

**Katharine Chute**  
**Lowell Student Speaker Series**  
**Tuesday, February 1, 2011**  
*“A Sense of Place”*

Hello everyone. Thanks for coming.

Tonight I'd like to share with you some thoughts about what it means to belong in a place and to call that place home.

When I'm on campus, I spend a lot of my time with the women's ice hockey team, and it is my teammates who have challenged me to think about this idea.

Now, one of the important things about the hockey team is that we have quite the regional rivalry within the group.

Out of only twenty-two girls on the team, there are seven from Massachusetts and seven from Minnesota. I am one of the Minnesotans, and I have to say that we are all very proud of our regional identity.

But our Minnesotan spirit is matched by a good dose of Massachusetts state pride. All in good fun, Minnesotans and Massachusetts residents alike have insisted that their state is better than any other.

The Midwesterners and I have argued that no one honks at left turners in the land of the Minnesota Nice, and that in our state, it never rains in the dead of winter, or for more than two days at a time.

But then the Massachusetts folk have countered that Minnesota is too cold, or that there's nothing to do there, or even that our accents are funny. We have had many a debate about whether to say roooooom or room, bag or bayyyg, milk or melk, ferrrry or fairy. Or the most contentious, whether our padded equipment shorts go by the term hockey pants, or by the Minnesotan name breezers...I really don't know where that one came from.

These debates are never resolved, and after each one, I find myself asking, why do I so stubbornly defend my Minnesota ways? And why can't my Eastern teammates understand my state pride? And admittedly their sense of pride is just as strong.

So I have stopped expecting non-Minnesotans to immediately embrace the sprawling suburbs and warm summers in the Midwest. Instead, I have realized that the only explanation I can give for why I love Minnesota is that it's HOME. I am familiar with the place, and I feel complete when I return to it.

The funny thing is, I get the same feeling when I return to Harvard. You might agree with me when I say that I really have two homes: one here, and one where I grew up.

But Boston has not always been a home for me, and by asking myself how I have come to call Boston a home, I think I can begin to explain coherently to others why it is that I love Minnesota so much.

It all comes down to having a sense of place, feeling you belong in a geographical location of some size.

The first time I can say I felt “at home” in Cambridge was when I was walking to the T to fly home for the first time freshman year. I had been homesick just two weeks earlier, but suddenly I was sad to leave. As I lugged my suitcases past the rows of taxis, I turned and looked down Mass Ave and across to the yard and it occurred to me that I had walked those streets hundreds of times, that I could recreate the whole setting in my mind. By simply spending long enough in one place, and criss-crossing its square footage, I had developed familiarity with the area, and I could associate memories with empty spaces.

But at that moment, my sense of place was still in its infancy. My familiarity extended only throughout Harvard and a few isolated places in Cambridge. The next step in developing a sense of place was for me to expand my locus of familiarity by pushing its boundaries, by exploring beyond what I already knew.

For example, if I live in Lowell House, I have a wonderful community and a nice place to stay. But if I explore parts of Cambridge on foot, if I find its hidden corners, if I bike into Boston on both sides

of the river, wander around on the Common, do something adventurous over and over again, but always come back to Lowell, then I will feel more at home because I have had a chance to go away and then to come back and to appreciate being back.

So it is through this repeated process, of developing familiarity, establishing a sense of place, and then expanding its boundaries, that I have come to call Harvard, Cambridge, and Boston my home.

And I think this idea can be applied to any place that life takes us. And if some of you do *visit* Minnesota, I can't promise that you'll like it. But if you were to *live* there, even for a few months, and deliberately explore your surroundings, I think you too might develop a home in the Midwest. And even my teammates might understand why.