that. However, that does not mean I do not feel pain when thinking about that. I stand with all of those communities; I always have, and I always will. No one should feel shame or fear, or receive hatred for who they are. To all of my friends in the LGBT, Muslim, Hispanic, African-American communities, as well as my female friends who are also afraid, I am still here. I will be here for you no matter what. I care about you.

I am saddened. I feel pain. I see my fellow Americans being torn apart because they refuse to look at the other side of the table, because they refuse to have the dialogues we need to have in this country. We no longer try to hear how those who disagree with us are feeling, because we decide to write them off, dismissing them with a flick of the wrist, calling them "bigoted" or a "libtard." This does not achieve ANYTHING. That's what we all, Democrats and Republicans,

liberals and conservatives, have failed at doing. We've failed at understanding each other; we've failed to keep listening to each other. We failed to care about each other. Writing off the person with whom we disagree makes sense: it allows us to feel safe, to be able to ignore those who hold values inconsistent with our own. We associate only with those who share the same values, those who make us forget about the other side, the "idiots." The problem is, we cannot forget about them. The election results today proved that. Yes, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but not by a wide margin. We have to remember how close this vote came, and realize why.

We need to come together as a country. We need to make sure do not disregard the other side because of disagreements. We ALL need to remember that we are Americans first, and Americans together. I ask that everyone treat each other with respect, with tolerance, with dignity, and with love. Speak with each other, seek to understand each other's point-of-view. I'm not asking you to love the president-elect. I'm asking ALL of you to come together and understand EACH OTHER. I'm asking you to love your neighbors, and even love your enemies. Hatred gets us nowhere, no matter where it comes from. Demonizing others, whether they're peaceful protesters (surrounded by a few violent ones), or they're rejoicing today because their candidate won gets us NOWHERE. Being spiteful towards others gets us NOWHERE, whether your candidate won or lost.

So exercise your First Amendment right to peacefully protest, keep a skeptical eye on any and all policies, or, if you're on the other side, respect people's right to peaceably assemble, ask them for their opinions. Keep an open mind. Appreciate those around you. And please, don't leave this country because Clinton didn't win. If you leave the table, your voice isn't heard. Stay, and fight for what you believe in. That's what this country's always been about. It's how slavery was ended in this country, how women and African-Americans gained the right to vote, it's how we as a nation became the United States of America. We didn't give up and pack in the towel when the British imposed taxes on us without our consent; we didn't give up and say, well, the South should just be let go; we didn't say "well, I guess Pearl Harbor was it, let's just give in." No; we gathered ourselves, and came out of all those incidents stronger. We've gone through divisiveness before. The United States can survive all of this, and it will; I have faith. Please don't lose hope.

If anyone needs a supportive ear, and doesn't have my phone number, message me and I will give you my cellphone number. I want to make it clear that even if you feel as if there is no one else to hear you, I will be there. I will talk about this election for as long as it takes. I don't

care who you supported. I want us to build understanding, communication, and empathy. I want you to know that I still care about each and every one of you.

Enjoy the much-needed weekend, my friends. Care for one another. Thank you for taking the time to read my post. Bless you all.

Some of what I said in there—about trying to understand others—I stand by, even though the events of the next four years would make me question that *heavily*, at least regarding some people. I also thought, at the time, that when I talked about the “LGBT, Muslim, Hispanic, African-American communities,” that I only tangentially belonged to one of them, as my father’s father was Puerto Rican. I’d come to find out in the next year that I had a closer connection to another one: the LGBT+ community.

I’d had periods of intense struggle with my sexuality since middle school. I’d experience these feelings that I couldn’t understand, but which also seemed to tell me that I was possibly gay. This possibility terrified me. I had two parents who were quite open-minded, and I’d even once shared with them my concerns that I *thought* I was gay, but I’d never made it definitive. I’d just said I was very worried about it being possible.

What really confused me was that I still had feelings for girls. Gay men were attracted to men, and straight men were attracted to women. I was attracted to both, and bisexuality and pansexuality were terms I’d never heard of before. That is, until the early-morning hours of April 28. A friend of mine told me they knew someone who was bisexual, and while I don’t remember how this came up in conversation, I do remember being surprised. I honestly thought bisexuality was a myth. (I would reproduce the entry, but for their privacy, I’m not going to.)

But as I thought about it over the next couple months, I realized that I was bisexual, or, at least, that this label was a better label than “gay” or “straight” for me. I came out to a friend that summer, Cole, but didn’t really tell anyone else until Fall 2017.

However, before then, another event would shock my second home: the riots of August 11 and 12, part of the “Unite the Right” rally.

Saturday, August 12, 2017

I cannot with any degree of accuracy verbalize the depth of my sheer despair at what transpired in Charlottesville today. My college town, my second home, has the world’s attention, all eyes on

that place of comfort. One word was trending worldwide, one word that should stand for acceptance: Charlottesville, marred in a day of hate that has allowed the true natures of every observer & participant to be fully examined in a clear light.

Mom texted me early this afternoon (she is currently on a trip with friends) saying she was glad I was not in Charlottesville at the time. That's an understandable response, absolutely. Mom cares. I searched "Charlottesville" in Google and found some early news about it. In the back of my mind, I remembered President Teresa Sullivan's email from a few days before which warned all students to avoid the "Unite the Right" rally, which was being held to protest the removal of Robert E. Lee's statue from Emancipation (formerly Lee) Park. I stayed on Twitter's home page for a few hours, watching as tweets came pouring in. Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Paul Ryan, Marco Rubio, John McCain, Barack Obama, Jeremy Corbin, etc. *Everyone* knows about this now. Charlottesville may be permanently known as a location of national significance because of a tragedy, and because of hate.

Then that chickenshit asshole known as the President comes on, disparages "many sides" as being in the wrong, then a minute later starts fucking bragging about himself. I'm done with this asshole. Not willing to lose what is now his only robustly reliable voting, white supremacists. Make no mistake on how I feel about these white terrorists: they are the scum of the earth, not fit to eat the dirt they stand upon. I am thankful to all those Republicans who have denounced these men for what they are. The President is a coward.

Cole knows two of those who were injured by the car in the terrorist attack. That, and the fact that it happened at the Downtown Mall, where I've been several times, once even with Dad, made the attack viscerally personal. I know how selfish it is to think about how it relates to me, but it really hits home and is therefore personal for me. It saddens me deeply that this happened at all, but it happened to a place I love, to a community I care about, and to fellow human beings I care about because they are human. These people were trying to spread love and combat bigotry & prejudice. I love my country, not for its leaders, or for its bigots, but for its loving people, for its kind people, for the good within it. I won't be able to sleep tonight, but tomorrow will come. I'm going back, and I will my head held high. Love must overcome hate.

To say it was surreal may sound cliché, but it's true. I knew intimately the Charlottesville before this event. I was also worried about the IRC, since the white supremacists had gathered very

close to it when they'd gone to the Lawn on Friday night. Considering the purpose of my residential college, it wouldn't have been a big leap to think they'd attack there.

I also obviously didn't mince words about how I felt regarding the then-occupier of the Oval Office and his response to the event, and my complete disgust with him is why, around that time, I stopped using his name, and it never again appeared in my journal.

I had written this entry by hand, which is why the ampersands are there. When I returned to Charlottesville, to the IRC, I went back to writing my diary with my phone. The first paragraph of my first Fall 2017 entry ran as follows:

Friday, August 18, 2017

I return to composing my thoughts in this electronic medium as I lie in my bed, in Hoxton dorm, in the International Residential College. Being back in Charlottesville hasn't given me the haunted feeling I expected. Granted, I haven't gone to the Lawn, or to the Downtown Mall yet, but even so, it strangely felt no different from the home I left just over three months ago. This city needs to heal, in more ways than one, but I think it can. I can't say the same, however, for the rest of the country. Steve Bannon's resignation, plus the outrage at the response of a certain federal authority figure to Charlottesville, are being cited as signs of the end, of a house in chaos. The problem? This has been said for more than a year now, and the train never stops. It keeps on chugging, a vengeful specter seeking to destroy. Do I think this changed anything? No. Do I hope so, and think it should have? I shouldn't have to answer that question.

It felt like every day I was watching a new disaster movie unfold. Writing helped me process what I was going through, as it had for more than a decade.

I started writing creatively on February 18, 2008, out of boredom, and while my first attempts were terrible, I never stopped writing stories after that. It's a lifelong passion that has never left. Film, however, got added to the list after I got into writing film scripts in 2014. Some of my best experiences at UVA were film-related, specifically with all of the projects I worked on with the Filmmakers Society, a UVA club.

However, I also made sure to attend the Virginia Film Festival that fall. There were a few films I wanted to see, but the one that stood out the most was *Call Me by Your Name*.

Monday, November 13, 2017

My friend and I arrived at the theater at 7:00, and the line was already long. I am not surprised that a lot of people wanted to see *Call Me by Your Name*. Despite its odd yet narratively relevant title, it has been getting an insane amount of buzz in film circles, and I'll say now, before I even describe the film, that I wouldn't be surprised if it won Best Picture. I certainly think Timothée Chalamet deserves a Best Actor nomination for his performance.

For reasons now lost to me, I didn't end up describing it, although I evidently did really enjoy the film. Although in hindsight it wasn't as perfect of a film as I felt at the time, it was the first LGBT film I'd ever seen, and it just felt so honest and real in a way that few films did, at least to me. I think it came at the right time in my life, as I was just at that point getting comfortable with who I was (although only two people knew about my sexuality then), and I had my first male crush wherein I definitely knew it was a crush, though nothing happened with it.

My love of film is why I first considered joining the Media Studies major. I wasn't guaranteed a spot, since it was application-based (and two previous things I'd applied for at UVA had rejected me), but I applied, and hoped for the best.

Thursday, March 1, 2018

I am ecstatic to announce that I received an acceptance email today for the Media Studies program. The congratulatory part went like this:

Congratulations! After careful review, we are pleased to inform you that your application to major in Media Studies has been accepted. Your work at UVA to date has shown the committee that you are just the type of student that is successful in the department. We look forward to having you as part of the Media Studies department.

I mean, how can you not bristle with pleasure at reading something like that, and knowing that the Media Studies Department thought that it described you? I need to officially declare by April 27, but since that's pretty much a done deal, I am essentially a Media Studies major. Hooray!

Just like that, something I'd been thinking about since I arrived at UVA had come true.

I also applied for the Distinguished Majors Program.

Monday, April 2, 2018

The email was received at 1:47 PM, although I didn't see or read it until after dinner. I'll reproduce some of what they said (though not the entire email):

Dear Ryan,

Congratulations!

You have been chosen to be part of the Distinguished Majors Program in the Department of Media Studies starting in the Fall 2018 semester. We look forward to having you as part of the cohort of students that will be part of the DMP program for the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years.

I felt like all of the hard work of both high school and college before these moments was finally paying off.

I became a Media Studies major because of my love for film, and that love also led to one two of my favorite memories of Spring 2018: making a short, skit-based movie and going home to see *Avengers: Infinity War* with my best friend. Both of these were under the same entry.

So, for context on the first of the two, as part of my Forum Capstone, I made a parody dating-advice video with a fellow Forum member, and on the same day where I would see *Infinity War*, my partner and I would also be presenting our film. Needless to say, I was nervous.

Thursday, May 3, 2018

So, I went up to the podium to introduce the project, and I'll never forget a classmate's "whoot" when I walked up, because it was then that I knew everything would be okay. My introduction got a laugh or two, and when the video appeared on the screen, I played it and took my seat. For the first ten to twenty seconds, I still cringed at my voice, but much less than I would have had editing it not habituated me to it. Then, about a minute in, the screen rolled up on its own, and we had some technical difficulties in getting it done, but it was okay, because I knew by then that people would find it funny, as they'd already laughed once or twice. We solved the, and we played the rest of the video. By the end of it, I was smiling, enjoying the memories of filming and editing, and appreciating the points at which people laughed.

Later, one of my professors said to me "You are *funny*" in a very declarative way. I'm not

great at taking compliments, but that felt great, and I think it showed in my happy reaction.

Yeah, so it turned out great, and I was actually genuinely smiling. I was so afraid things were going to go wrong, or that I wouldn't be funny, and despite the first happening, everything was all right. I went back to my hometown that day euphoric.

Then came *Infinity War*.

Thursday, May 3, 2018 (cont.)

I had a total blast with the movie, but it came in bursts, for which I don't necessarily fault the movie. The standout moment in the entire film, when I lost it completely, was when Thor dropped onto the Wakanda battlefield and tore the shit out of that army. Of course, "Bring me THANOS!" is the best line in the film by far. During that Wakanda/Titan dual battle, in fact, I had these stomach-twisting feelings which come when I genuinely don't know what's going to happen next and am enjoying that experience to an unimaginable degree. I also appreciated the return of Red Skull; I didn't realize he wasn't played by Hugo Weaving at first, although the voice sounded different enough that I wasn't surprised that he had been replaced (by master impressionist Ross Marquand, no less). Also, we finally know where the Soul Stone was: Vormir, guarded by Red Skull and requiring the steep price of a life in order to reveal itself. One of the reasons I think Thanos is one of the MCU's best villains is because of this scene, in which he is shown to genuinely care about Gamora, and it tears him apart to kill her. From the outside, that may sound bad, but trust me, it makes sense in the film. I can't wait to see what *Avengers 4* has in store.

Turns out, though, that Spider-Man bit it, as did about half the cast. That was an emotional finale, though. I could hear one woman crying when Spider-Man died, and Tom Holland played that scene like a boss. Some people were disappointed at the ending; I guess they didn't know that this saga was planned as a two-parter.

I love how some my Media Studies, well, studies came back into play when thinking about this film. Things come full circle.

Also, I came back to UVA the next day not because of anything pressing (since it was the beginning the exams period), but to streak the Lawn with two friends that evening. It was the only time I ever streaked, but I did it, and it was both fun and stupid, but you know, the fun-

stupid kind of thing that, well, was a great way to say goodbye to my first half of UVA.

There wasn't much of note that happened in the fall, but of course, the next spring was a big semester for UVA, as we became National Champions in basketball. I watched the Final Four and the National Championship with my suitemates, and both times we ran down to the Corner to join the mob celebrating there, and when I say *ran*, I mean it. We sprinted there.

These two wins were special to me because my dad is a VCU alum, and I remembered when they made it to the Final Four in 2011. I was amazed then, at how Richmond city was bustling after they made it there. I never imagined I would be attending a university when they not only made it to the Final Four, but won the entire championship.

That time, though, wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. I was very depressed about my academic performance, because I'd been talking with someone who had a perfect GPA, and I'd felt inadequate by comparison. It never escalated as far as it had that day. I was suicidal. (For reference, Jason is a friend who was at the conversation about the GPA.)

Monday, April 8, 2019

I called Mom and told her I was going to kill myself and that I'd given up on everything. We didn't complete our conversation, because Jason called and I wanted to assure him that I was okay. He suggested, if I was truly in that much despair, I should go to the hospital. I ended up not needing to do that, but he emphasized that killing myself would have bad consequences for everyone who knows me, that there are people who care about me and who could not fully recover from my death, that it was selfish. We resolved it somewhat, though, with him suggesting I get serious help this summer, when my academic obligations are over, and agreed with my assessment that I didn't have good coping mechanisms. He said that he's found that what really matters are the people in your life, which is so undeniably true. He also said I should go watch the game, because it was bound to be good.

It was a good game, but the reason this is so important is because three things came together that day: the game itself, my struggles with depression, and my sexuality:

Monday, April 8, 2019 (cont.)

I then found out from Mom that she'd come to Charlottesville and wanted to take me to dinner.

She'd been on the road home when I called and decided to just come here, since it was the same highway she'd take to get to Charlottesville. I was afraid of missing the game, but Mom said she needed to see me, and of course, I wanted to see her, too. It was such a thoughtful thing. Mom said we could get whatever I wanted, and I picked Chipotle. I, however, cried through most of the short car ride. When we got there, I asked Mom to park before we went in so that we could talk. After just talking about it and saying she wouldn't understand, I realized that I had to tell Mom about my sexuality, because she really couldn't understand my whole tumultuousness without that context. It was hard, but I said it, and explained that I went both ways. It wasn't a moment of pride, but of shame, because of the shame I'd felt, if that makes any sense. Mom said that she didn't have a problem with it, and it didn't change how she saw me; in fact, she'd suspected this for years, which I predicted. Mom said she thought her family would be fine with it, but I don't think that. Regardless, I don't want people to define me by that, anyway.

It's very true: I've always been afraid of being defined by my sexuality, of people hearing this one aspect about me and making all these assumptions. While I've realized that I can't control what other people think, I still don't want my sexuality to be the main thing I focus on in my day-to-day life.

Also, as I've gotten older, especially since graduating from UVA, I've been less attached to the label of bisexuality, and for me, having a label doesn't really matter anymore. I think it was definitely comforting when I was first coming to terms with it, as it allowed me to give voice to what I was feeling, but now that I've grown in confidence, I've not really used the term as much, unless I tell someone about my sexuality. I like whomever I like. That's it.

But, of course, here comes the game:

Monday, April 8, 2019 (cont.)

I am officially a student at the NCAA National Championship school for 2019! The team went from being the first 1-seed to be defeated by a 16-seed to national champions in one year! One year! Talk about a redemption story. Also, oh my gosh, between this game and the last game, we have been completely on the edge of our seats for the entire time. When they went into overtime, I relaxed a bit, but we were still on the edge of those seats by the end of it. I can't describe what it was like to see that. It's a moment I'll never forget. We ran to the Corner just as a crap ton of

others also got there, and it was insane.

For many reasons, Monday, April 8, 2019, almost two years after I first had that conversation with my friend about bisexuality, I came out to my mom, and UVA won the National Championship. It was a pretty memorable night.

So, to set up the next memory, I had in Spring 2019 signed up for the CavEd course in the fall. If you took and passed this course, you could then propose your own course to teach at UVA in any subsequent semester. I took it in the fall with the plan to in the spring propose a course about how superhero films after 9/11 reflect a post-9/11 world, whether that be in their depiction of terrorism, destruction, government surveillance, or in what a superhero in today's world looks like. The class's name would be "National Marvels: Superhero Films After 9/11." This entry is from when I got the status about my application for my proposed course:

Monday, November 4, 2019

I have some big news: the class got approved!!! I can't remember the last time I was this ecstatic in regards to anything. It's been the thing that's defined my entire day. It started when Mom called, and when looking at my messages (I'd just woken up), I saw the email they sent out to all three of us who'd applied, as well as our faculty sponsors, informing us that we'd all been accepted. Oh my gosh, I was so excited! I'm still nervous, actually, but this means a lot.

Not only did it get approved, but I had 18 students by the time everything was settled, out of a possible 20. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life, getting to teach it, and I was incredibly proud of the work all of my students put into it. It was honestly the most humbling experience of my life.

However, as conditions outside of my control dictated, we would not end the class all together, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus gets its first mention on Leap Day 2020, amidst some love for the 29th, although I was aware of COVID-19 for at least a month.

Saturday, February 29, 2020

This is cool: the first Leap Day since I started the college journal. This is worth remarking on, as I absolutely love Leap Day! It's the idea of a day that only comes around once every four years. I

mean, it's a day like any other, and the concept of a Leap Day is, to be fair, a human invention for keeping the calendar in line with the natural year of approximately 365.25 days. But it feels like it means more, and when feelings aren't offensive or harmful, they can definitely be positively important. So, let's celebrate a day that only comes around every 1,461 days.

I was thinking of proposing to Mom that we go to California instead of Ireland this summer, but with fears of the coronavirus being on my mind because a friend mentioned it at Runk last night, I don't know if I want to travel *anywhere*. I'm afraid of this bug.

I think it's telling that at that point I referred to it as a "bug." I didn't understand its seriousness. There were some cases out west in the country, but it didn't seem like it would turn into the deadly, world-changing pandemic that it became. At this point, while at the back of my mind I thought it *could* affect graduation (not classes themselves), some of my friends thought it might be an issue, but we'd definitely make it to graduation. Little did we know.

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

So, this morning UVA decided that classes will be cancelled and moved online until at least April 5, at which time they will review the situation and make a decision. So, this isn't stressful at all! I think the most stressful thing about it is that it seems like I *should* be panicking. I'm not stressed about having to do online classes, or with having to adjust my own course. What stresses me out is that I may have just said goodbye to UVA, aside from moving out the last of my stuff, for a final time today. Dad (who was gracious enough to take off work, as I don't think I could've done this alone) and I drove up to Charlottesville and brought home what we determined were necessary materials, such as books, extra clothes, toiletries, etc. Grounds were still normal, for the most part, which was surprising considering everything else that was going on today. I mean, they had just canceled school this morning, to be fair, but at the same time, *they had just canceled school*. There was a tennis match going on at the Snyder Tennis Courts across from the IRC. Things still seemed normal. You know, I think one of the hardest parts for me isn't having to transition to online classes as both a student and an instructor, but it's the idea that I might not see my suitemates again, that the two months I planned on having as a transition point to graduation and getting a job have been cut in half, and probably won't happen at all. I don't even know if the graduation ceremony will happen at all. It's really hard to think about that.

It all seems so far off now, like it was part of a different world. It also seems so odd that I was thinking about graduation, but of course, that was the big thing at the time.

Despite all that happened, I finished my DMP thesis (which involved researching income inequality as depicted on film and then using that research to write a screenplay which more accurately depicted the situation in the United States), and my class transitioned wonderfully.

In a final email to my students, I wished them the best, whether they were in the first, second, third, or fourth year (I had at least one from each, which was also amazing), and also making it clear that my course not only wouldn't exist without their enrollment, it wouldn't have been what made it great without their hard work in it, as well. They *were* the class; I was just the facilitator. I will be forever grateful to all of them.

Then, on May 18, 2020, I moved out of the IRC for the final time. I never did get to say the goodbyes I wanted to, but I was blessed to have four overall-great years at the University of Virginia. I've journaled beyond that date, but that was the final date of my college diary. I ended that entry with this:

Monday, May 18, 2020

So, now, here we are. At the end of the line for the college journal. At the end of 3¹/₂ years of academic work, of friendships, of mentors, of self-discovery, of connection. I've chosen to end this the only way I think is appropriate: a letter to my 18-year-old self, about to start college.

Dear Ryan,

You've just accomplished a great deal in your time in high school. I know this summer has been filled with both rest and anticipation of what's to come. You're both afraid and excited about this new phase of your life.

College isn't going to be perfect, though you know that going into this uncharted world. I want you to know that it really isn't going to be easy. I'm not even talking about the work you'll do for class, which is across the board pretty reasonable. I'm talking about outside the classroom. You'll be challenged in ways you can't imagine.

You'll watch your friends in pain, and they'll see that side of you, too. You'll learn what a good friend looks like, and what one doesn't. You'll meet professors and fellow students who will

have a profound impact on your life. You'll feel welcome and at home in ways you never did in the past, and you'll wonder how you were kept away from this until now. You will come out of all this a changed person, and that's a good thing, even if not in all ways equally.

You'll contemplate suicide many times, and you'll hit several rock bottoms. It'll be tough. But you'll get up. You'll brush the dust off your pants, and you'll step back up to the plate. You'll prove your toughest critic wrong. Who will that be? You. I'm glad that I'm still here, and one day you will be, too. You'll be okay.

Yeah, you're in for one heck of a ride. I envy you it, in many ways. My advice? Don't lose that optimism you profess in that entry you wrote on August 20, 2016, even though I know it will be shaved down a bit. Just enjoy the ride as much as you can. You'll be glad you did.

With best wishes,

Ryan (at 22^{1/2} years old, finished at 10:23 PM)

And with that, my time at UVA was over.

That June, I finished the first draft of a novel that I'd started writing the previous late July or early August. I also finished a non-fiction book about narrative across media. As I write this final reflection for this project, I am looking toward the future, even though COVID-19 has and will continue to affect all of our lives.

Even eight months later, though, I'm still very glad and grateful that I stayed alive. I'm glad and grateful that I chose to attend UVA. I am grateful for everything it gave me, and for helping make me the person I am today. I am grateful for all the friends and acquaintances I made thanks to the university.

In short, this was a highlight reel of what it was like to be Ryan Ten, a member of the Class of 2020, during his time at UVA. My experiences are unique, and I don't claim to speak for anyone except for myself. It was definitely a very... interesting time. Thank you for listening to my story.

Sincerely,

Ryan Ten (23^{1/4} years old)