“Effortless Perfection”  
by Isabel W. Ruane ’14

This past winter, a class of ’73 graduate asked me whether students still spend hours lingering over meals. He recalled his Harvard as heady and carefree, a place for reading great books and whiling away days in conversation. He had been saddened by an article in this magazine that chronicled the over-programmed lives of Harvard undergraduates today; among other alarums, it had mourned the death of the two-hour lunch.

I looked up the piece (“Nonstop,” March-April 2010, page 34) and likewise found it upsetting. It painted Harvard undergraduates as so over-scheduled, they barely shower or sleep, let alone linger over lunch. But I knew it was not entirely accurate. At the very least, the article did not accurately reflect my Harvard experience. One of the greatest delights of my two years here has been dawdling in dining halls, listening, talking, and laughing with friends.

I now realize the article bothered me in the same way I’m bothered by people who talk too much. I see in their annoying behavior a shade of something I fear I also do. Likewise, reading about Harvard’s “superstars” who “do it all,” reminded me of a role I’d once tried to fill, now consciously refused, feared falling back into, of a role I’d once tried to fill, now condemned. Everyone believed I was happy-go-lucky (except maybe my parents, lone witnesses of biweekly meltdowns), and I was largely happy. But the harder I tried to be perfect, the more my perfectionism became torture.

Of course, in a sense it worked out. Aesthetization of effortless perfection got me into Harvard.

Harvard values “effortless perfection.” To be admitted, high-school students are supposed be smart and play sports, participate in clubs, lead groups, volunteer, and seem socially competent, too. All the evidence says one cannot be a high-school-cafeteria lingerer and be accepted by Harvard.

And, yet, somewhere I picked up the idea that lingering in the dining hall—and all that represents—was what I was supposed to do at Harvard. A nebulous idea floats around in the “liberal-arts education,” the “residential House,” and the “communal dining hall” that Harvard wants its undergraduates to explore, take risks, and learn from relationships with one another.

But there is a disconnect between the students Harvard admits and this life the College suggests we should lead. And there is a greater contradiction between the College’s implicit endorsement of exploration and its explicit honoring of “success.” Harvard honors its Phi Beta Kappas, its fellowship recipients, its grad-school admits, even its ranks of banking and consulting hires. And of course it should: these are wonderful achievements. But you cannot spend all your time exploring and lingering if you want to be thus recognized. You cannot slip.

And I guess I’m worried about those people who don’t let themselves slip. Because “slipping” a little was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

My struggle for the perfect balance of perfect happiness and perfect success worked in the controlled arena of getting into college. But I must have sensed the holes in this attitude by the fall of last year. I know because, once arrived in the Yard, I began making decisions that would have shocked my high-school self. I stayed out late and skipped assignments; I pursued new friendships rather than new subjects, took long walks instead of logging long library hours.

Eventually I decided to embrace this impulse to relax, reassess my priorities, and spend time getting to know people instead of burning the midnight oil.
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fectionism. If I hadn’t done so, I could not have been a good friend to my friend at such a critical time. I would not have had the perspective to help. And I would not have been able to put school work on hold to do so.

Last winter, I had wondered how I could ever reconcile my guilt at having relaxed my work ethic with my certainty that doing so had allowed me to grow in other ways. I had worried about where my duty lay: to Harvard, for offering me an education and paying a great share of its cost; to my parents, for raising me, guiding me, and making sacrifices for me; or to myself, maybe more in need of reflection and friendship than a spotless transcript. Now I realize I was worrying about the wrong “duty.” My duty to the world isn’t to be perfect. It is to take care of myself as best I can so I can give back to the world the love and care it has given to me. If slacking off was what I needed to make myself happy and available to help others, then this decision reflected no disrespect for my parents, for Harvard, or for my own work ethic.

My friend is doing much better now. She’s back on track to finding her equilibrium. And she’s still someone with whom I can while away hours in dining halls talking about life. I wouldn’t cut back on that time or our friendship for the world.

And I’ve been thinking more about my other friends and classmates. I’m guessing that many of them, along with sharing my history of high-school perfectionism, have experienced similar crises of duty and unclear expectation. This uncertainty comes from our upbringings, from our personalities, and from the mixed messages about exploration and achievement that Harvard sends us. There are no easy answers. I just know that I found an answer for me. I suppose we all must find our answers ourselves.

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