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Book Review - Educated: A Memoir, by Tara Westover

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Educated: A Memoir (Book Review)

Westover, T. (2018). *Educated: A Memoir*. New York, NY: Random House. 280 pp. ISBN: 978-008042-7698-9. \$25.20 suggested retail price.

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Educated: A Memoir by Tara Westover is the story of a first-generation college student navigating the transition from a conservative rural community and family into and through higher education, including graduate education. As Westover shares her story and is transparent with her vulnerability, she highlights a number of struggles students often face in college. The book explores the tensions between family/home and college. It also highlights the importance of individual connections and actions in the persistence and success of students. It is compelling and directly transferable to the work of Student Affairs practitioners as highlighted in the review.

Overview of the Book

Students bring their stories and histories with them to our campuses every year. Learning about these stories can help us support them through their educational experiences. *Educated* by Tara Westover focuses on Westover's journey as a first-generation college (FGC) student from a rural, Mormon household and community into and through higher education. Issues related to family, educational access, and cultural knowledge are highlighted. Additionally, the way the lives of students are impacted by individuals at key moments are another theme across Westover's educational experiences.

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The book is divided into three sections – part one focuses on Tara’s life at home in Idaho. Part two focuses on her transition during college and the tension between college and home. Finally, part three focuses on Westover’s graduate education and the end of her relationship with many of her family members. These sections are woven together with a series of recollections but also with Westover’s own vision of what her life was, is, and could be.

Educated opens with “My strongest memory is not a memory,” (Westover, 2018, p. 3) where Westover shares a story her father told the family that showcases the power he has over everyone else’s understanding of the world. The second section begins “On New Year’s Day, Mother drove me to my new life” (Westover, 2018, p. 153). This sets the stage for the author’s experience in college and makes a statement to the reader that this transition is the beginning of something permanent—Westover will not be going home again to live there as she had before she started college at Brigham Young University (BYU). Finally, when Westover (2018) closes the book she writes, “You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education” (p. 329).

This review of *Educated* is designed to identify themes throughout the text of one person’s academic journey. It also includes

recommendations for incorporation in student affairs and higher education. Just as each student brings a story with them, this text can help each of us surface our own stories and how they impact our work, our relationships, and students’ abilities to connect with us through our own vulnerability.

Themes

Family

Family is often at the forefront of a student’s educational experience, even in higher education. As an FGC student, Westover struggled with defining herself when her family had already defined who she was and who she should become. Acknowledging the power her older brother held over her, Westover wrote, “It’s strange how you give the people you love so much power over you... But Shawn had more power over me than I could possibly have imagined. He had defined me to myself, and there’s no greater power than that.” (p.199).

The tensions between the culture of college and the culture of home are highlighted when Westover goes back to Idaho at the end of the spring term. Her father and older brother take offense that she would rather be at college or at least bagging groceries for the summer rather than working with them. Westover writes that the two of them agreed that “my brush with education had made me uppity, and that what I needed was

to be dragged through time. Fixed, anchored to a former version of myself" (p. 176).

Later in her academic career, Westover continues to struggle with the tension between her identity as she defines it and the way that many of her family members define her. This struggle is part of her identity as both an FGC student and a woman from a very conservative family. In the book she asks, "What is a person to do... when their obligations to their family conflict with other obligations—to friends, to society, to themselves?" (p. 317). This struggle and tension is at the center of much of what happens in the book.

Educational Access

Westover's notions of education are driven and informed by her family. Initially, we see this in her exchanges with her parents who are not supportive of her attending college. They do not see any reason for it because they have another vision for her future. Westover wrote,

I knew how my life would play out: when I was eighteen or nineteen, I would get married. Dad would give me a corner of the farm, and my husband would put a house on it. Mother would teach me about herbs, and also about mid-wifery... When I had children, Mother would deliver them, and one day, I supposed, I would be

the Midwife. I didn't see where college fit in (Westover, 2018, p. 123).

The author sees her life as being the same as her mother's and grandmothers' before her and is told repeatedly that any education she needs will come from home and not from college.

However, when her older brother Tyler encourages her to begin to study for the ACTs, Westover gets the books she needs to prepare. With Tyler's encouragement and Westover's own initiative – applying after exploring the Brigham Young University (BYU) web site – she begins to see college as a possibility for a different kind of life. While Westover is an FGC, having her older brother to encourage her and model the way was important. Not only was he a resource, he showed that there were other things you could do besides follow in the footsteps of family and continue the patterns of previous generations.

Cultural Knowledge

Another theme in *Educated* is how important and influential cultural knowledge is. Westover's transition to college is complex. She notices everything from the noise of the city – "The chirrup of crosswalk signals, the shrieking of sirens, the hissing of air brakes, even the hushed chatter of people strolling on the sidewalk – I heard every sound individually" (pp. 153-154) to the difference

between the Mormonism she knew at home and the people who identified as Mormon at BYU. One roommate claims to be Mormon, but goes grocery shopping on a Sunday, breaking the Sabbath. Westover is navigating the culture of higher education, but also learning about different religious cultures within her own faith, as well.

On the first day of class, Westover takes a bus going the wrong direction and gets to her first class for the last few minutes only to be told, “You don’t belong here” (p. 155). She responds in classic FGC student form:

I stared at her, confused. Of course I didn’t belong, but how did she know? I was on the verge of confessing the whole thing – that I’d never gone to school, that I hadn’t really met the requirements to graduate – when she added, “This class is for seniors” (p. 155).

After failing her first American history course, she reflects on whether she is prepared for college or not wondering “whether whatever I had in my head by way of *education* was enough,” (p. 156). Her self-doubt intensifies when she, after seeing other students asking questions in class, dares to raise her hand to ask the teacher to explain what a specific word means. From both his reaction and the reaction of the class she knows she has made an error, but she does not understand

what it was. The word she had admitted she did not know was “Holocaust.” When he thinks she is joking, she goes after class to look up the word on her own. After reading about it she writes, “I suppose I was in shock, but whether it was the shock of learning about something horrific, or the shock of learning about my own ignorance, I’m not sure” (p. 157).

This example highlights not only Westover’s lack of knowledge about history, but also her lack of understanding about education. She is trying to adapt to what she sees as educational norms (asking questions in class) and failing (the room goes silent, the professor refuses to answer her question), and not understanding what the mistake is that she has made.

The middle section of the book goes through issues common to most college students: roommate conflicts, financial concerns, and academic struggles, for example. However, throughout her experience, there are moments when she clearly does not have knowledge about college that other students possess: she does not bring a blue book to her first exam, but everyone else knew to bring one. She gets more than halfway through a course before realizing she should be reading her art textbook instead of just looking at the pictures. She does not ask to talk with her faculty because she does not realize that is allowed. Through all of this

Westover knows she wants to stay in college but does not fully understand how to “do” college.

One Person

Tara develops a relationship with a church bishop at BYU. It starts with her refusal to date men at college and him directing her to talk with the counseling center so that she can work toward marriage as a part of God’s plan for her. However, their connection quickly becomes something much more significant to her success in college and her understanding of the issues in her family. Over the course of their interactions, the bishop gives her language for what was happening at home – words like “manipulative” and “violent.” Westover acknowledges that the words were not her own, but that, “They had been given to me by the bishop, and I was still trying to wrest meaning from them” (p. 200).

Over time, the bishop’s support of Westover and his encouragement to her to continue in college takes the form of financial assistance so she does not have to go home for the summer – first from a federal grant (which she adamantly refuses) and then from church funds (which she declines) and a personal check to cover a serious health issue (which she also declines). Ultimately Westover’s bishop persists and with the help

of her roommate, they arrange for her to get the funds she needs to continue at BYU.

Two other key people in Westover’s higher education experience are Drs. Kerry and Steinberg. Dr. Kerry helps her secure an opportunity to visit the University of Cambridge as an undergraduate. Dr. Steinberg helps Westover attend the University of Cambridge for graduate school on a Gates Fellowship.

In all three cases, these people saw tremendous potential in Westover. They worked to secure her the resources she needed to be successful and persist on to graduate education. They also helped her navigate the hidden curriculum and norms of higher education in different settings. Without any one of them, Westover’s story would be significantly different.

Applications to Higher Education and Student Affairs

In reading *Educated*, the role of family and life before college, college access, understanding the hidden curriculum and foreign culture of higher education (especially for FGC students), and the tremendous difference a single person’s investment can make in a student’s life are highlighted. All of these issues are directly relevant to student affairs. We engage with FGC students, but all students have stories and histories they carry with them into education. Different students

need help with different aspects of navigating college. Finally, in many cases it might be a student affairs practitioner who is positioned to be the “one person” who notices, reaches out, and supports a student through a difficulty or crisis.

This text could be used in training, teaching, and other workshops/events for staff and students. In the formal classroom, there are pieces of the text that could be used as case studies for emerging student affairs professionals to explore ethical and legal considerations. Additionally, this text provides an important look behind the curtain of students’ lives. There is always more going on than what we know or see. Reminding ourselves as we engage with students that their lives are rich and complex is essential to serving them in supportive and holistic ways.

There are some additional insights into this text in the current COVID-19 pandemic landscape and how it affects higher education. While talking in the book about her own personal struggles, Westover wrote,

The thing about having a mental breakdown is that no matter how obvious it is that you're having one, it is somehow not obvious to you. I'm fine, you think. So what if I watched TV for twenty-four straight hours yesterday. I'm not falling apart. I'm just lazy. Why it's better to think yourself lazy than

think yourself in distress, I'm not sure. But it was better. More than better: it was vital (p. 307).

As students find themselves socially and otherwise isolated in an environment where the future of their college and post-college experiences is definitely unclear, how are we attending to them? What are the struggles they are engaged in that they do not see? Not only does this text bridge the gap between the student affairs world and friends and family, it is set in a specific context, provides real-life examples, and encourages the reader (and perhaps the student affairs reader in particular) to look at the bigger picture in this particular student’s life rather than just the four years she was in college.

This emphasizes the fact that as student affairs practitioners, we must constantly remind ourselves that what we know about a student – any student – is not the entirety of who that student is, what they have overcome, and what they have to offer. Each student brings their own background with them to college and that informs the experience they have in higher education.

The impact of the bishop who helped Tara when she could not find anyone else to help was integral to her story. The role of this one person in her life showed the importance of student/faculty relationships. Without that relationship, she would not have studied abroad or ended up in her master’s program.

The same could be said of Dr. Kerry and Dr. Steinberg. Whether faculty or staff, there are important roles for us to play in the support of students. Those relationships require some risk-taking on our part, but often they make all the difference.

Using this text in reading circles as a part of a staff development program, in training with student staff, or in community or student organization reading groups with students could prove particularly effective. Discussing the role formal and informal education has on our students not only on campus and in their future, but in their family relationships and in connection with their home communities is one way to use this text. Teams might use Westover's work as a case study to understand what knowledge, skills, and insights she brought into her higher education experience and connect that to how all of us can support students and recognize the knowledge they bring to our campuses.

Earlier in the review, we cited Tara's quote about not knowing what to do when obligation to family creates a tension with higher education. Maybe this is the essence of the book and the core of what we as student affairs practitioners need to reflect on and wrestle with. This is a salient observation that likely resonates with many of the students that we work with - especially first-generation college students. Many struggle while exploring their passions and also navigating what their families expect from them. Being able to put this question into the universe is powerful. Our students do not need to feel or be alone because others are battling this same thing. Student affairs professionals can help them find the resources and communities they need to navigate their struggles. This book shows some key moments where that can happen.

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