



THE GRASSHOPPER: A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

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Introduction

When I was given the opportunity to write a report for the Plymouth Law Review, I knew immediately what topic to write about. I wanted to put forward a personal interpretation of race, to explain the effect it can have regarding how you think and feel as an individual. I also hoped to draw attention to the mental impact of race and identity, and how something as light as a grasshopper can weigh so heavily on one's mind. Furthermore, I wanted to convey how my two backgrounds, White and Asian, affected my self-belief and how easily a person can feel like an imposter in their own skin. However, this is not some critical rant on the issue of race, because the most important aspect is the lessons learned – accepting, persisting and finally overcoming the obstacles faced in the past has helped me to become incredibly proud to be a part of two wonderful and diverse cultures.¹ This report is about how developing a positive mindset put me on the path to study law at the University of Plymouth.

The Lessons of Early Life

Ironically, growing up I never wanted to do anything 'academic', as I first aspired to be an artist, like Van Gogh, and later wanted to fulfil my creativity through architecture. Even now I still do artistic projects while at university.

Back then, I never had much drive or ambition for learning – I just wanted to live a simple life on a farm in Thailand, painting. At that point in time, my family only had one 'academic' member, my mother, who was attending university, while my father was more practical, working long hours. Both worked hard and struggled in life, burdened by lack of money and constant bills. But the most amazing thing to me was and is the fact that despite working till they dropped, they never stopped supporting me. However, it made me seriously concerned

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¹ Thai and British

that I was doomed to fail, to repeat their life and struggle with money.

Shortly after joining secondary school in Cheltenham, I started overhearing murmured comments and occasionally outright verbal abuse from some of my peers. I began to feel ashamed of my Asian descent and cultural background, no longer feeling proud about it, to the point I started to consider bleaching my skin to look more white. Even worse was the feeling that I could not confide in my parents at the time because, in my mind, they were already stressed enough.

Unfortunately, even when we stayed in Thailand, where I thought that I would be more accepted, I was firmly told not to talk to people or walk around most areas of the city, or even the little village we lived in. It wasn't until I grew up that my mother told me why, that the locals quite maliciously saw me as 'farang'² and not Thai. This was evidently true, as some would compare me to a 'mongrel'.

The Enemy Within

By this time, I sadly realised that I would not be accepted by either group of people. There is honestly nothing more frightening or hurtful than the feeling that you are all alone in this world, due to the way people perceive you.

These experiences soon changed after moving from secondary school to college but even to this day, I still get the occasional snarky comment. However, going to college brought some new challenges because my mindset had developed to feel constantly on the defensive from everyone.

I really struggled with trusting people and 'letting them in' because I would always wonder, "how long until they stab me in the back?" or "how long until they hurt me?" which was to my detriment, as it cost me a few good friends. It wasn't until I realised that no one here was going to harm me because of my background that I understood how out of touch I was with people around me – I had let things as small and light as a grasshopper weigh heavily on my mind. Since my mental health and willpower had declined, it was clear that something had to change.

Make or Break

During lockdown, I had a lot of time to think and reflect. It became clear to me that to change

² A foreigner among Thais

my mindset, I had to first consider the impact it would have on me if I let it continue. The question constantly going through my mind was whether I should let these problems and the people involved define me. Should I let them win? No.

Instead of letting myself fall into a dark pit of hatred, I decided to turn my emotions into determination, ambition and perseverance. One quote that really stuck with me is, 'The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall'.³ It emphasised the mindset I needed to get up every time; that only I could turn my life around by showing haters I did not care what they believed and that I am in control of my own life. Ever since then, working hard and overcoming challenges has been a large aspect of achieving my goals.

Regarding my cultural background, I learned not only that I should not feel ashamed of either culture, but that I myself should not compare them. I have embraced both my British and Thai heritage, with two different cultures that I can draw from, and I am proud to share this with people. This was the inspiration to change my mindset, because the shame that I previously felt had been vanquished.

An Unexpected Journey into Law

As mentioned earlier, I never was an academic and it's quite ironic that I am now doing what is considered one of the most academic courses that a person can do! From what I had experienced, being on the defensive for most of my life, I was interested in politics (because I had a point to prove), as well as history, which was and still is my hobby. In addition, I initially considered economics but I soon discovered that it was beyond boring, so my dad suggested law.

When we attended a law presentation and talked to the educator representing it, my dad piped up and asked, "Are you an officer of the leu?" "The leu?" she asked, "That is correct, I am the Chief Inspector of the leu". Immediately we started chatting and it was as though a new passion emerged within me, all stemming from a simple joke from a film from the 1960s!⁴

Although I had been focused on becoming a politician, the law aspect enticed me. I loved the prospect of representing people on a more personal level, rather than becoming an MP or council member. But more importantly, it was a harder challenge than politics and that appealed to me most.

³ Nelson Mandela

⁴ Reference to Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther film series

My law journey took an unexpected turn when due to some lower than expected GCSE results due to Covid, my school said that unless I did two more years at sixth-form and re-took maths and English, I would not be able to study Law at A-level. This shattered me, but instead of wallowing in misery, I picked myself up and decided that I was going to study Law, just not with them. Consequently, I applied to numerous colleges and sixth-forms around the Gloucestershire area that taught law. Eventually, I narrowed it down to my only option – Cirencester College. However, my application was very late and as I had not heard back from them, I just turned up on induction day, explained the situation, and enrolled on the day just like that! During my time at college, I re-took maths GCSE, did an EPQ and took three humanities A-levels, including Law.

Despite getting a low grade in A-level Law, there was something within me spurring me on to stay with it and keep at it. After a long hard think over many nights and much deliberation with my parents, I came to the conclusion that it was what I most wanted to pursue, so I chose Law for my university degree.

I should add that one of the lecturers I had during my A-levels was a great inspiration to me. Without a doubt, she is one of the major reasons I want to become a barrister. Consequently, I did background research on the role, as representing people on a personal level really appealed to me, which solidified my aspiration. I saw it as an opportunity to help others that had been in my position, or a position similar to mine.

My Time at University and In Plymouth, So Far...

What can I say about Plymouth University? I can tell you that I've never felt more at home, more welcomed and accepted by people since I arrived here. You go in thinking that it will be horribly competitive and that law is rather cut-throat, but it is not, at least not to the degree you are led to believe.

You learn that law is not available exclusively for a wealthy group of people in the upper echelons of society. So far I've met mothers, pub-owners, and even a climbing instructor on this course! It is these people that made me feel welcome in Plymouth and that I consider very good friends – a bunch of library nerds, one could say. And I know that I can rely on these friends, as they have been invaluable in helping me with my worries and mental wellbeing, especially considering I moved 256 miles away from my family. The last few months in particular have been quite hard, but with their help and the support I received from the university, I've found the confidence to continue.

My time at college studying Law alongside an EPQ enabled me to recognise the kind of work ethic needed to prepare and write essays. This really helped me in the first year of my degree, as I was quickly able to understand the aims and objectives set, which led to very rewarding results. My second year started somewhat turbulently; however, this was soon overcome by getting back into the groove and discovering that one of my assessments would be advocacy based, which inspired me to take back the initiative and momentum felt at the beginning of the first year.

I really enjoy the friendly, approachable relationship between students and lecturers too. It makes you appreciate university more, knowing that if you have any concerns or questions you can just go up and talk to them, without feeling intimidated like in secondary school or college. It's also easier to talk to them because you know they are all so committed to what they are teaching. One lecturer even got into a car accident and still had the willpower to turn up to a lecture and teach us about consideration! The commitment that I see in all my lecturers has made me feel secure about my knowledge and understanding of law.

I must also mention the University of Plymouth Law Society (UPLS), which has been a huge help getting me settled into university life, with its social events (themed around Suits and Legally Blonde) and the student competitions. In my first year, I enrolled in mooting and negotiation competitions, which was great for building self-confidence. More importantly, I made a lot of friends in their second and third years, who I could ask for advice about upcoming modules or ask if they wanted to join me for a pint! Recently, I was elected one of two mooting officers on the UPLS committee and judge the mooting competitions, where it is vital to have an objective view and a professional attitude. The skills you develop are hugely beneficial for later life, as you learn to read people and pick up on vital aspects of their presentations and arguments.

Another thing is that after having a lot of difficulties in the past with my faith, I recently started going back to church again, and the community that I am in has given me the opportunity to do much more. For example, we recently went on a trip to Dartmoor, or as I like to call it, Rohan.⁵ The weekly 'Dip and Sip' is also great, as it involves sea swimming (something I used to do a lot in the past) and then drinking loads of free hot chocolate after, because of how freezing the water is!

⁵ A fictional kingdom in J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings

Conclusion

You learn that time heals all wounds and that even the hardest walls crumble to sand. You can come out of the bad and not let it define you. Admittedly, it's a journey that I'm still on, but I've learnt that it's not the destination that reaps the greatest reward – it's the journey. I was once told that the one who enjoys the journey more than the destination is the one who will walk the furthest. I don't know exactly what path I'll take to reach my goal, but I'll take time to appreciate the view around me. For no longer does the grasshopper lay heavy on my mind – it has been laid to rest peacefully.