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WALKING THROUGH FEAR

By Miguel M. Morales

The first day I came to campus, I sat in my car trying to talk myself out of enrolling.

You don't have any money. You don't have any time.

You live too far. You're too old.

More reasons came as I walked across campus.

College isn't for people like you. You don't belong here. Look at them – they're all white.

They're never going to understand you and you're going to get into a lot of arguments.

I found myself at JCCC because my boss at the retail bookstore overheard me telling a co-worker I planned to go to school "next semester."

It's sort of a game young people play. We know society will forgive us for working dead-end jobs if we say we're going to school "next semester." Besides, we usually do have the intention of going to school. It's just never the right time.

Well, my boss did something unexpected. He begrudgingly gave me the next day off to register for class. He had to adjust all the students' work hours, and my class schedule was the last he needed. While terrified of enrolling in college, I was more afraid my boss would give me horrible hours or even fire me if I returned without my class schedule. He was not a pleasant guy.

So once again, my big mouth had gotten me into trouble. It jeopardized the job that put gas in my car, cheap food on my table and paid my rent. I had learned early that survival jobs were all that mattered. At 10 years old, I started working as a migrant farm worker with the rest of my family. We spent summers working 12-hour days six days a week for \$1.25 an hour. Work required my sisters and me to leave school early in May. We took no final exams nor said goodbye to classmates. Work also meant starting school in October instead of August.

For reasons I don't understand, my parents didn't encourage us to have friends, to go to school, or even to pursue our dreams. Maybe that's the way life was for them. When my sisters became teenagers, they lied about their ages in order to get jobs that took them out of the fields. Soon after, my father began working in a meatpacking plant and my mother and I started cleaning houses.

When I was able to attend school, I discovered a talent for telling peoples' stories. I hid my gift for years because I knew talents needed to be exploited into jobs. I also knew what work was. Work was laboring at something you don't like in order to pay bills. I feared my talent becoming labor. Writing is the only thing I've ever done right – I couldn't risk tainting it because then I'd have nothing.

Besides, who'd ever pay me to write? Yet there I sat with shaking hands filling out an enrollment application. I must have gone through five applications. I was so scared. After all these years of talking about going to college, what if I don't have what it takes? What if I fail? What if I get proof that I'm really not good enough?

I know this sounds crazy but trying meant failing and as long as I didn't try – I could do anything. I had infinite potential. Why in the world would I risk losing that? Because not trying also meant I had gained nothing.

There I stood with an application in my hand, a man with nothing to lose. With the simple act of handing my application to the woman at the desk, I set my universe into motion. Soon I spoke to a counselor, signed up for a class, and paid for it with my emergency credit card. I went back to my car and as I sat looking at my class schedule, I cried. I had walked through my fear. It wasn't the last time I'd have to do it on this campus and it never gets easier, but I did it.

Trust me, whatever your fear is, you can walk through it too.

