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Interviewer: Dr. Catharine Munn
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Dr. Catharine Munn (00:01):

Welcome to the BOUNCE podcast series, hosted by me, Dr. Catharine Munn. This series is inspired by the original BOUNCE Project at University of Victoria, created by Rebecca Gagan. In our series, McMaster faculty and alumni share stories, which could easily have remained untold or secret. These are stories of loss, grief, rejection, relationship difficulties, mental health problems, and more, based on experiences our guests have had when they were students. This podcast series has been developed by our BOUNCE team, made up of students, staff and faculty at McMaster with a grant from the McMaster Okanagan Special Project Fund.

The BOUNCE team are inspired and informed by our own experiences as students and conversations we have had with students. And we are passionate about promoting more open discussion of failure and struggle at McMaster. We envision that BOUNCE at McMaster can help us to build resilience individually and collectively, by increasing mutual standing and creating connections through the sharing of stories. Learn more about the project, our team, and our guests by checking out our website.

All right, so good morning and welcome to BOUNCE. Today, we're reporting a conversation, having a conversation with Dr. Mat Savelli, from the faculty of social sciences, where he is a professor and instructor there. And looking so much forward to having this chat with you, Mat. And hopefully you can introduce us a little bit to yourself and look forward to having a conversation about some of your experiences as a student to open that door to other conversations for other students and faculty. Thanks for joining us.

Dr. Mat Savelli (01:55):

Yeah, very happy to be here. Thanks for asking me to come in and speak. By way of introduction, I get guess one thing I would say is I was once literally in the shoes of a lot of the McMaster students who might be watching or listening to this. I was a McMaster student as an undergraduate. I did history and a minor in French before moving on and becoming ultimately a historian of psychiatry. So of course I'm really interested in mental health and it's one of the reasons I wanted to talk about this. And by dumb luck, I ended up back at McMaster and have been here as a faculty member for five or six years.

Dr. Catharine Munn (02:43):

Great. And if comfortable, Mat, can you tell us what area you work in just because I think it is kind of relevant to our conversation?

Dr. Mat Savelli (02:53):

Sure. So I'm in the Department of Health, Aging and Society as well as being cross appointed to arts and science. And the teaching that I do is really focused on interdisciplinary social study of mental health. So although I'm trained primarily as a historian, my teaching really looks at mental health and illness. But rather than doing it from a strictly biomedical perspective, it draws on anthropology and sociology and nursing theory, and of course, biomedicine, to try to approach it from a slightly different angle than people might get if they were, I don't know, reading a pamphlet in their physician's office.

Dr. Catharine Munn (03:39):

Yeah. Beautiful. So I think that will make it so interesting to hear your perspectives from a personal point of view, just also given all your expertise and knowledge from a professional point of view. So thanks for that info. So maybe we can sort of dive into talking about, as we're here, to talk a little bit about faculty and alumni experiences when they were students, that may have been challenging, times that they may have struggled and really trying to start those conversations to open up those conversations and doors to make those lines of communication perhaps more open and accessible to people or at least for people to think about, well, other people may have also struggled on their journeys through being a student in university and to think about that, talk about that, reflect on that. And hopefully we can just get to a place where it's a little more of a comfortable, honest, open conversation about these issues on university campuses.

So maybe you can share a little bit about your experiences as a student that you're comfortable to share. And sounds like you were a student at Mac at one point and I think you've been... So wherever you're comfortable to start. But if you want to share a few thoughts about some of your situations and challenges.

Dr. Mat Savelli (05:15):

Sure. I was really excited to go to McMaster as an undergrad student. I'm someone who had really loved school in the first place. Really, nothing probably made me as happy as studying. I got to McMaster full of really high hopes and I decided to really make studying and the focus... So I'd make my classes rather focus of my life. And that was really, really great for a long time. One thing it was not so great for perhaps was that sometimes I fixated too much on that and not enough on some other parts of my life. And that was kind of a strange time in my life, actually my time at Mac and especially my last year, which I imagine I'll talk about in a bit more detail. So I was doing really well in terms of grades and all those metrics that don't really matter that much, but I was not necessarily doing so well sometimes on the personal side.

It was great for the first two years. No problem. I was able to kind of maintain really strong focus on my studies. But in summer in my third year, it began to be evident to me that I had not been paying attention enough to other parts of my life. Some things that probably I should have been given more consideration to, I hadn't. Other things, although I couldn't have changed them, I was not even thinking about what perhaps I should have.

Dr. Catharine Munn (07:19):

Sorry to interrupt, but just to ask, what led to that realization, do you think, in third year, that you'd been exploring parts of your life and really focused on the academics, but perhaps the other parts, you weren't attending to as you feel now you might have?

Dr. Mat Savelli (07:40):

So there's a couple things. So my parents split up right when I was starting university. It was quite a bad one. Extraordinarily acrimonious, I don't mind saying that. And I was, for a while, doing a juggling act between my two parents. I don't think I was really considering them as human beings, but rather just expecting them to continue just being parents. And so one of the things that happened was in third year, I got into a big fight with my mom about something and we stopped talking. We stopped talking for more than a year. And it was complicated because two of my siblings, I have five siblings, also stopped talking to her around that time.

When I look back at it, I could say, oh, maybe I wasn't giving enough time to thinking about this stuff or engaging with it. In the moment, it didn't feel like that at all. I just thought my mom's a horrible person. I don't want to talk to her anymore.

Dr. Catharine Munn (08:50):

Yes.

Dr. Mat Savelli (08:51)

Yeah. So that was part of it. But the other thing is, approaching the end of third year, it was also dawning on me that this thing that I was loving, or at least I thought I was entirely loving, going to school, studying, it was coming to an end, at least in the way that it was set up. I knew I had wanted try to go to grad school. I don't have any skills. I have nothing beyond school. So for me, grad school is logical.

Dr. Catharine Munn (09:35):

That was your forte skills.

Dr. Mat Savelli (09:39):

Yeah. So I knew I wanted to go to grad school, but it was dawning on me that, that was going to mean a big move. I decided I wasn't going to go to Mac. I wanted to study Eastern Europe in an interdisciplinary way and Mac didn't have a program like that. So I knew I was going away. And it was just that daunting realization, like, wow, in 18 months or in 12 months, my life is going to look totally different. I don't know what country I'll be in, I don't know what continent I'll be on. And then I start to think about, okay, my family's falling apart, I'm not going to see any of my friends anymore. Because most of my friends, I'm from Hamilton, so I just had continued my high school friends. And just that realization that I was going to have to do something totally foreign to me in the near future. I think that was the turning point as well.

Dr. Catharine Munn (10:52):

Yes. And it sounds like having to do that at the same time as family was falling a part a little bit. And so moving away at the same time as there was all that instability there.

Dr. Mat Savelli (11:06):

Yeah. Oh and sorry, one other factor. I had been in a pretty long term relationship, or at least long term for my age. I had been dating the same girl for three years, by that point, through all of my undergrad and even tail end of high school. And the realization that maybe I wasn't happy in that, but I was so convinced that it was going to work out, that I also was not realizing that that was not a relationship that I wanted to continue forever. I started to come up with all sorts of strange ideas on what I could do to try to find fulfillment in the context of relationship rather than realizing, oh, maybe I've outgrown this or this is not ideal for me.

Dr. Catharine Munn (12:04):

Yeah. You're of painting a picture of a whole bunch of parts of your life you were either starting to question or were starting to shift in terms of your academics, your family, your relationship. So unsteady ground on a whole bunch of fronts. How did that affect you? What did happen for you or to you?

Dr. Mat Savelli (12:30):

I freaked out. I had what I would call, non ironically, an existential breakdown. I still use those words. I think my friends would laugh at that, but because they said, "You would've used those words 15 years ago." But that's exactly it. I didn't know who counted as family or what my relationship to them would look like. I didn't know where I was going because I knew at that time, okay, I fancied this idea that I might become a professor, but I also knew that that was an extraordinarily difficult thing to do and not a straightforward path. And I was open to other ideas, like, maybe I'll try to work for the UN or something. I didn't know if I could be happy in a relationship, let alone that particular relationship. I started to think maybe I'm not made for this. Especially in fourth year when I had of course, a lot of pressure and I was TAing two courses, I freaked out and I think kind of withdrew from a lot of people, probably got increasingly impatient with people.

Dr. Catharine Munn (14:10):

You pushed people away at the time when you maybe needed them most. You pushed them away.

Dr. Mat Savelli (14:17):

Absolutely. Absolutely. And rather than doing this, what I think may have been sensible, which is slowing down, I was just so determined to get it all done at once, finish all the school stuff at once, get all the TA experience I could at once, apply for every scholarship, do all of those things. And of course, it is important and good to work hard and to prioritize your studies. But when the world around you is collapsing, you may also need to take a step back and slow down a little bit.

Dr. Catharine Munn (14:58):

Yeah. It sounds like you just kept trying to power through and focus on the academics, continue on your path and find your path. And you were very ambitious from what you're describing. You were really trying to move forward as though perhaps these things weren't happening. But at the same time, describing it being kind of a crisis, an existential crisis, an existential breakdown, where you were maybe slowly realizing that, that path wasn't actually the right path for you or wasn't maybe the one you actually on.

Dr. Mat Savelli (15:32):

Yeah. It was really kind of a tunnel vision at times, ignoring all of the chaos that was around me. And although on some level, it, quote unquote, worked, as in I got into grad school and all that, I don't think it left me in really good shape and I could have been much better prepared. Sorry, go ahead.

Dr. Catharine Munn (16:02):

I was just going to ask, when did that realization hit or when were you forced to reconcile those things, that you were moving forward but that it was at a cost to you?

Dr. Mat Savelli (16:18):

It's a good question. I think some of this, I'm putting together as someone in my mid thirties, not someone, certainly not at the time, I think at the time or shortly thereafter, I realized, okay, the scope of change in parts of my life that I'm excited about is so great that I shouldn't and can't afford to have the same amount of change in other parts of my life. I was really lucky, I got a place to go and study overseas. That meant moving to the UK. Once that was apparent, I realized I needed to maybe try to reconcile with my mom, maybe try to fix some of the gaps I had opened up with friends.

Some of it was really hard, but I realized that I don't want to move to Britain and maybe leave Canada for the rest of my life and not be speaking with my mom or not have good relationships with some of my siblings. At the very, very end of fourth year, really after graduation May, June, July, that period before going after grad school in September, it started to hit me like, oh yeah, some of this has not been worth it. Some of the sacrifices were necessary and some of them would just make my life worse. I was able to fix some of it, but some of those things carried on for another year or two as well into studying for my PhD. So after a masters and all that kind of stuff before, I think, some things began to feel calm. That relationship instability in terms of who I was dating and stuff, that didn't calm down for two years or something.

Dr. Catharine Munn (18:30):

What would you say were some of the things that actually helped you finally start to look at those things, examine those aspects of your life that you'd been pushing aside or not prioritizing? It sounds like it had to be pushed to a crisis in a way to actually start thinking about those things. What was helpful as you started to do that? What helped you?

Dr. Mat Savelli (18:59):

A couple things. One was time.

Dr. Catharine Munn:

Absolutely (19:02).

Dr. Mat Savelli (19:02):

I think sometimes people have a tendency to get that suffering isn't intrinsic to our nature as human beings. This is something we've been doing for thousands upon thousands upon thousands of years. So I needed some time to pass. I needed to process some things. I think I needed to get some distance, I needed to reflect a little bit and learn from what was going on. So that was the first thing.

I think the second thing that was really helpful was once I got to grad school, I didn't have it in me anymore to be the person who was studying more than anyone else and who was withdrawing from people and just diving into the books full-time. I started making friends again and doing social things. I started playing for the soccer team out there. So I was actually getting a lot of exercise. I was going to say getting some sun, it was in the UK, you don't get sun in the UK. But you can get exercise. And it's not that I stopped taking my studies seriously because I didn't. I was a really dedicated student, even in grad school. But I stopped thinking about things like grades, which were not important, and I started really focusing just on learning, like, okay, why has this professor assigned this? What can I learn from the 10 books I'm going to read to answer this essay or whatever it was.

So those things were really important. I was also lucky enough, I guess, to have a relationship with the psychotherapist from when I was a kid. I saw a psychotherapist when I was 10 for a paralyzing fear of thunderstorms. And then again, the same person around 15, 16 in part because my home life was pretty chaotic. But all I knew was that something was wrong or something was off in how I felt. And then eight years later, the same person was there when I wanted to go see her. And it wasn't a lot. I think I had three or four conversations with her, but it was enough to help make sense of some things.

Dr. Catharine Munn (21:49):

Yeah. You're talking about, I think, a few really important things. One being time, one being other people, finding people, finding people and talking to people, both friends, but also then some professionals, but in limited ways, kind of episodic, limited ways. But really putting yourself back out into the world and connecting with people as a way of getting through difficult times.

Dr. Mat Savelli (22:19):

Yeah. And really, all of those things, just some maturity. It's hard to fault people ever for being immature because of course, we were all babies who got here yesterday and just figuring out how to do life now. But really realizing that some of the stuff that I was emphasizing around grades was just like not meaningful, not important and ultimately, not even helpful for me. Just that realization that actually what matters here is my learning. It's not the number that's attached to whatever assignment I've submitted. That was really, really, really important, I think.

Dr. Catharine Munn (23:06):

It might be hard though, for some people to believe that, right? Because here you are now working in a university and you got through a master's and a PhD and obviously grades had to play a part in that.

Dr. Mat Savelli (23:14):

Yeah.

Dr. Catharine Munn (23:15):

I guess the question, not to challenge you in that way, but the question is just to kind of say, just to kind of wonder how can one not focus on grades and then be this successful, in quotes, however we want to define success? What are your thoughts around that?

Dr. Mat Savelli (23:42):

That's a great question. And honestly, so I can say this now as an instructor, as someone who teaches for a living, there's a difference between learning for learning's sake and then rather not learning. Learning for learning sake or doing stuff for the grade. And it is sort of about the mindset that I went into it, because what I found was actually my grades were at their best when I was just engaged with the material and not so attached to the outcome. When I was really invested and interested in learning, the grades materialized. And the truth is that you're not going to get amazing grades on everything, but I stopped the fixation on what do I need to do X grade, because that I found that that often didn't work.

And here's the other thing, this is a big one. There was a realization that actually, if I'm just focused on the learning and I'm still not getting the grades, then this is not my strength. So as much as I would've loved to progress even further with my French grammar, I found my level. I hit a point where after that, I was not that strong in the level of granular detail into French grammar that I needed to be, to continue getting As and A pluses. Suddenly I was like a B level student. And then just being at peace with that and saying, "Wow, that's great because now I can speak enough French to go and travel and not worry about it." But I think just that acceptance.

Dr. Catharine Munn (25:49):

That acceptance of there are some things that I'm good at and there are some things that I'm not so good at, but that's okay, that helps me figure out where I want to go and actually be comfortable there.

Dr. Mat Savelli (26:02):

Yeah. Because for a long time I thought, "Oh, maybe I'll be a friendship historian." And I wouldn't have been super well suited to it or it would've required a totally different life path. And that would not have been my strength the same way. So yeah, I think that's really important. The other thing is it's like the minute you graduate, you realize what a weird micro ecosystem the university is and how actually out in the real world, there are loads of people living happy and fulfilled lives who never even went to university or who went and then they're doing something that's totally unrelated to what they studied.

And I'll be honest with you. So I did my master's and PhD at Oxford, and there are a lot of people there who are really bright, hardworking people. My God, there were a lot of miserable ones too. And the miserable ones were those people who I think couldn't make that transition, who couldn't give up sometimes, the number attached to an assignment, that grade number. It's not the thing that's going to bring anyone happiness long term, that's for sure. I really would say to people, try, put the effort in, but don't fixate on the grades. If the grades come naturally, wonderful. If they don't come naturally, do something else.

Dr. Catharine Munn (27:41):

There's many paths you can take, there's not one. And the one you pick, at whatever point you pick, it may turn out also not to be the one, I guess.

Dr. Mat Savelli (27:53):

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

Dr. Catharine Munn (27:57):

I want to just revisit something that you said that kind of struck me early on is that you talked about, you said something about who counted as family. I wonder if you can talk about that a little bit, what you mean by that when you were wrestling with who counts as family?

Dr. Mat Savelli (28:19):

Yeah. I think, like a lot of people do, I struggled to deal with that relationship collapsed with my mom, I'm going to say for other reasons. I had complications in my relationship with my dad. And I actually had to recognize, okay, these can be people that I care about. They don't need to be people that I talk to every day or every week. If actually I'm getting more support, if I feel more comfortable with my friends, that's great. If it's just my siblings and that's sort of what's most important. So it wasn't like I redefined family and said, "Okay, mom and dad, you're out," but more just like I think I started to focus on people who could be supportive and be people who I felt good around and people that I wanted to spend my time with.

And then just changed the nature of my relationships with other people so that I wasn't worried about having to make them the center of things or having to deal with them too much. I was, in a way, lucky that my parents were always super hands off. Neither of my parents finished high school. They didn't know anything about university. So I never had that pressure that I know a lot of people feel. But nonetheless, I had to accept like, okay, actually at the end of the day, these are just two human beings and they're going to screw things up and get stuff wrong sometimes. And I don't need to punish them for that, I don't need to hate them for that. I need to accept that that's what humans do. But I'm an adult now. And id I don't call my mom every week, I'm just not going to. I'll tell her.

And it doesn't have to be a binary buy black and white, either we're talking or we have no relationship at all. You can redefine those relationships.

Dr. Catharine Munn (30:51):

Yeah. So in a way you sort of expanded your definition of family in a way, or reconfigured who was going to be in your family and broadened it, and I guess try to understand where other people fit in, both in your family and outside your family, to do your life.

Dr. Mat Savelli (31:14):

Yeah, absolutely. I think giving up a focus on those of us with shared genetics, instead focusing a little bit more on people who I felt connected to and supported by. So in my case it was friends.

Dr. Catharine Munn (31:34):

Yes. So when you think back to, I guess some of the more difficult times might as you described them, might have been those third and fourth years in your undergrad when all these things were going on. When you think back to that time, what would you almost like to say to yourself as your third and fourth year self or to someone maybe that's going through something that has some similarities to what you went through? What would've been good to hear? What would've helped you through a little bit, or maybe could've?

Dr. Mat Savelli (32:13):

Couple things, I think. So one, for me, there was a temptation at times to think that there was

something, quote, unquote, wrong with me. So I started wondering, oh, might I have this mental disorder or this diagnosis, whatever. But actually stepping outside of it, I was just in a really chaotic place. I had good reasons to feel disruptive. I had good reasons to feel uneasy. So not worrying, not so much making about me and what I might have, quote, unquote, but starting to think a little bit about the context of my life and say, okay. I suppose this would be the second thing, focusing or thinking about that context a little bit. So one of the things I said is I got quite tunnel visiony and in the process, didn't pay attention to some things that were going on with me or going on in my life that I could have that may have made that a lot easier.

And then slowing down, would've been really, really beneficial, I think. What I crammed into 12 months should have been spread out over 24 months in terms of changing family stuff, the changing romantic relationships, all of the schooling and the TAing and the applications. I don't know what I was in a rush for. There was nothing on the other side that was so desperate that I had to get to it right away. But for me, I just thought, well, I don't want to stretch it out, my friends are going to graduate. And of course, half of them didn't. Half of them needed five or six years anyway.

This would be a really important one for me, to slow down and to really step back and think what am I doing and why am I doing it, and is this something that I really want? In my case, I knew I wanted the schooling piece because I had no other real goal. But that applies to other things like relationships. Rather than just trying to make something work at all costs, I probably needed to step back and just say, "Oh, okay. Yeah, if you're not happy in this there are good reasons. You don't have to be here, do something else."

Dr. Catharine Munn (34:56):

Yeah. I guess, broadening your vision, like moving outside the tunnel vision and broadening your field of view to look at and not just focusing on what was wrong with you and what you might be able to fixate on with being wrong with you, but looking at the world around you and how it was contributing to how you were feeling, but I guess could also help you feel better.

Dr. Mat Savelli (35:25):

Yeah. That's the thing, it's not only that I wasn't paying attention to the problems around me. I wasn't seeing some of, solutions is too strong a word, but I wasn't seeing some of the supports, I wasn't seeing some of the resources, I wasn't seeing some of the other pathways. It's like I was determined to drive down this road where the road was blowing up and there were car accidents everywhere and so on. It's like I didn't even see that there was a cutoff I could have taken.

Dr. Catharine Munn (35:56):

That's a great visual metaphor to think about. Yeah, you were just, I'm going to get there no matter what. And so you had to slow down, open up your field of view and look around and see what was not going well, but also then what could go well, what were the possibilities out there for you.

Dr. Mat Savelli (36:12):

Exactly.

Dr. Catharine Munn (36:16):

It's been so interesting to dig into your time as an undergrad, and I think some of your other times.

And I think I'm sure we could talk for a lot longer about some other experiences you've had as a student, but I do want to really thank you for speaking to me today and for sharing some of these stories that I think can really help other people find their way too. So thank you so much for talking today.

Dr. Mat Savelli (36:46):

Yeah. Cheers Catharine. Thanks for having me on.

Dr. Catharine Munn (36:48):

Thank you for listening to this BOUNCE podcast. We hope that you have been taken on a bit of a journey by listening to the podcast and hearing the story and perspectives shared. We would love to hear more of your reactions to and reflections on our story if you wish to share them with us at bounce@mcmaster.ca. You can also check out our website, which is linked on the podcast description and our social media on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Thank you so much.