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A Thank You To Kao Kalia Yang

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A Thank You To Kao

Kalia Yang
Collin Calvert

College is a time of opportunities; or so say all the brochures, magazines, books, and faculty of and about the world of higher education. But what are these things - “opportunities?” Will we know them when we see them? What do they look like and what can they do for us?

Truthfully, I had never really even considered what a college “opportunity” was. My assumption was that I was getting something special simply by living away from home, learning what I wanted to learn, and being promised better job opportunities after graduation. Essentially, college is putting me on the “right” track to a productive life. Exactly what a B.A. is supposed to do, right?

Not until yesterday, really, had I begun to re-think this idea of “opportunities.” Because not until yesterday was I given an opportunity that I never would have imagined possible, nor an experience that I will ever forget. The chance to sit down with Kao Kalia Yang, author of *The Latehomecomer*, and to interview her will remain not just a highlight of my college years, but of my life.

Some of you may know that *The Latehomecomer* was the class of 2014’s reading for this year’s Common Read. Her book is a memoir of her life and the lives of her family members as Hmong refugees fleeing Laos and Thailand, trying to make a life in America. After reading this book, I expected to meet a woman eight feet tall and desensitized after a life of hardship.

So expect my surprise to meet someone shorter than I, speaking in a voice that sounded on the cusp of tears (at first I thought of sorrow, but now I believe they would be tears of joy). Yes, this is an opportunity that Macalester gave me: to meet someone who I’d met through the pages of her book. To meet someone I’ve looked up to and admired ever since I read her story. Are these not the kinds of opportunities that college gives you?

No, they’re not. You don’t meet famous or amazing people only in college. Those aren’t the opportunities that I see college as giving its students. So what are they, then?

I would have had a completely different answer twenty-four hours ago. Before meeting Kalia, I doubt I would have really stopped to even wonder. She asked me the questions that I should have been asking myself. The

interview may have been about her, but I'm the one that walked away a changed person. She has done exactly what she said: "I want to make memories with others. I want to write on the fabric of their being."

Put simply, college offers you the chance (and in some ways, forces you) to be *vulnerable*.

Throughout my life I've constantly been exposed to the idea that we are individuals, friends and family to others, but ultimately alone. We are born alone and we die alone, so the best way to live life is to protect yourself. To protect your heart. To save yourself from pain.

And then I spoke to Kalia, and she told me more about herself than any stranger ever would. She told me how she cherishes her vulnerability, how she opens her heart up to people, and let me see the world through her eyes and her words. And I asked myself: why would anyone cherish their vulnerability? Was was the point of opening yourself up and risking your well-being?

The answer, simply, is to grow. Kalia opens her heart to everyone she meets. She said to me that she wants more people to be able to share their hearts with one another, and asks how she can expect such a thing without doing likewise. She is genuine in her feelings. The story of her family's hardships have brought tears to her eyes, yet she continues to speak to others about these things, these traumatic and emotional events. And from meeting her, from speaking with her, I feel that I've changed, that I finally know what the opportunity is that college, that Macalester, presents us. It allows us to open our heart, to risk ourselves, in order to grow.

I feel that I've changed for the better because of how difficult of a change college has been, and still is, for me. I can no longer see my family every day, nor any of my friends back in Nebraska. I'm confronted with the questions of whether or not I'll have a job after I graduate, if I'll be able to get into Grad School, if I'm truly going to be able to meet my goals in life. When you take a risk, there's always the chance of failure. But I know (in the words of Professor Marlon James) that I would rather "aim high and miss" than "aim low and hit."

Now I'm learning to cherish my vulnerability. I cherish being able to meet so many new people here and risk rejection or disappointment. I cherish the classes that make me work harder than I ever have before. I cherish doing things that scare me, that I fear. Vulnerability is how I will grow. Opening my heart is how I will, in turn, connect with the hearts of others. Even if it causes me great pain, I don't want to miss out on all that is life and the people who constitute it.

So what are the “opportunities” of college? What can you do here that you can’t do anywhere else?

You can do everything. You can meet everyone. You can overload yourself with work, with activities. You can go with friends to a concert or movie at 3:00 a.m. on a Monday. You can go without sleep, share stories that no one else knows, date someone who’s way out of your league. You can open your heart to so many new things because they’re all here, on one campus, in the places and the people. You can cherish your vulnerability, the fear and the risks of the unknown, and embrace every experience - good or bad - to grow.

So maybe you feel homesick. Maybe you had a bad break up. Or maybe you’re stressing out over your future. Take heart that these are the kinds of things you should feel, because you’re taking a risk that many others can’t, or don’t want, to make. They’re the risks that make us all better, make us stronger, and make us wiser. The risks that Kalia has taken.

While interviewing her, she said that the softness of her voice does not reflect the profundity of her words. And in her soft, almost musical voice, she asked me two questions that gave me more insight into myself than anyone has ever been able to.

I encourage everyone to ask themselves what Kalia asked me, and to answer honestly. Though they’re two questions, they are actually two parts of one whole.

Do you know what you want to do professionally?

Do you know what your life work is?