

From living for approval to living through it

Sociology, Identity



I stepped on campus for the first time as a Tar Heel overwhelmed by so many unfamiliar faces buzzing with anticipation, perturbation, or a combination of the two. My eyes darted around the endless abyss of proud parents bragging about how successful their kids were in high school and how rigorous their first semester course loads are. Surrounded by fierce competition like never before, for the first time in my life I felt ordinary, or even subordinate. I was lost.

Over the next few weeks, all that once gave me pride and accomplishment in high school slowly dissolved into antique feats of my childhood. Everything that was recently the foundation of my identity would soon be irrelevant. But I wasn't alone.

As I hopelessly wandered around the campus, I stumbled across an extravagant house with big signs out front: WELCOME NEW TAR HEELS. I strolled through the yard into what appeared to be a back to school cookout. This was my introduction to the Study Center—a warm, welcoming environment of people who seemed to care more community than all else. I hopped in line hoping to grab a scrumptious North Carolina pulled-pork sandwich and there he was. A towering 6'4" with the most magnificent grin I've ever seen stood Madison Perry. He strolled over with emphatic enthusiasm and introduced himself. Madison, founder of the Study Center, graduated from Chapel Hill in 2006 with a bachelor in political science. I asked him about his time at Chapel Hill to which he responded, "well clearly I never left." An alumnus of Chi Psi, the 2005 intramural athlete of the year, and a representative in student government, it sounded like he made the most of his four years as a student. But I was curious. How did a poli sci

major end up founding a non-profit ministry outreach organization on the border of campus? It turns out it was a long time in the making. “ I was always really driven to be a winner. I mean look at me. I’m a big guy.” A tall, athletic figure he dominated the court, the diamond, the pitch, and the pool. In high school, he was salutatorian with a smorgasbord of extracurriculars: sports, student council, volunteer work, church, and everything in between. The oldest of five sons with both parents working full time, Madison Perry was a man on his own at the age of 18. He was a hometown hero—an outlier amongst the many. Born in Chapel Hill, he later grew up in the small town Kinston, North Carolina, half way in between Raleigh and the coast.

Surrounded by a close knit community of extended family and friends, Madison was raised as any small town southern boy would be: with love for fried chicken, sweet tea, Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. The harsh reality is that thousands of kids across the country share a similar profile by the age of 18, me being one of them. We are just two kids of an entire generation taught to fill the checkboxes on a pre-written resume. A generation “ always trying to jump through everybody’s hoops,” as Madison would describe it—all caught in the same trap while striving for success. “ I’ve always been very sensitive to other peoples’ expectations... wanting to meet and exceed them at all costs.” After leaving his echo chamber of tedious hoop jumping and exceeding expectations, however, Madison was faced with a crisis of identity. Entering college you have to recreate and rediscover who you are all over again. “ I found myself asking these questions: What’s real in this world? What’s worth pouring my life out into? What gives me the most joy? What is the most dignifying?” Asking myself

those same questions just hours earlier, I yearned at knowing the answers like him. But how? And when? The answers are different for everyone.

For Madison, he began to figure it out sophomore year. Removal from the comfort of his status, friends, and family were extremely difficult to cope with. The only prodigy of Kinston to go to Chapel Hill, no one knew who he was. “ It was the loneliest time of my life. I did everything alone. Woke up, ate, went to class, did my work, everything.”

To resolve this longing of friendship, Madison turned to the fraternity Chi Psi. Known for having a high academic record and accomplished members, he joined “ knowing it would funnel me back into campus, into things that I cared about. Give me a group of guys who had my back.”

And he was right. He found a home and a place to grow. Thrown into a group of ambitious men with nowhere to start, he found comfort in knowing there were so many people right there with him. He finally found “ somewhere I was truly valued and cared about. But I was still different—looking for something even beyond my fraternity.”

In search of direction for the rest of his life, Madison reached out as far as he possibly could to every corner of campus. He played sports, joined clubs and even ran for student body president. He wrote an honors thesis and started a volunteer organization, but nothing satisfied his questions. “ I fell back into the same funk—doing things for others. I had no clue who I was.”

Finally, he turned to faith. “ Up until high school, my faith was primarily focused on what the major moral decisions that I had to make were. It was

about what I didn't do." I think most kids raised in Christian households often find themselves at the same place eventually—following the rules to something you don't completely understand, just because you were raised that way.

Madison was aware of his ignorance and decided to dig into deep, meaningful questions that challenged his beliefs. While studying abroad in Europe he encountered so many diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, it caused him to “ wonder if the only reason [he] believed was because of where [he] came from.” In effort to discover who he truly was apart from all the strict norms he mindlessly followed, he reevaluated his faith, spending months doing research and thinking. “ Being unafraid to ask the hard questions and investigate it left me feeling like I could actually take ownership over this and live it out.” After a good year, he decided to not only continue his curiosity in Christ but also incorporate what he knew into his identity, not just follow the rules. “ I was happy to walk with Jesus because I knew it was different from what everyone else was doing. I took ownership of my faith and it's what made me who I am today.”“ Before I was driven by jumping through other people's hoops.

Once I identified what I liked to do and why I liked to do it I only jumped through the ones that mattered to me.” He started a bible study in his fraternity senior year, began dating his now wife, and lived purely for his “ pleasure and peace of mind.” Such a drastic transition, however, might not happen for everyone. Hearing Madison's encounters about how his life changed directions throughout his senior year it gave me assurance that I

have a lot more time to figure it out. I don't need to know who I am right now. I don't need to know what I want to do in the future, or why I will get up every morning. Slowly but surely I will recognize who I will be for the rest of my life and if I knew who that was freshman year, then I would be doing something wrong. Madison's transition is just one of many that I can learn from as I go through the same experience. " I went from living for approval of others to living from approval of myself." He got married, started a family, and founded the Study Center to spread the " hospitality, thoughtfulness and joy of the extended Christian community throughout Chapel Hill." He was okay with being different if that's what it took to be happy.

I understand no one has the same background as Madison, nor has the same interests or personality; however, there something that nearly everyone can learn from his story. " Do it for yourself. Don't do it for anyone else. Do it because you like it—because you love it."