As I look back on the path that’s taken me from adolescence to middle age, my overwhelming sense is that the processes of maturation and personal growth have largely been gradual, indeed almost imperceptible. Nothing seems to change from one day to the next, and only when I pause to look back over the decades do I see just how different the “me” of today is from his 18-year-old counterpart.

Only once in my life have I experienced what I’d regard as a true moment of epiphany. It happened the summer after my freshman year in college. July 23, 1987, to be precise. And it was prompted by an otherwise long-forgotten article in the sports section of the Minneapolis Star Tribune.

I had gone off to Harvard from a tiny town in rural Minnesota and its tiny public high school. My mom was a secretary and my dad was, mostly, someone who repaired farm equipment. Our house was not filled with books, and our dinner conversations were not sophisticated explorations of the issues of the day. I associate no value judgments with those descriptions, other than that none of it prepared me for what I encountered in Cambridge.

So there was culture shock. I had never lived in a city. More than that, when it came to socioeconomic status I lagged well behind my new peers on both the socio and economic components. No doubt I wandered through the Yard throwing off class markers like crazy, while at the same time being largely unable to recognize the existence of, much less interpret, the ones confronting me. Things were different, that I knew. What took me a long time to figure out was how and why they were different.

And then there were the academics. I had never dealt with material of that volume or complexity. I had never struggled to make sense of things. It was a year...
of reading Kant and laboring to understand a single paragraph, then having no real ability to tie the ideas from multiple paragraphs together. Of having to write papers that I had no idea how to approach. Of not appreciating what it meant to work at something, because I had never had to do it before. Meanwhile it seemed like everyone else knew what was going on, or at a minimum had learned things in high school that I hadn’t even dreamed of.

I vividly recall walking through Harvard Yard during my first semester and thinking to myself, “Well, even if I fail out it will still be pretty cool to say I went here for a little while.”

I was intimidated in the full “made timid” sense of the word. I held back. I wasn’t sure my thoughts were worthy of class discussion, and I certainly wasn’t about to offer up anything that seemed to me like it might be a novel take. I spoke when spoken to, and as little as possible. A common side effect of trying not to look stupid is that you end up not looking smart, either, and that is exactly how I pulled it off.

I didn’t fail out, or even come close, really, but that first year’s transcript is not attractive. The word “disaster” isn’t entirely inapt. You wouldn’t exactly call the nonacademic side of the year a rousing success either. I made a handful of good friends, but fewer than I would were I to do it again. I talked myself out of doing things the 51-year-old version of myself very badly wishes he had done.

And so there I sat in a parking lot in suburban Minneapolis, in a car I had borrowed from my grandmother, the wisdom of the past year’s timidity seemingly confirmed by the results it had brought. I was there waiting for my girlfriend and her family to meet me for some now-forgotten activity. The parking lot was nearly empty and drenched in sun. I bought a newspaper from a box outside a fast-food restaurant.

Whether it was on the front of the sports section or buried inside, I can no longer tell you. But what I vividly recall is an article about a kid named Willie Banks. Banks was a pitcher, and had been the Minnesota Twins’ top pick in the most recent draft. He had absolutely dominated at the high-school level, and to this day he remains the highest-drafted player out of New Jersey.

So far, however, his professional career had not lived up to expectation. He had been, as the article put it, “knocked and swatted around like some middle-aged man at a fantasy camp.”

Why? Well, there was some culture shock. He had gone from Jersey City to a small town in the South. The stadiums, while still stretches, sure, and while I’ve managed to accumulate a handful of plaques over the years, none of mine will be for the Hall of Fame. But that’s not how it happened. He managed to play nine years in the big leagues, which is no small feat, but he never approached greatness. For my part, well, I can’t complain. I found my way to a place in the world that was unimaginable to the 12-year-old version of me.

Speaking in front of an audience including some big names? Might as well let it rip. It could get hit, sure. But then again it might not, and there’s only one way to find out.

All of this would make for a better story if Willie Banks had figured everything out and gone on to have a Hall of Fame career, and if I were writing this from my faculty office at Harvard. But that’s not how it happened. He managed to play nine years in the big leagues, which is no small feat, but he never approached greatness. For my part, well, I can’t complain. I found my way to a place in the world that was unimaginable to the 12-year-old version of me.

Perhaps improbably, it worked. That very next semester every single one of my grades was an A. And while I can’t tell you that I performed at that level for the entire remainder of my time in Cambridge, things in the classroom were never again like that first year.

Of course, my process of becoming wasn’t over. I had to figure out how to navigate law school, then the law firm world, and then the world of legal academia. Each has involved moments of uncertainty, and times where I’ve caught myself falling back on the curveball. Three-plus decades on I still remind myself, when I’m about to do something that seems big and intimidating, to throw the fastball.

**“I wasn’t sure my thoughts were worthy of class discussion, and I certainly wasn’t about to offer up anything that seemed like a novel take.”**

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