

## Lost and Found

I came ten thousand miles from Malaysia to study here with you, and sometimes I have wondered whether that was such a good idea. I arrived here safely enough. But once I got here, I lost my way. My dear audience, the real Harvard experience is filled with obstacles that can make us lose our way. But do not despair! I am living proof that we can find our way again.

In my freshman spring, I did not know what I wanted. Like some of you, I enrolled in hard pre-med classes because I liked science. In a certain spring semester genetics class, I received a splendid D+. Then, when I enrolled in Molecular Cellular Biology 52 the next term, I failed the first midterm.

What I hated about this experience is that I got punished for exploring my interests. This went against everything I heard about how US education allows one to explore in their first year as compared to universities elsewhere that require you to pick a degree before you enroll. I loved biology in high school, but when I was in LifeScience 1B and in MCB 52, it was hell. Tom Torello repeatedly ignored my raised hand. I did not feel loved or welcome in that department. But these painful experiences were among the many clues that led me back onto the right path.

It was like I was in the wrong place, and these clues led me home. Another clue was being lotteried into Lowell, with Diana and Dorothy. These little breaks acted like voices in my head, pushing me in certain directions. I also lotteried into an advanced vertebrate evolution class. That class encouraged me to say bye-bye to MCB 52 and immediately switch my concentration to OEB. Trying to fulfill two gen-eds, I took religion classes that blew my mind, leading me to my secondary field in Religion.

These classes got me talking face to face with my classmates, instead of sitting in lecture being ignored. It was better than the classes I left behind.

Learning from each other teaches us to be friendly competitors, not competitive monsters.

Yes, this place is academically challenging but it can also teach you to find your way and be your own agent in this world.

I am not afraid to tell you that in facing these challenges, I have had my share of loneliness. Much academic work is the product of isolation and can lead to loneliness, which can be magnified if you come from a different cultural background. I tried antidotes to counter the loneliness, like yoga but I found loneliness less boring! I threw myself into work and isolated myself, trying to prove that I didn't need other people. How wrong I was. Truth is, we all need each other to rediscover our paths.

Put your books down and look around you- these beautiful faces...with so many stories. I just shared my experiences in 5 minutes, but I could go on for hours. In fact, the first draft of this speech was about one hour! In this dining hall there must be over 100 people—imagine the rich diversity of personal stories right here.

I am not the most brilliant Harvard student. And I am ok with that. If I wanted to JUST GET good grades instead of a Proper Wholesome education, I would not have come to Harvard; I would have gone to Yale.

My experiences here allowed me to explore and to grow. When I look back now at the D I got in LifeScience, and the MCB midterm, I don't see failure.

I see survival.

My grades tell me, that I had obstacles thrown at me, I had friends betray me, I had professors who made me feel less of an intellectual because I failed an hourly exam.

And yet, I am still here whether you like it or not.

I survived because I have friends who supported and loved me; I had wonderful professors who encouraged me and never gave up on me.

When I was a freshman, My expos preceptor, Courtney Lamberth, told me that the best essays have tensions and the writer is supposed to resolve those tensions. I realized later, that she was not only talking about essays; she was also talking about the real Harvard experience and the nature of life! We will hit obstacles that push us off our path, and we have to get back onto it.

My Dear Audience, I...would gladly travel any distance to learn that, with you.