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University Public Worship
Dream Sabbath
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Thank you to the Stanford religious community for inviting me to speak at this event, to everyone for waking up early this morning to attend this service, and especially to my friends who are here. Your support means everything.

I rarely remember movie endings. I can recite dialogue and tell you the exact moment a train will sound its horn in the background, but don't ask me how the conflict gets resolved, if it ever gets resolved. Maybe I don't remember endings because maybe I really don't care about them. It's been said, "The journey, not the arrival, is what matters most." When you're undocumented, sometimes you never arrive.

One night over dinner, Chris and I exchanged all sorts of stories about growing up undocumented in the U.S. Chris was one of the first undocumented immigrant rights activists I met in the Bay Area. I still couldn't believe he was 28. With his sense of fashion and contagious energy, he could make anyone believe he still couldn't buy a drink at a

bar, but Chris felt his time running out. Despite having a bachelor's in engineering, he faced legal barriers in the workforce due to his immigration status and found himself working for low wages at a tech support call center. Over dinner and jokes, we exchanged playful glances, until the laughs subsided and we locked eyes. He was no longer Chris the clown. His whole face transformed. His calm, tired eyes seemed to call out for help.

The longest phone conversation I ever had with my younger brother was about our experiences as undocumented college students. My brother got into some great private universities around the country, but because of his immigration status, he was ineligible for federal financial aid and could not afford attending. Instead, he enrolled in the local University of Houston and lived at home with my dad. Denied a driver's license because of his immigration status, he relied on public transportation to get to classes. I felt uncomfortable with how lucky I was to be receiving a free education at one of the best universities in the world, as he was denied his dream of a traditional on campus college experience. What hurt me the most was my brother's belief that

somehow it was his fault that he was not living his dream, that maybe, if he'd worked harder, he would be in a better place. At the same time, I could hear him losing hope in his education. He reminded me of myself, as I often wondered whether my Stanford degree would be worth anything if the DREAM Act had not passed by the time I graduated from college.

The day I graduated from Stanford, I could not be happy for myself. Instead, I relied on my family's pride in my accomplishments to appreciate my own hard work. While many of my friends had internships, jobs, and graduate school to look forward to, I had no idea where I would be in the next few months.

At the start of senior year at Stanford, I'd visited the Haas Center for Public Service. I had just finished a Haas summer fellowship, so I inquired about my eligibility for year-long postgraduate fellowships given my undocumented status. I learned I wasn't eligible. I thought about all of the times I felt I couldn't pursue a dream because of my immigration status. There was the summer after freshman year when I knew I could not get a paid internship. Instead, I found a volunteer

position at an immigration clinic. When I showed up for what was supposed to be my first day of work, my supervisor told me she actually didn't feel comfortable with me working there because I was undocumented. I left the building in a state of paralysis and confusion.

When you're an undocumented student, you get used to constant rejection and the death of your dreams. After graduating from Stanford, I returned to Houston to live with my parents. My sister did the same thing after her college graduation a few years ago, but within months she started working at a dry cleaners. I didn't want to settle for a low-skilled job myself, so I decided to begin a search for a job that required a college degree. I knew of at least one undocumented college graduate who was able to work at a prominent social justice organization in DC because she was hired as an independent contractor, a worker classification that does not require a social security number. I hoped there would be other employers who would be supportive of DREAMers and would be willing to hire me in a similar fashion, even though it is unlawful for an employer to knowingly hire any undocumented person.

Back in Houston after graduation, I began sleeping no earlier than 7 am, as my mind refused to stop running and my anxiety took over. In the middle of the night, I would often break down into tears when I faced the reality that my immigration status severely restricted my options. I decided to apply to a dream job in DC as a philanthropy consultant anyway, hoping the firm would somehow be sympathetic to my story. After making it through three interviews and discussing my experiences as an undocumented student openly, I was asked about my work authorization status. Upon revealing I did not possess work authorization, I was removed from the hiring process.

For days after that rejection, I could not bring myself to apply to more jobs. One day I received a letter in the mail saying that my health insurance coverage, which Stanford paid for four years, had officially ended. At this point, my stress and anxiety had led to decreased appetite, weight loss, and an exacerbation of obsessive-compulsive behaviors such as checking door locks repeatedly before sleeping. Knowing that I had no access to healthcare providers was the last thing I needed to hear.

I began considering alternatives to finding a job, including becoming a private tutor, starting my own company, and even leaving the United States. I considered starting a new life in another country, or trying to apply for a temporary work visa, which would require me to leave the US. The issue with pursuing the work visa option was that it would mean risking being unable to reenter the country for at least ten years.

It wasn't long before I had three of my most important realizations this summer. One, the people I love, my family and friends, live in this country and I am not leaving them anytime soon. Two, I am not happy in Houston. Three, I am not just an immigrant, but the son of two parents who left their home and safety to an unknown territory on a journey with an uncertain destination. I, too, am capable of making my way in the face of intractable territory. However, like my parents, I will not do this alone. When my parents moved my family of six to the United States, we first stayed at my uncle's house for a month before finding a small one-bedroom apartment of our own. To help us settle into our own house, my aunt gave us plates, cups, and utensils. When my dad wanted

to mortgage a home, the mortgage broker overlooked our immigration status and helped us find the right loan. Looking back at my parents' immigration story, I realized how critical positive reception from people in this country was to our family's social mobility.

This country's current immigration policies are an assault on human dignity. They thwart the growth of youth. They inhibit our hopes for ourselves and for humanity. When I think of undocumented youth who have been denied their dreams, I imagine thousands of ghosts walking around wondering what life could have been if they had only been documented.

My parents' immigrant story gave me the boost I needed to get back up this summer. Once I recovered from my philanthropy consulting rejection, I contacted a number of people in my Bay Area network to inform them about my renewed job search. One of my friends connected me with people in his network who have already provided job leads, and for the next few weeks I will be staying with him as I look for a job in the Bay Area.

Indeed, the success of immigrants in this country often depends on the positive reception from people who already live here. Today I embark on a similar journey that my parents pursued when they first arrived to the United States. I didn't know this until a few months ago, but my parents apparently did not actually plan on staying in the U.S. when they first moved here. I'm not sure where my journey in the Bay Area will take me in the next couple of weeks. Then again, as a DREAMer, I understand too well that the peril of dreaming big is that you may not achieve.