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Here's some advice, don't take it

I'm sure at some point you've all already heard someone tell you this. "Step out of your comfort zone, try something new." College seems like the perfect place to do so, right? WRONG!

No doubt, there are amazing opportunities provided to us here, which we should all take advantage of, but joining a new society, trying out a new sport, taking up acting, or even summer school abroad is not really taking that step. Here at Harvard we live a very privileged existence, with countless fallbacks to prevent us from really failing or 'screwing up'—our professors, tutors housemasters, TFs, advisors and friends are all here for us and strive to push us forwards. In a sense, they are also what's holding us back. With all their combined advice, we have little left for us to figure out on our own. So are we really taking any risks? Are we really taking a big enough step outside our comfort zones?

The advice I am going give you now…is to stop taking that advice. Not forever. Just for a while, long enough to be able to experience and learn from the good and bad decisions you make purely on your own. Take that giant leap—make your own decisions, reap their benefits and suffer their consequences. There are many ways to learn about yourself and the world—

stuff you will never be able to learn in college or even for many, after you graduate and move on to the "real world." For me this happened, this learning came when I took a year off to live and travel on my own.

Since my decision to take the year off was very last minute, I couldn't find any 'worthwhile' internships or jobs. Naturally, I began to panic. My father presented me with another option: he told me to go live in a foreign country. I chose China, and decided to try and make it on my own in a country I had never been to.

When I got to China, I didn't speak a word of Chinese, knew no one in the country and knew little about Chinese culture. I didn't even bother doing any research before I left home—not because I was trying to be adventurous, but because I was lazy. The first lesson I learnt was to do more research. It definitely wasn't the greatest of ideas to assume I'd find a taxi driver who spoke English in a country where barely anyone speaks English. I'd clearly messed up and spent the next 4 hours trying to get from the airport to the hostel I was staying in. But this was a mistake I had made by myself, and only I was to blame for it—therefore I learnt the most from it.

I ended up spending my entire year in China making my own decisions, living my own life. During this time, I learnt some Mandarin, worked a number of odd jobs (one of which actually including getting paid to watch Disney

movies), and even got to travel around most of the country. There were good times and bad times, all of which were learning experiences. From sneaking onto the Great Wall at night to watch the sun rise and getting to act as the token foreign extra in a Chinese movie to nearly getting deported from the country because I was missing one of the many immigration documents and spending the night in a Chinese hospital after tearing a ligament in my knee because I a Pakistani tried to teach a bunch of Chinese guys how to Play American Football, all these experiences good and bad helped shape who I am today.

I have lived on my own and been able to fend for myself. I've realized that I can overcome most challenges and adversities, no matter how daunting they seem, even without a massive support system behind me. But most importantly I have learnt what it's like to be on your own, and for that now I really appreciate everyone around me; my family, friends and teachers. It is because I had the chance to go and live on my own, do what I wanted to, make my own mistakes with no one to tell me that I was messing up, that I can truly value the advice of others. And if you don't get a chance to do so as well, you may never be able to fully appreciate those you have around you—and your own powers.