

Introduction: My name is Min and I graduated from Emory in 2017 from the College with a major in International Studies and a minor in Arabic. And after working for about three years, I'm now back in school, and I'm studying at Sciences Po in Paris.

Question 1: Can you tell us a little bit about your journey (and where your headspace was at) from your Emory graduation to your current role?

Response: So I had a professor recently who remarked a quotation from L.P. Hartley, and she said "The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there." And when I think about my journey in 2017, and what I was doing and how I thought about things, I did things differently there. I was like many Emory graduates in that I was unsure of what was to come, and I was really dead set on trying to prove to everyone that I could do more than talk theory and skim a reading and contribute to class. I think I was like some, honestly, in that I was in a long-term relationship and friendships, and I honestly didn't know where that was going. But like a rare few, I came to Emory from a very different background than what is typically thought of those that go there. And I felt that I had finally adjusted to Emory, after growing up first-gen, low-income, rural. And then, to be honest, I felt like I figured out the system. I knew how to survive and enjoy this ecosystem. And then graduation just meant I was forced into a world where I had less resources and knowledge and tools. But you know, like many, I would learn to not just assimilate, but find my way back. And I think at the time, there was a bit of a pity party being thrown. And I think seniors were a bit entitled to that because so many changes are happening, but I did channel whatever feelings I had toward proving myself. And one can frame this as imposter syndrome or chasing your imposter. And if you're asking me about my story, I think there are many ways you can frame a story, but identity is how you tell your story. And it's not about ticking boxes in social groups. But for me, my journey from Emory is about chasing my imposter. And honestly what merits and demerits that has, and the humility and peace that comes in the entire journey. So, that's how I would phrase it.

Question 2: What were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: Oh, things that were unplanned or unexpected but meaningful to your growth... I find this an ironic question given this as a creative project because it's the importance of art and creativity that came back into my life, which I think I subconsciously tabled when I was in undergrad. But now I learned how creative sources have such a unique way of helping us make sense, in senseless circumstances, whether that's war, trauma, or PTSD. The analogy that I use is, how many times have you watched a movie and you've read a book or you've seen a line and you're like, *Yes, that! Those were the feelings I wanted. And that's the way I want to tell him or her or them how I felt. And that's the gravitas. That's the color. That's the feeling that I wanted that I was just trying to reach for.* And so I think that's what I've learned, especially in someone that's involved in more international affairs where they tell you the world and the words are everything. It's not just semantics. And there's a lot of competition in being right in circumstances that are not very clear. And so I found a lot of answers, or ways to look at things, through art, which I hope that whatever Emory is doing moving forward that they find ways to encourage that in students. Because I learned the hard way, to be honest with you. I didn't seek answers there. I thought that a poem is not a fact, for example. I think from looking at the inauguration, at the Nobel Poet Laureates that spoke. Like, a poem is just as much a fact as a stat that

describes where we are and how we feel. So that's something that I learned. It's evolving, that skill is evolving. I think I have my moods where I feel like I need a straightforward answer to life and how it works and it should be black and white. But I think the most calming bits have come when I haven't been looking for it. So creativity is largely unplanned.

Question 3: What does creativity/creative exploration/living a creative life mean to you?

Response: I would say it's making meaning, to be honest with you. It's not being told meaning, it's making meaning. So it invites questions like, *How is it made? How is it valued? How is it valued with the time or overtime?* That's going to depend on person to person, but being able to move between theory, real life experiences, and art—that to me is creative. As a trained political scientist, between theory, empirics, and creative sources, the latter two seem a bit obvious, but the last makes most people a bit skeptical. And yet, I think it's also a mistake to believe you can make meaning if that's creativity by continuing. Or let's say you can understand the Syrian war by just working at a think tank that works on it for four years and that's the farthest you'll take it. I think that's absolutely impossible. And in the reverse, apart from the ivory tower, which I did feel when I was at Emory, and I think we all did, like some people felt, *Okay, well, how does this work in practice?* I think it's also a mistake to believe you can understand the plight of a refugee. Again, if creativity is making meaning of senseless or difficult circumstances, by working the field for 10 years, because whenever one is caught up in intense situations, even just life, which is an intense situation, you don't have the time to ask what you're actually seeing or making meaning of, or you don't recognize it. So you can only see and detect something if you can recognize it. You can only recognize it, if you've been trained to recognize something. And artistic sources, whether a picture, whether a song, or something else—you can tell I'm not that creative, I'm like thinking stereotypical versions of creativity—they're wonderful opportunities to try your hand at recognition and making meaning and there's just so much beauty and richness in wandering in it a little bit because no one is going to come up to you and say that's the wrong way to look at a painting.

Question 4: What advice do you have for your younger self?

Response: So academically, or just to any intellectual perfectionists in the room, I would tell them, *You can learn anything, anytime, and anywhere.* If you try doing this, you'll never get bored. You might have a job that you don't absolutely love, but you will not live a boring life with no creativity, no meaning. As we've discussed, you will always find something to move forward in with your life. So I would tell myself that, which would hopefully help take the pressures off of having a boring job. I think that's what most graduates are thinking sometimes. But I would also say doubt and knowledge go hand in hand. And doubt isn't a lack of self confidence. That's important. And that you have to find a way to maintain joy. You can't learn without joy. I think some people are naturally joyous, which is amazing. But if you tend to migrate or be drawn to the more broken things in the world, which is not a problem, just find a way to have joy. You can't learn without it, you can't work without it, and you won't make relationships from it without it. So do that and you'll never get bored and you'll find it fascinating.

I guess the second thing I would tell myself is even the average person can reach their dreams. I talked about imposter syndrome a bit. And the demerits there are in trying to nail...kind of reconcile that. And

I believe if I was told, *You're okay*, but in a way that was more, *I see you, I know what you're capable of, you will get there*. I think that's a lot better than looking at someone and saying, *You're being anxious for no good reason*. It might be true, but I think that could have been messaged so much differently to myself.

And the third thing would be about relationships. And I'm not talking romantic, I'm talking with people. Just because a friendship, relationship—or, to speak more to the times, a system—has always been there, doesn't mean it should always be there or continue to be there. You should always demand better. But more than that, learn how to see, recognize, work toward, reward and sustain good relationships, good systems. And no matter what field or far-flung place you'll find yourself in, you will just never feel alone, really. And that's from someone that has moved five times in the past 13 months.

When you're moving forward and you're doubting yourself about what I can do, you have to remind yourself the hardest part is already over. Now, that doesn't mean you know what's to come. You don't know how much you have to fight for, how much you'll have to restrain yourself, how much you'll change, but the fact that you know something is coming, and the fact that you've made it this far up the hill...they say, *Don't look back*, and I completely disagree. I think you do need to look back, remember where you come from, and remember what it took for you to get there, how you were helped by others. There's no such thing as a self-made person. There are people with many resources, financial maybe, that don't have personal resources, and they don't end up the same way. Maybe they're shut down emotionally, they're not encouraged. But I as a person was always encouraged by my parents, even though we weren't the most endowed. It's so hard to square all these things from potential to obstacles to *I'm skilled*, or *I'm smart*, or *I have common sense*, but I think the only way to stay sane and know you can do it is to look back and say, *I've made it this far*. And more than that, *I have more direction than I did yesterday, so I'm going to be fine*. And if you can learn anything, anywhere, you're not going to take the next day or the next opportunity as. *Well, this is a lateral move*. Or, *This is not where I want it to be*. You'd be like, *I'll do this **and** I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna lay the inroads*. I think that's the best way you can move forward is to look back and keep thinking outside the box.

Being yourself, your genuine self, is really undeniable. And whenever someone questions it, it will be undeniable. So, you know, stick to your guns in that respect. Don't brag and don't be miopic. Because I think when we come out from undergrad, if we didn't get XYZ scholarship and we don't have a job, we're in trouble, because we didn't get the cookie cutter opportunity. But if you remove that lens and start talking to people and thinking broader, you'll never know what you'll find. I remember going to foreign policy networking events and employers would say, *What would you want to do*, and I said, *foreign policy*, it was just these buzzwords. But if you spend time to know the industry and the people in them, you'll find opportunities for sure. And I think, in contrary maybe to the hard sciences, you might not want to take that approach. In this realm, you definitely do. So stay, keep your mind open. Really, it's okay if you don't recognize it. But if you keep your mind open, you'll catch something in your net. And the “do” part, I would say, do evaluate industry or subfields based on if you like the people. And I'm completely serious. I largely left the security field because I didn't like the people. And it took me a while to realize this was affecting how I saw the world and how I saw the situation—I don't want to call it a problem, it's very easy to call it the problem—the situation and my role and becoming jaded, which is a little chronic in this space, in anything that's highly politicized. So do find a way to judge your situation that is humble but is confident. And find a way to surround yourself with people,

working people—not just relationships outside of work, working people—that encourage you to keep going, no matter what. Even if the cause is noble and the people are not great, I do not encourage you to stay there. That will only get you so far. And I think in any case or any compassion-based industry for you, there's a lot of emphasis on cause cause cause, but again, not on people. And we're all people. People need people. So find a way to make your own rules. And to please trust your gut. I know I hated that advice when I was an undergrad because it was like, *Great, that gives me no direction, thank you.* But I'm completely serious. As soon as you get out of undergrad, so many people will have advice for you, so now is the time to get your compass going and trust your gut.