

Were you lonely when you were a freshman?

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [November 25, 2015](#) issue



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A boy asks me, Were you lonely when you were a freshman? and suddenly there I am again in the bottom bunk of my small room in the old hall, with my roommate snoring above me, the roommate I hardly saw and hardly knew, and when we did talk we could hardly find any common ideas where we could stand together for a moment; thank God for basketball, a language we both did speak, or I might have spent an entire year saying no more than hey and see you later to that boy, a boy who like so many boys was so shy that he was loud and florid and extravagant and dramatic, to prove that he was anything but shy; that is the way of boys, and probably always has been; and I have known several men who never were able to stop being that boy, it grieves me to say.

Was I lonely when I was a freshman? Yes, for a while, for a time, most of the time, early on; and then I was lucky to find boys whose humor fit my humor, whose smiles were genuine, who didn't mind when I slouched into their rooms to try to fit into my new life somehow; and then somehow one or two began to walk to class with me, and two or three seemed to eat at about the same time that I seemed to eat, so we began to claim a corner table, and so I had a target, in the dining hall, to aim at across the sea of seething laughing burbling students who already fit in, somehow, in ways that I did not yet understand.

And there was always basketball, thank God for basketball, because you could play a game and say good game and shake hands and the next time you saw that guy he

would say hey and maybe pick you for his team and then you would meet other guys with whom to say hey and good game and let's play tomorrow at four.

And I got a job washing dishes, which meant more boys and girls to say hey to, and they would nod and smile and say things like hey can you cover for me tomorrow and hey we are having a party after the game; and then here and there the same thing happened after classes, boys and girls saying hey and listen we are studying together tomorrow you in?

And then finally there was a night when my roommate was snoring above me and I lay awake and realized that lonely was gone, that it had ebbed away when I wasn't looking, that it had been crowded out by other people—boys and girls, I began to sense dimly, who had been, every one of them, just as afraid of being lonely as I was, in those first weeks of school. And for the first time in my whole life, I think, I understood that there were no cool kids, no confident kids, no cocky and arrogant buffoons; there were only kids afraid of being lonely, performing and capering in all sorts of ways in order to pretend that they were not; and I began to sense that whatever it is we mean when we use the word *maturity* probably means the moment, if it ever comes, when you finally tire of capering and performing, and stop doing so.

Was I lonely when I was a freshman? Dear yes, heavens yes, inarguably yes; but I do not think that I have ever truly been lonely since, because I finally understood that everyone else was afraid of being lonely, too; and once you understand that, you can try to speak all the languages that people are, behind their masks and disguises and performances. The work of a lifetime, certainly; and maybe, if there is a merciful providence that is entertained by the creative strivings of human beings, more than one, maybe far more than one, maybe only one eternal one, spoken in chapters, as you would tell one story per night to a sleepy child.