

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# I Am Not Proof of the American Dream

Feb. 2, 2022

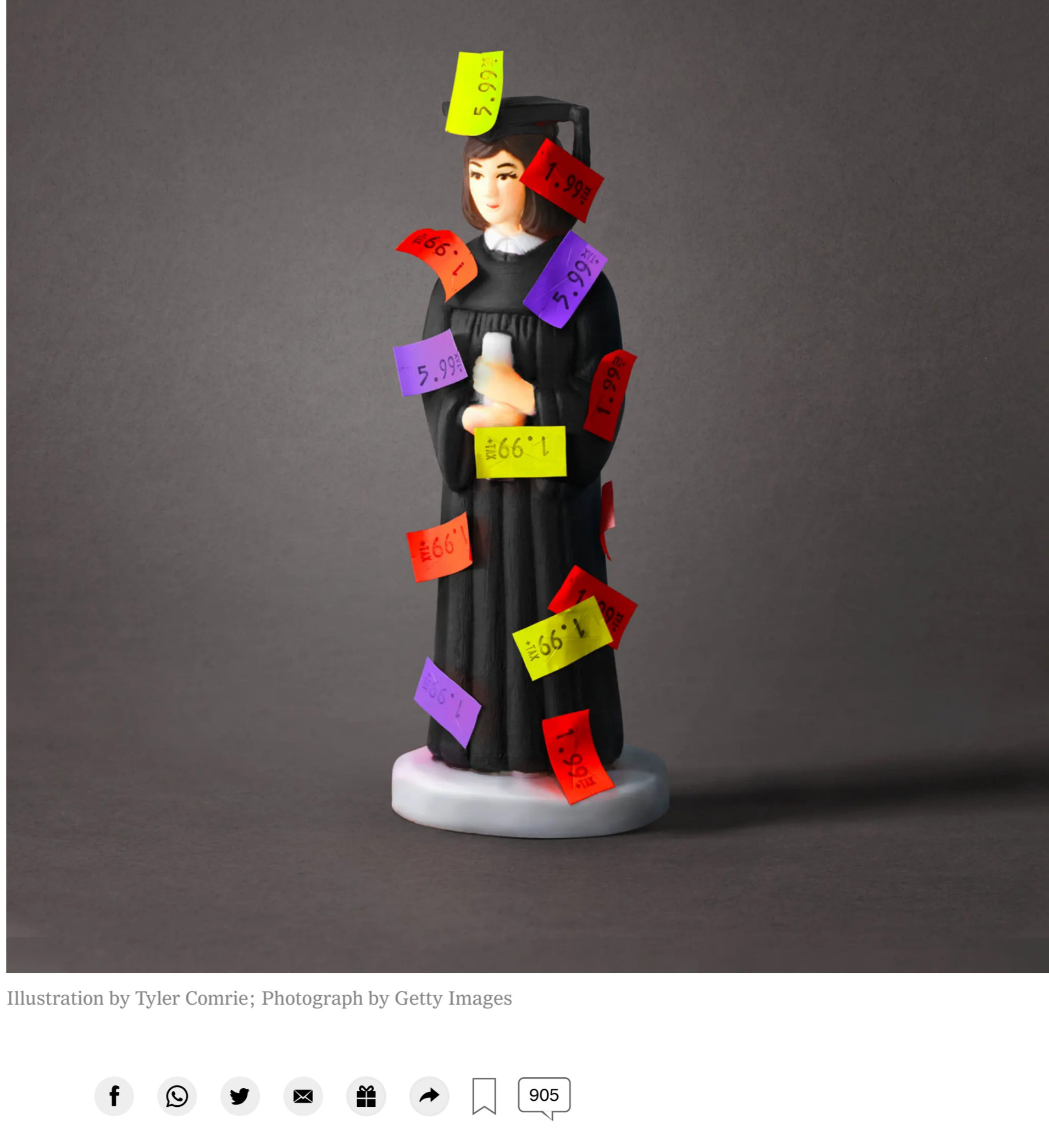


Illustration by Tyler Comrie; Photograph by Getty Images

By Tara Westover  
Ms. Westover is the author of the memoir "Educated."

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When I think of my first semester of college, the memory comes to me as a physical sensation. I feel *tired*. There is the siren-screech of an alarm sounding at 3:40 in the morning. I feel it in my teeth. Then images: the orange glow of the jumbo numbers in pitch black, the instinctual, semiconscious tapping of the button, the gradual shrinking of my bed as I climb out of it and move toward the door. I do not change my clothes. It was my habit to dress for the day the night before, because an alarm blaring at 3:40 really does sound much better than an alarm blaring at 3:30.

Outside I feel the Rocky Mountain winter on my cheeks as I begin the scramble to campus on sidewalks that will not be salted for another three hours. I'm heading for the engineering building, where I will pick gum out of short nylon carpet, wipe strange equations from dusty chalkboards, and scour the interior of toilet bowls with an odorless blue gel. I will finish around 8 a.m., then head to class.

This was my routine for the first two months of my freshman year. Then, because I was short on rent, I added a second job, serving coleslaw and Jell-O in the cafeteria. The woman who worked alongside me was also a freshman who could not afford the meal plan. I don't recall either of us mentioning the fact that we were serving food we could not afford to eat; I don't recall feeling angry as I hooked my apron in my locker and reached into my backpack for my own lunch, a protein bar and pack of ramen noodles (10 cents at my local grocery store). I also don't recall feeling humiliated or disrespected to be cleaning plates or toilets used by my classmates. The full complexity of my opinion on inequality and poverty then could have been summed up with utter simplicity: I was tired.

I wrote about these and other experiences in my 2018 memoir, "Educated," which surprised me by becoming a best seller. My story was one of extremes: born in the mountains of Idaho to Mormon parents who kept me out of school, I had never set foot in a classroom before my first semester of college at Brigham Young University. I graduated in 2008 and won a scholarship to the University of Cambridge, where I earned a Ph.D.

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A curious thing happens when you offer up your life for public consumption: People start to interpret your biography, to explain to you what they think it means. At book signings, in interviews, I'm often told that my story is uplifting, that I am a model of resilience, an "inspiration." Which is a nice thing to be told, so I say thank you. But every so often someone takes it a bit further, and says something to which I do not have a response. I'm told, "You are living proof of the American dream, that absolutely anything is possible for anybody."

But am I? Is that what the story means?

After being tired, here's what I remember most about being poor: a pervasive sense of costly trade-offs. Of course you had to take the maximum number of credits, because tuition was expensive; of course you had to pick up that second job, that extra shift, that third side hustle raking leaves or mowing lawns or shoveling snow. The only question I ever asked was how soon could they pay.

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The architecture of my life was defined by money, meaning its absence, right down to the alarm blaring at 3:40 a.m. The night shift paid a dollar more, \$6.35 an hour instead of \$5.35. Never mind that my roommates blasted music until midnight, so that on a typical night, I got around three hours of sleep; never mind that I was dozing through my lectures, or that I spent the entire winter with a raspy cough and string of unexplained sinus infections. It was a dollar more! The math was straightforward and decisive.

My college ambitions nearly came to an abrupt end in my sophomore year. Blinding pain in my lower jaw turned out to be a rotting nerve. I needed a root canal and \$1,600 to pay for it. I decided to drop out. My plan was to hitch a ride to Las Vegas, where my brother was working as a long-haul trucker, and to get a job working at the In-N-Out Burger across the street from his trailer.

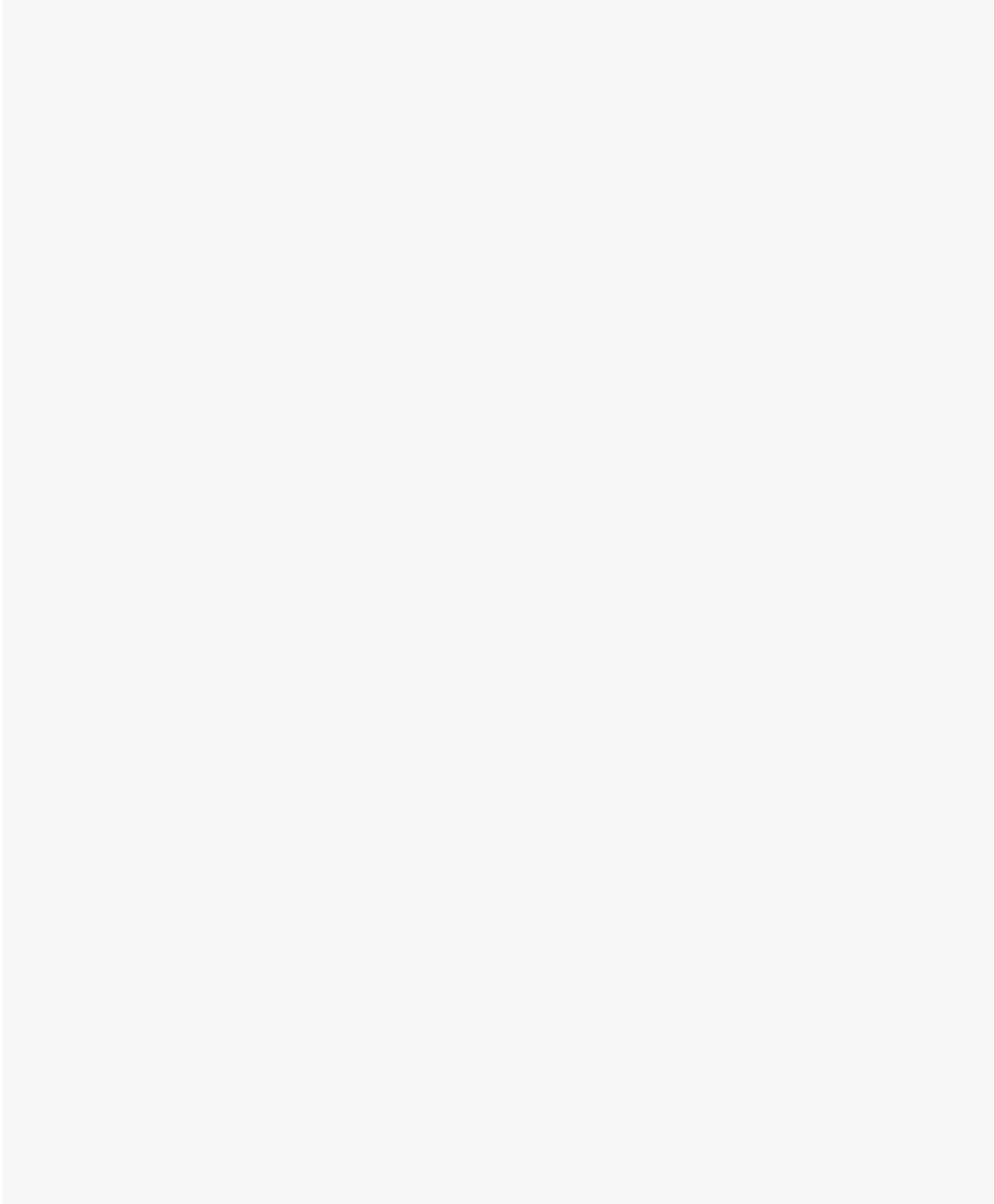
Then, a leader at my church pulled me aside and insisted that I apply for a Pell Grant, a federal program that helps poor kids pay for college. Days later a check arrived in the mail for \$4,000. I had never seen that much money, could not wrap my brain around the amount. I didn't cash it for a week, afraid of what possession of such a sum might do to me. Then the throbbing in my jaw motivated me to take a trip to the bank. I got the root canal. For the first time, I purchased the required textbooks for my classes. There was money left over, more than a thousand dollars, so I quit the cafeteria and swapped the night for the day shift. I stopped sleeping through my classes; the cough dried up, the infections cleared.

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The day I cashed that check is the day I became a student. It's the day the current of my thoughts shifted from obsessively tracking the balance of my bank account, down to the dime, to obsessively tracking my coursework. It was an experience not of wealth but of security, and with security, the freedom to ask questions about what I wanted from my life. What did I enjoy doing, or thinking about? What was I good at? I started seeking out and studying books outside the required reading; I took courses that were not required, for the simple reason I was interested in them, and I had the time.

Every decision I made from that moment on was a function of that check. In those desperate years a few thousand dollars was enough to alter the whole course of my life. It contained a universe. It allowed me to experience for the first time what I now know to be the most powerful advantage of money, which is the ability to think of things besides money. That's what money does. It frees your mind for living.

It's tempting to tell my story in the way people want me to. I would love to be the hero, and say that it's all about hard work and determination, the white-knuckled triumph of the human will. But if I put my ego aside, I know that's not the case. I entered college in 2004. I attended Brigham Young University, a private college heavily subsidized by the Mormon Church. Tuition was \$1,640 a semester. This was before the housing crisis, when it was possible to find a shared room in a shabby apartment for just \$190 a month. What these numbers meant, in real terms, was that it was possible for me to work my way through college.



Tara Westover on graduation day at Brigham Young University.

I could make enough to cover tuition by bagging groceries for \$5.35 an hour during the summers. Back then, the nearly \$3,000 I needed for two semesters seemed staggering, and it necessitated me saying the words "Paper or plastic?" an unthinkable number of times. But it was possible. Without family money, without cultural advantages. It was a thing that could be done, if only just, if you really wanted it.

For kids today from poorer backgrounds, the path I took through education no longer exists. The numbers are not imaginable — not if your parents are truckers or farmers or cleaners or cabdrivers, maybe the hardest-working people in our country. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in the last three decades, tuition at four-year colleges has more than doubled, even after you adjust for inflation. A 2019 [report](#) by the Institute for Higher Education Policy tells us that at some state flagship schools (not fancy private schools, just regular four-year public universities), low-income students are asked to cover some \$80,000 beyond what they can afford. Even at B.Y.U., one of the most affordable four-year colleges in the country, tuition has nearly doubled since I graduated.

A Pell Grant was my first taste of financial security. Now even a full grant would be wholly inadequate, because of the rising costs of tuition and housing. When the program was established 50 years ago, the largest grant [covered](#) 79 percent of the costs to attend a four-year public college. Today it covers just 29 percent. It's not enough. What that grant offered me — security, peace of mind, a space in which to consider, for the first time, what sort of life I wanted — it no longer offers.

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To poor kids today, we present a no-win scenario. We shout shrilly that they must get a college degree, because without one they can't hope to compete in the globalized economy, but even as we say it, we doubt our own advice. We know that we are asking them to bury themselves in debt at a moment when it is very uncertain what kind of job they will be able to get or how long it will take them to repay the loans. We know it, and they know it. For them, the American dream has become a taunt. Perhaps my story is proof not of the persistence of the American dream but of its precarity, even its absence.

The solutions are multitude. We could restore funding to public universities and insist that they operate as public utilities, rather than as strictly profit-driven businesses. We could increase Pell grants and reform student debt. If we were more ambitious, we could tackle the supreme inequality that, in recent decades, has disfigured every fact and facet of social and political life.

For my part, I will begin by telling my own story differently — by discarding that fashionable old fable that reduces any tale of success to one of grit and diligence. I will admit that, to be frank, it was an easier time, and things were better. Our institutions were better. Perhaps that is what the story is about, inasmuch as it is about anything. There is the one thing I learned when I cashed that check: that people cannot always be resilient, but a country can.

Tara Westover is the author of the memoir "Educated."

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