

You Don't Earn Love

I pack each thing in a room on the fifth floor of Winthrop, carry my boxes over to a gate still locked to me, and bring them to the second floor of Lowell. I go to that room, to the golden light filling it, to its hollowness because it is a room without anyone but myself. I have a low-grade fever and a key in my hand. I open the door and its beauty overtakes me, windows facing the river and the arch leading into the common room, and I feel my weight give in. The loneliness in this room is overwhelming.

The fall of my junior year of college, this is where I had come, and I was so grateful.

This memory takes me back to an earlier fall, my senior year of high school. Thirteen years of Catholic school, and I had learned to believe in a God who spent His time on earth in the company of beggars and outcasts, healing the rejected, and revealing a love that recognized no social barriers. Not until senior retreat did I learn what this love actually meant, and it was a lesson I had to relearn the hard way at Harvard. It was not a profound or complex message, just the simple words: "You don't earn love. You accept love." It's a message at odds with what we're taught, at odds with what we teach each other. How do you accept love without first earning it?

In elementary school, I was the frizzy-haired, awkward kid who was always reading, always writing poetry. There were such things as popularity, cliques, and teasing. And then, there was high school. I went to a high school in the heart of Newark, New Jersey where many of my classmates came from some of the poorest communities in the city. And with these girls, suddenly, my frizzy hair was complimented, my shy bookishness praised. Without trying, without earning it, I gained the acceptance of my classmates. The one social sin you could commit was something J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield condemns: being "phony." I learned in high school that I did not have to be anyone other than myself to be accepted, a very uncommon

thing to learn in high school. Popularity and cliques became the stuff of myth, of elementary school drama.

Then I came to Harvard. At Harvard, exclusion, turning on people because they don't conform to social expectations, is not just the way of childhood playgrounds. It exists in college, too. Here at Harvard, we work to make people like us by who we're seen with, by the career paths that we pursue, by what we choose to defend and what we choose to stay silent about. We live in a culture of appearances. I initially tried to resist this through an elaborate game of pretend, refusing to admit to myself that many people I called friends expected me to earn their love. This pretending eventually brought me to that empty room on the second floor of Lowell, a transfer, without a roommate, a floater for the third time.

And yet I was grateful. I had reached the break, the edge, and there was no going back. Junior fall was not the first time that a roommate had left me feeling disillusioned and worthless. But it would be the last. I had been so afraid of facing the pain I experienced that I used a great deal of energy convincing myself I was not angry. The truth was, I was angry. I was hurt. I felt broken. It is hard to be told that there is not enough room for you in a blocking group. It is hard to feel like you share nothing with someone but the space in which you live, despite reaching out to that person over and over. It is hard to be told by a person you had already made sacrifices for that you need to give up your living space. It is hard to give all the best and worst of yourself to someone, only to have that person walk away. All of these things weighed down on me when I reached that room and for the first time, I began to accept how I felt and to accept the need to make a change.

That moment in the golden light in the empty room beneath the arch, that is when I decided it was time. It still took me a while to get there, a while to figure out what I actually wanted, to accept the love I had already been offered by those who did not expect me to earn their approval. Because I guess what I am trying to say tonight is that it's not true—this idea that

you should earn love. Yes, love can be earned and deserved, but you earn it by being the person you are meant to be. And if anyone expects you to be different in order to earn their love, then theirs is a love that is not worth having. After years of manipulating my own self, of playing victim to my circumstances, of hiding my anger and my true wants, I have learned that all I had to do was accept love. I have learned that the rejection I faced here and the acceptance I received in high school are two sides of the same illusion—the illusion, that we teach ourselves, that the opinions of others determine our value as an individual. It is not true. You have a value, all your own, separate from any compliment you have ever received or any aspersion that has ever been cast upon you. In the end, we have to turn to those who love and accept us, who challenge us to be who we are called to be, but who do not ask us to change for their approval.

Winter of my junior year was a time of painful, but beautiful awakening, a time of waiting for snow and waiting for change. The snow came and I, too, changed. I learned to respond to the love present in my life. An incredible spring followed when I finally found my imperfect, but happy place at Harvard, one that encouraged my growth without compromising my identity. It was a spring of dancing on tables in Eliot courtyard, singing Disney songs on the Red Line, getting glitter on my clothes in a completely non-Kesha kind of way, writing poetry into the morning and into the night, a spring of new beginnings and an old lesson, relearned. That there is a way to transcend the pettiness and the hypocrisy that so often clouds relationships. It is to understand that you don't have to earn love to be loved.