

## What I Learned From My Sister

I arrived at Harvard my freshman year excited to be away from home. I was so eager to leave my old surroundings that I, an unathletic, weather-sensitive bookworm, signed up for a week of backpacking with FOP 42 through the Green Mountains of New Hampshire. When school started, I jumped into a bustling routine, writing for the Science Review, volunteering for the Red Cross, and taking piano lessons on top of classes, struggling to make friends, and attempting to coexist with my roommates.

I got so preoccupied with myself that I forgot about my 14-year-old sister Tiffany. I had abandoned Tiff in California along with my mom and dad. I wonder how many of you left behind a younger sibling when coming to college. Or were left behind by an older sibling. Did you call your brother or sister? I called Tiff maybe once that fall. And perhaps sent her a cursory text every few weeks. But I hardly ever wondered how she was doing. Consumed by college, I had only one thing on my mind: myself.

As the leaves darkened and fell, my sister's mood did too. My parents told me one night that Tiff's beaming smile had morphed into a brooding stare. She bristled at my parents' attempts to dissect what was wrong. I was concerned, but I shoved those thoughts aside. I had a problem set due the next morning. When I flew home for Thanksgiving, I didn't notice anything wrong. Sitting around the dinner table, enjoying my mom's savory chicken soup, we all remarked how normal it felt for me to be home.

It took me most of freshman year to realize how not normal it was for my sister when I was gone. As I finally settled in at Harvard, and got less preoccupied, I found the space to reminisce about my special relationship with Tiff. I remembered elementary school, when we lazed on the carpet inventing adventures for our stuffed animals. I thought back to high school, when we gossiped about friends as I sped down the highway to get us to class just on time. The memories seemed so distant. She would ask me geometry questions; I would seek her advice on social situations. When I was a senior in high school, and she a freshman, Tiff was the one who counseled me when I finally decided to ask someone to a dance.

I missed those times when we told each other everything. I realized I no longer heard about her life and she no longer heard about mine. It had never occurred to me before how much we depended on each other.

This year, I decided to stay more connected. I've made sure to text Tiff every day to ask how she's doing. I call her once a week to check in. We always end our conversations with, "I love you too." I've found that one of the most comforting feelings is to know that my sister thinks about my existence just as I think about hers.

Two weeks into the fall semester, Tiff needed me. One of her favorite things is high school mock trial, and she was the opening attorney for a case resembling the JFK assassination. When I FaceTimed my parents one night, my sister refused to join. I texted her and got no response. I called her. Through angry tears, Tiff told me she wanted to quit mock trial. Her coaches had belittled her cross-examinations and threatened to demote her in front of her teammates. She had put in all she could and received only blows to her self-esteem. Tiff loved mock trial, but she hated it.

I tried to give some advice from 3000 miles away. But I don't think my words were that important. What was important was that I listened and empathized. I spent time with her. I was emotionally present, something I had neglected my freshman year. Tiff ended up continuing mock trial, and was even promoted to a larger role. She had just needed someone with whom to talk things through.

Many of us are used to being the ones in action, the ones achieving goals and overcoming challenges. During these past two years, I've learned that cheering from the sidelines can be equally challenging and fulfilling. Challenging because you care so much yet have so little control. Fulfilling because you accompany someone on their personal journey, commiserating with them and celebrating with them. I've discovered the joy of having my sister back in my life. I've realized that nothing I'm busy with is worth as much as our sibling relationship. I've learned how to be a more caring brother for my one and only sister Tiffany.