

# Locating the Point Five {

## by Michael Mount

Intro {

Welcome, everyone. Congratulations!

Two years ago I began the Pacific Crest Trail with little more than a vague reckoning of where Canada was. I was standing at the Mexican border with a man named *Furniture*. We looked North into the gauze of the rising sun on the desert, watching the car that had dropped us at the border clearing drive off into the dust. I missed my **family** already and I missed my **bed** and I missed the **hot meals**. Furniture and I stood looking far off into the horizon but hardly able to see beyond the brush and the scrub oak. And even if we could we could not see beyond the mountains or beyond the **second** range of mountains or the **third**. We tried to think of something poetic to say but the dust **slapped** us in the face and thus began a **three thousand** mile journey on foot across the country, hoofing through the wind, sand and *starlight*. This should have been my fourth semester at Brown.

I had developed an interest in completing the Pacific Crest Trail during my sophomore year. My mother thought I was crazy to throw away a semester of my Ivy League education. She thought that it was obviously a waste of time to wander across the country with a man named Furniture. She waited by the phone nervously, as Furniture, whose real name is *Pete*, and I walked through bear prints and met people named Bojangles and Rally and Uncle Tom and we hitchhiked with women in big red pickup trucks. She sent me clips from the Brown Alumni Magazine and I read them in little post offices in rural towns in the Cascades. I maintained a blog of photography and my friends and family watched as I slid down snowy passes in late June and walked through the sand of the Mojave desert.

When I got the chance I called my friends at Brown on payphones, or wrote them letters. I thought about my geology classes, once in awhile, but otherwise said farewell to school. I put aside the seminar rhetoric and instead filled my mouth with Almond Joy bars and dehydrated coffee, romping across the nation with only two shirts in my wardrobe.

We spent four months walking through the woods, through John Muir's backyard and the green maze of the Cascades, encountering folks in the old prospecting towns and Indian

reservations. Everyone was intrigued as to what we were doing. Four months of living in a tent, and I could have been at school. They wondered why we were doing this to ourselves. And my friends at school were also intrigued. Four months of living in a tent. *You could be here, with us. The Spring Weekend lineup is amazing.* And often times I did want to be there with them, but I had chosen to leave school, and thus chosen to leave them too. I had separated myself from Brown.  
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Assimilate {

The assimilation was easy enough. When I returned I began a job at Brown's Curricular Resource Center as Leavetaking Coordinator, advising other students who were considering semesters away from the university. I was mystified as to how I got this job, considering that I still didn't understand why I had taken leave myself, but nonetheless I assumed the office of a de facto counselor, holding sessions with tea and cookies, and in turn, I listened to many students tell me about their lives at Brown.

I listened to stories about taking five classes and barely having time to sleep, about fighting for internships and fighting for grades. I listened to stories about **losing** friends, about **losing** money and **losing** family and I wondered what on Earth I had to console them with. There was no miracle word that the trees had whispered to me. It was nice to be able to sit on a toilet again, but I still had no postulate to give. I had been living with a twenty-four year old peanut butter addict named Furniture in the pine trees, and how could I possibly offer anything to these students, other than my silly backpacking stories? It took many of these conversations to figure out why I had left Brown in the first place. That's how I was introduced to many of you, class of twenty twelve point five. **That's how I came to know what it meant to be a point fiver.**

That's what they call us. Point-fivers. There is no one category that we all fit into, other than being in this state of in between. There are those of us in our last semester, carving out these projects and finalizing onerous academic challenges. Some of us are actually graduating early, having whisked away their requirements. There are transfer students, who may be finishing their second or third year at Brown. There are resuming undergraduate education students, who may have children of their own in college now.

There are those of us who took a leave of absence to pursue internships, and some of us spent our time traveling, and a great number went home, simply to recover from the ordeals and trials that life had thrown in our paths. We all have reasons for graduating a little off target, and they are radically different. Many of us did not even *decide* to leave, but were forced into that position for monetary or medical reasons.

The four year system did not accommodate all of the obstacles that we encountered, so we entered the bizarre space called **point five**.

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Struggle {

For many of us, this is the fifth time watching the red leaves fall on Brown. Or this may be the *sixth*, *seventh*, or *eighth*. We've been in and out of many seminars and lectures by now and we have even dipped our toes in what people call the real world. You must have experienced the estrangement by now, class of twenty twelve point five. Did you go to the graduation ceremony in the spring, looking for your name on the program? Did you come back here in September, discovering all the incoming students, overflowing with love for school, perhaps future point fivers *themselves*? When you went home for Thanksgiving did your family ask what you've been doing with those precious four years? And most importantly, are you not finally of greater conviction than ever, having watched all these red leaves fall for the last time, that you made the right decision?

We have been bombarded by the {what did you do on your time off}s or the {why are you still in college}s and we have started to craft a better story each time. What did we gain from our fractured education? Was it that all of our problems went away...was it that some miracle had occurred, and we came back to school with pearls of wisdom? But it was not that tidy. There is no filter on the Van Winkle gates that keeps our complications out of college. If anything, we've brought all of those stories into greater light in the classroom.

If we consider this the waiting period to endure before getting that high-paying career then we'll be waiting a long time for the day that we can clock out with our paycheck. We'll be waiting a long time for a period of our life when we can compartmentalize anything into perfect parcels of time. What about accidents? What about causality and failure and falling in *love*? What about randomness and the emergent behaviours that happen when we bring thousands of thinkers together?

If there's one thing that we've learned from our fragmented time at Brown, it's that we cannot simply clock out from our problems. In a certain sense, then, to have gone through college without *struggling*, is not to have profited at all. These are the struggles for which we have paid, trying to make sense of a lifetime of walking with Furnitures. Trying to make sense of when we are rejected from the jobs that we wanted so badly, or laughing to ourselves in the early morning when we finish the paper that we had hated that we had

grown to love.

It is only through the correspondence with our friends and scholars that we can begin to decode them. We have to enjoy every day of the discovery, and forget the wisdom that comes at the end. Hold on to those moments. It is the struggle itself that we have to grow to love.

Very slowly we have unpacked our journeys, for which three words would be too many and three thousand too few. It takes a long time to unfold the tapestry of our memories, too dense to unfold all at once. There is something about the retelling that makes a constellation of all of those pinpoints of light, just as something about discussing computer science or geology or literature makes it more real.

And it is likely that we have **no** pearls of wisdom, but now have begun to understand what it means to be graduating now. Very slowly we begin to understand that graduating college in something other than four years is about embracing an extracurricular for which there is no prize or club. Others may call these events *failures* or *struggles* but we must hold tight to whatever they are called, and extract every bit of power until those ashes have no more heat to release.

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Linger {

Furniture said if your goal is to get to Canada then you fail everyday. You fail everyday that you crush thirty miles of terrain, and everyday that you go until sunset before stopping. But if your goal is to just make it a little bit farther, and to keep walking, then you made it. It takes a great deal of confidence to stop fighting for a **tomorrow** when everything will be clear.

Just to have tried is a triumph greater than any of the glossiest pearls of wisdom that we ever could have been given, and to have taken our time, to have lingered when need be, is no sign of weakness at all. This probably won't be the last time in our lives that we take leave. It won't be the last time that we transfer, or that we resume something that was interrupted a long time ago.

In fact, it's the beginning of a messy tangle of knots, circuitous and lacking any symmetry. Take a deep breath, hold on. There's no curricular resource center and no office hours after this, but there will always be the friends and the colleagues. No endeavor is a failure/success binary. Welcome to a lifetime of point fiving, in which we pile up all of our little accomplishments into something much greater and multiform.

And I met an old man on the Pacific Crest Trail once who handed me a piece of paper with a stanza of a poem by T.S. Eliot on it, and it wasn't until coming back to Brown that I could identify it, maybe you have heard of it too:

*We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all of our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started from,  
and know the place for the first time.*

Now I look around with the same amazement and wonder that I brought freshman year. We've made it through the hard times. Now we're looking out at that big world once again. It doesn't matter what amount of time it will take to fly, because one day...we'll stretch our arms farther, and *run faster than we ever have before!* Congratulations, class of twenty twelve point five. Let's be proud that our names are on the program today.

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