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## The Silent Struggle: A Journey to Find My Voice

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The Silent Struggle: A Journey to Find My Voice  
Angela Ortlieb '19

Dartmouth has a peculiar way of attracting some of the brightest high school students from around the world, plopping them down in the middle of rural New Hampshire, and crushing their confidence. Dartmouth can be a great place, full of opportunities to push ourselves to learn and grow in ways we didn't know we could. But it took me two and a half years to realize how truly special this place is and how I fit into it. It took me leaving the physical confines of Dartmouth to realize that I can control my life, my choices, my happiness. It took me studying thousands of miles from this place to realize that I have a place right here, at Dartmouth.

A place takes on the feel of the people that live there. In COCO 21, we've discussed "culture" quite a bit. Culture is a word that is used a lot to describe places, especially places foreign to us. Culture is defined as "the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group." When you read that and really think about it, you realize that culture isn't tied to a place; it is cultivated by the people in that place. Dartmouth has a distinct culture that is perpetuated by many deeply-rooted traditions. These traditions are meant to be fun, exciting, quirky, and for many of us, were likely a deciding factor in coming here. Many students take great pride in some of these traditions and get angry when any of them are threatened by administration. We fear that any changes that might reduce the authenticity of our Dartmouth experience. And while some of these traditions *are* fun and provide great enjoyment to a lot of students, there are some aspects of Dartmouth culture that we could do without. Dartmouth has a tradition of excellence that tricks students into placing unrealistic expectations on themselves; the brightest students come here, they get great grades, they make lifelong friends, they receive a liberal arts education and leave well-equipped for whatever high-paying job they land after graduation. They are the healthiest, happiest students in the country. They are adventurous. They work hard and play hard. They never seem to struggle or second-guess themselves. On the surface, this seems right. Looking around campus, mostly everyone seems to have their lives together.

In high school, I felt that I had my place. I knew who my closest friends were and I never had trouble making new friends. I knew I was smart, never hesitated to raise my hand in class, never doubted my ability to do well on a test or write a great paper. I was very involved in more extra-curricular activities than I can remember now, spent enough time with my family, and never got enough sleep but somehow always had tons of energy. I was seemingly thriving, able to juggle everything that was tossed onto my plate. I was happy with who I was and who I thought I was going to become. I was excited to come to Dartmouth and continue that trajectory.

The week of trips and orientation was a shock. Everyone I met was so articulate, so interesting, so radiant. I had never been surrounded by so many bright young minds in one place before. Freshman fall I tried to make as many friends as possible. I was always *on*, always ready to make jokes that I thought people would find funny and unique. I initially tried to set myself apart, but knowing no one here and seeing how quickly friend groups formed intimidated me. I started conforming to the ideals I thought people wanted me to: I went out way too often, stressed myself out by "studying" in facetime-y spots in the library but not actually getting any work done, and hid my darker thoughts, emotions, and struggles deep within myself. I showed only my smile to the world, tried so hard to fake a carefree disposition. This continued all throughout my freshman year, this cycle of desperately trying to feel that I was enjoying my Dartmouth experience, conforming to the cultural norms of everyone around me that I thought

embodied a “good Dartmouth student”, and feeling inadequate when I ultimately failed at something. I compressed all my negative thoughts into a small space in my brain where I rarely accessed them. I told all my friends at home that I loved Dartmouth more than anything, that it was hard and that people were smarter than me but that it was great. I didn’t tell them that I no longer raised my hand in class, that I turned in work that I knew wasn’t my best but couldn’t make it better no matter how hard I tried, that I felt inadequate, ugly, awkward, and alone despite having incredibly supportive friends and family. I didn’t tell them these things because I *wanted* to love Dartmouth, and for a long time I tricked myself into thinking that I did.

Sophomore year, I forced myself to reassess my life at Dartmouth. I realized I needed to try harder in school and prioritize wellness. I tried. I made goals for myself, but when everyone seemed to be operating better than me after getting five hours of sleep, taking four classes, and going out three days a week, it became hard to stick to them. Halfway through sophomore year I felt like I wasn’t doing enough at this school. I started working, got involved with community service, rushed. And while I did feel a greater sense of fulfillment, I also felt unnecessarily stressed. It seemed like I never had enough time in the day to get everything done. Sophomore year bled into the summer which bled into junior fall, which, looking back, was my low point at Dartmouth. I knew I was going abroad in the winter, and I spent the second half of fall worrying about it. I was feeling pretty burnt out on the whole “school” thing, and I knew the Bio FSP was notorious for its workload. I was excited to see Costa Rica, but I really didn’t know many people that were going on my program. I was going to miss my friends at school a lot. I couldn’t believe I had committed to leaving Dartmouth for an entire term. Most of the fall I felt strange. Many of my friends were off or abroad, which left me feeling lonely, and that I was doing Dartmouth wrong. My classes were difficult and everything new I had committed to sophomore year now felt like obligations, not fulfilling ways to spend my time. I felt overwhelmed and trapped in a place that I wanted to badly to love, but did not.

I could spend pages writing about how studying abroad was the best decision I’ve made in my life, which is cliché, but true. There is a reason people travel. And I’m sure if you ask someone about any trip right when they return, they’ll tell you all about how it changed them. But I’m going to focus on some of the deeper, fundamental ways my trip and COCO 21 changed my life. Going abroad helped me to rediscover my voice, my voice that used to be loud and confident once upon a time – the voice that I lost during my first two and a half years at Dartmouth. It took me going abroad to realize that I had even lost my voice, and it took me stepping as far as I could outside my comfort zone to find it again. Now that I’ve found it, I want to scream at the top of my lungs. I want to share my voice with the world. I know that I have intelligent thoughts, that I have ideas worth sharing. I know that Dartmouth is a unique place full of extraordinary people. It provides opportunities every day for us to search for and stumble upon people that make us better, people that push and challenge us and ultimately cause intellectual and emotional growth. But being surrounded by all these bright minds can be intimidating. It was for me, and I know my experience is not an anomaly. Before I got to Dartmouth, I had no doubt in my mind that I deserved to be here, but once I got here, everyone seemed so much better than me in every way possible. This made me stop sharing my opinions. I’ve said this before but it’s so important that I can’t stress it enough: I felt inadequate, so rather than making a fool of myself by opening my mouth, I fell silent. I agreed with others to fit in. I blindly conformed to the cultural norms of Dartmouth even if I disagreed with them because I assumed that everyone here knew better than I did. It took leaving Dartmouth for an extended period of time to realize that Dartmouth as a place and a culture didn’t need to silence me. Away

from Dartmouth, I was able to rebuild my broken self-confidence. I realized that I actually *am* capable of excellence. I realized that I am just as qualified as any one of my peers to be here. I realized that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, that everyone is constantly working on some part of themselves that they aren't happy with. It took me trekking through Costa Rican rainforests and working my ass off with thirteen strangers to realize this. Through the process of unpacking my experiences abroad, trying to open my mind to new ideas and new people, I realized what I'm about to articulate next.

Part of my problem for my few years here was a perceived stigma surrounding struggle. Aside from my closest friends, I rarely heard anyone speak openly about feeling overwhelmed, uncomfortable, or sad at Dartmouth. I assumed that struggling was bad, that it meant someone was weak or unlucky. Now I realize that there's nothing wrong with struggling, that it's an inevitable part of life and everyone has different struggles that they carry with them every day. Just because we don't *see* these struggles does not mean they don't exist, nor does it mean that we should keep our own struggles hidden. I believe we should voice our struggles and let others in. No one needs to struggle alone. An unrealistic expectation exists, one that Dartmouth students don't struggle, are brilliant, work hard, and still have enough time to live healthy, fulfilling lives. We can challenge this expectation. We can show that success does not come without struggle. We, as Dartmouth students, have the power to change Dartmouth culture for the better. We can be more open with one another. We can have real conversations about physical and mental health and lose the façade that we have our lives together. We're college students. We have our whole lives to get our lives together (or try to). Now is the time to mess up and learn from our mistakes, to meet the people who will make us better, to say yes to spontaneous adventures, to study hard but also to take care of ourselves. College is supposed to be fun. Life is supposed to be fun.

Since leaving Dartmouth and coming back, I've realized that this is a very special place and college is a very special time. I know that my time here is limited and that every moment I spend here is valuable. I learn more about myself and others every day. Every day we have a thousand choices, and every day has the potential to be a great day if we choose to make it one. While there is a lot in life that is outside our control, we *can* control how we respond to those things and what we choose to learn from them. Going abroad helped me become confident in who I am. I no longer feel silenced or inadequate. I know that everyone has a story, even me. I know that I want to continue to choose to be happy whenever possible, and approach every day as an opportunity rather than an obligation. I finally feel ready to tell my story, to share my thoughts and feelings that I've locked away for so long. I now know how important it is to speak openly, to say exactly what's on my mind when people want to listen. And I've figured out that I'm happiest when I surround myself with people who *do* want to listen.