

If I Knew Then

Brooke Boal

Abstract: Brooke Boal is a student at Durham University studying BA Philosophy and Theology. She is originally from the seaside town of Fleetwood, Lancashire. During her time at university, Boal struggled to navigate her first-generation identity; however, over the past three years she documented parts of her life in a diary. The diary was intended to be a reflective exercise to help her understand her feelings and experiences, as she knew that she wanted to gain a more positive mindset. Three years later, she shares some of her personal diary entries to present the most authentic version of her story. Boal addresses her former self to highlight how she came to be proud of her first-generation status. She intends to share her diary entries to show other readers who may also be experiencing a hard time in their lives that everything does get better.

"Right now you are a big fish in a small pond, but one day you will be a small fish in a big pond".

I understand. But if I am a fish like everyone else, then why do I feel like I am drowning?

I have decided, after much deliberation, to share a very personal aspect of my life. What could be so personal you may ask. Well, I believe there is nothing more intimate or raw than one's true thoughts. It is for that reason that I have decided to feature snippets from my diary; it doesn't get much more personal than that. In October 2021 I began to feel very low. My weight dropped. My self esteem diminished. I felt lost. Instead of just experiencing my feelings, I began to document them. Upon reflection, it seems obvious (although it did not at the time) that my first generation identity was responsible, at least partly, for such emotions. I hope that by sharing some snippets from my life I will help to reassure other readers who may also have experienced a similar time in their life. I hope to showcase the good, the bad and the lonely. But more importantly, I hope to shed light on the positive aspects of my first-gen experience, minus the romanticisation.

12th October 2021

"I spent a few hours in the library today and helped a couple of people with their printings—it felt rewarding to help as I know the stress can sometimes feel overwhelming. I would have appreciated a little help when I struggled too."

I chose this extract as I believe it is a great starting point. Note, I used past tense, 'struggled'. But rest assured, I was very much struggling..

What I want to highlight is that I would have appreciated some help in my initial years at university. It would have meant the world to me to have had supportive peers, or encouraging friends, or someone who could guide me from home. However, my parents never gained higher education qualifications. In fact, one of my parents was entirely absent during my adolescent years. I had no one to ask for help. Perhaps this would not have been so much of a struggle for myself had my peers been a little more supportive. For example, many of my new house mates were privately educated, and therefore, had more

exposure to the kinds of readings and writing tasks that we were expected to complete at university. However, every time I reached out for help, it was as though I was cast aside, I was not adequate enough to gain the knowledge of the privileged.

This reminds me of an event that took place in my first week of university, a moment I frequently reflect upon. After moving into my university accommodation my housemates insisted that we played a game I had never played before. **Paranoia**. The rules are simple, Person A asks person B a question in secret. Person B answers aloud, naming a person within the group. If the coin lands on tails, the question is kept a secret and if the coin lands on heads, the question is revealed to all. Entirely cruel and ethically objectionable. Person B answers with my name, Brooke. The coin lands on heads. The question at hand, 'who is most likely to drop out of university'? How this judgement was made I will never really know, but I can certainly hazard a guess. I am a woman, I am from a socio-economically deprived area and my parents never attended university. Of course I was the prime target for the question. I could have painted the bullseye on my forehead myself. I was hurt and quite honestly embarrassed.

If I knew then, what I know now I'd tell myself...

You never did drop out of university and you graduate in June! Congratulations from the present you. You finally become self validated and no longer care so much about the opinions of others because you know your own worth. You recognise your self-determination, your hard work and your kindness towards others. These are the things that matter to you now. Perhaps, such things would never have mattered to you without your first-gen experiences.

You start to breathe under the water.

13th January 2021

"I called my nan and grandad today and I loved speaking to them. I like to reassure them that I am happy here—I often tell small lies about how happy I am because in reality I just miss home and having proper friends. I feel as though I am surrounded by people but I have never been so lonely."

My nan and grandad, the people whom I owe the most to. I lived with my grandparents, my dad and my sister in an overcrowded house. This was intended to be a temporary situation, six months at most. However, this lasted six years. I look back and feel incredibly guilty for invading my nan and grandad's home for that long. I plagued them with the terror of youth. Yet, they never once complained. My nan and grandad have always been my biggest role models. They are humble, honest and hard-working. So, when I called home (which I do frequently) I loved to hear their voices and to see their smiles. But at the same time, I was pierced with the feeling of homesickness. I felt alone. I missed the people that provided me with the most comfort.

One memory springs to mind. Back in my first year of university when I was missing home dearly, my nan, grandad, sister, dad and dog surprised me with a visit. I don't know how

they knew that I needed to see them so much. When I saw their faces I was overwhelmed with joy. Oh, how I had missed them! We spent a couple of days together, shared memories and enjoyed each other's company. Despite their old age, my nan and grandad endured the journey down to Durham from Fleetwood to see me. My family have always been my biggest supporters and that day I realised this. These moments remind me that I am not alone.

If I knew then, what I know now I'd say...

It is quite alright that you feel the way that you do right now. In fact, you are very lucky to miss home. This is because it is impossible to experience love so strongly without dealing with the violence of homesickness. You realise that all along you were categorically mistaken. You were not lonely at all, you had all the support you needed with you at every moment, the support was just back home and only a phone call away. So whilst it hurts right now, you soon realise that you are whole because of love. Remember what Nanny Jean always said, 'to love is nice but to be loved is divine'. Life is divine.

You start to swim.

18th January 2022

"I had a FEMSOC call as a part of a Mexican student exchange at 9pm tonight. It was really nice to see people engaging with feminism".

During my second year of university, I joined the executive committee for my college's feminist society. I was a social secretary. I joined in the hopes of meeting some new friends who shared similar interests to me and to make an impact within the college community. I really did enjoy my time in the society that year. Everyone I met was lovely and seeing people engage with feminism brought me joy. I felt as though I had some purpose. One evening we hosted a zoom call with students from Mexico to talk about feminism. It was great interacting with people from different parts of the world and to see how important feminism is globally. I hoped I could continue to have experiences like this.

If I knew then, what I know now I'd say...

Whilst you had no way of knowing this at the time, Brooke, you later became the President of your college's feminist society. Over the past year you have helped to engage people with feminism within the wider university experience. You have planned events, held discussion groups and organised fundraisers. You finally got to make a meaningful impact just like you always wanted. Even more than that, you started to see the light in things again.

The pockets of joy that you found within your second year of university continue to provide you with joy in the present. You still love to meet other likeminded people. You still love engaging with different cultures. You still love learning about feminism. All of these things that once brought you joy will help to guide you back on to your feet. Your faith in people

will be restored and you will no longer think that you are alone in this world. Keep chasing joy and keep being yourself.

You find your school of fish.

19th February 2023

"I keep thinking 'what if'—what if I studied next year? But I think the opportunity is long gone, I won't be able to fund further education. Whilst it doesn't feel fair I keep telling myself I should view this as a new opportunity. Who knows what doors it will open?"

It was always my intention to complete my undergraduate degree and then to attend further education to complete a Postgraduate Diploma in Law (PGDL). This decision was informed. I had spoken to mentors who told me that this was a great idea. I would be able to study the two things that I love and to pursue my dream career within the legal sector. Towards the end of 2022 I received my offer to study at The University of Law in Newcastle. However, when I went to apply for student finance, I soon realised that I would receive no funding. The course alone is £10,950. How could I possibly afford this alongside paying rent? I researched scholarships but nothing was substantial enough. I had to give up on this dream, at least for now. After learning this I spent days in a bubble of my own. This was the moment I realised that the educational institution is designed to keep people like me out. But I continued to be optimistic and as per usual pragmatic.

If I knew then, what I know now I'd say...

You were right! This was only the beginning of another opportunity. In fact, I would say that things have gone better than you could have ever imagined. Only two days ago you received a phone call and were offered a job that you cannot wait to start. You will be working as a sustainability graduate for one of the world's largest infrastructure companies. That's what you would usually say is a 'girl boss moment'! Your interests in moral theory, ethical practice and sustainability have amounted to something. Not only this, but you will be based in London. The place that you have wanted to live for so long. You're on the right track and the hard work is paying off.

You start to ride the waves.

8th June 2023

Dear Diary,

I have decided that I will include one final diary entry as this seems only fitting to write an up-to-date entry that reflects on where I am right now.

At the moment I am hopeful. I am excited about what the future will bring and cannot wait to start on the next chapter of my journey. I am excited to graduate. I am excited to move to London. I am excited to start my career. I am excited to meet new people. I am excited to pick up new hobbies. I am excited to learn new things. I am excited to make

a change. I know that things will not always be easy but I am prepared to approach the future positively. I know that my experiences up until this point will only make me a stronger person. My younger self would give me a pat on the back and that is what keeps me going. I often tell myself that I ought to treat myself as if I were still a child. That means being compassionate and kind to myself but also pushing myself to become the best version of me. I think that everyone should think like this from time to time.

Whilst I have been writing it seems as though my present self is advising my past self, as if they are not the same person; however, I want to make clear to myself, and to my reader, that this is not quite the case. Instead, I am always my past self. I always carry the experiences of the past with me. The ones that made me feel miserable and the ones that provided me with copious amounts of hope and joy, I am all of my past. But do not be fooled. I am not defined by this. Whilst I use my experiences in life to guide me and to make me a strong individual, I am entirely in control of who I want to be. I have only come to see this recently. It is inevitable that people will hold expectations against you, including limitations. But if I am to get one message across to my reader it would be this. You define you. Not the system. Not the people around you. Not the stereotypes that invisibly loom over your head. But **you**. Therefore, I say challenge those who aim to hold you back from your dreams, however small or however great they may be.

This mindset has only developed further over the past few weeks in which I have participated in a first-generation writing workshop in affiliation with California State University, Los Angeles. It has been very rewarding. I get to listen to other people share their first-gen experiences. Whilst I wish that we could live in a world where people were not treated differently because of their first gen status, it has still been refreshing to hear others share experiences that resonate with me. I have learned a lot and I am grateful to have a supportive network of people who understand first-gen struggles. I was recently told the following. 'The problem is not you. The problem is the problem and the problem is structural'. It was reassuring to hear that I should not internalise the problem but instead challenge it. It is not me who needs to change, but the system. This will always stick with me. In virtue of this, I vow to continue challenging the grain and I hope that by sharing this small part of my life with others that I will encourage them to do the same!

You start to swim against the current.

P.S. None of this would have been possible if I did not know what I know now, and I now know that one day in the future I would tell my present self, 'if I knew then what I know now, I'd say'...