

“There’s no way in *hell* I’m eating that,” I say. My best friend Danny gleefully shoves a plate of gravy cheese fries in my direction. We’re sat Pleasant Ridge Chili, a local hangout specializing in – you guessed it – chili, a popular Cincinnati dish. At first, I’m appalled by this incoherent mound of brown and yellow; but, at his urging, I swallow a bite and lunge for more.

Fast forward. The stadium erupts as the Cincinnati Reds jog onto the field of Great American Ballpark, seated on the bank of the mighty Ohio River. Tonight, MLB’s oldest franchise will welcome our regional rivals, the St. Louis Cardinals. My younger brother Luciano is confident the Redlegs will emerge victorious. Me? I’m not so sure.

Fast forward again. I’m alone on my driveway, curled up in a lawn chair with a book. As the day draws to a close, the shadow of the house blankets me while the laughter of neighborhood children dances through the air. It’s another peaceful afternoon in my hometown of West Chester.

These are but a few of the scenes that capture the spirit of Ohio; indeed, they are scenes that embody the very soul of the American Midwest. It’s a region defined by competing loyalties – to friends and family, to your school and team, even to your country. It’s also a diverse region; depending on where you draw the boundaries, the Midwest can stretch from Detroit to Chicago to Cleveland and beyond, including every city, town and village in between. I believe there is an “honest eagerness” in the people there: a genuine, humble and curious disposition. Life isn’t simple, *per se*, but it *is* gentle, careful, deliberate and rich in meaning.

That’s the Midwest I know. But if you listen to conversations at Harvard, that’s not the picture you get. For example, the ever popular “flyover country” gives you no picture at all.

Other reflections are more...creative. One friend, having never seen the Midwest, imagined a series of cornfields...and more cornfields...and maybe a town, here and there. Another friend shared with me her belief that “rolling up your sleeves and moving things” – you know, physical labor – was a “Midwestern thing to do.” Yet another friend, in response to the very idea of raising a child in the region, went so far as to say, “F’ the Midwest.”

What do these stories, and countless similar experiences, say about the Harvard community? Nothing positive, to be sure. At best, they indicate a lack of knowledge about the Midwest. At worst, they demonstrate a callous disregard for the region, and a supreme arrogance that perceives certain lifestyles as inherently better or more valuable than others.

The millions of Americans who call the Midwest their “home” want the same things you do – safety, happiness, love. And like you, they spend every day building lives from which they can draw great meaning and pride.

Sure, you may prefer the gentility of the South, or the hustle of New England; still, ignorance is never an excuse for disdain or disrespect.

In his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson famously remarked, “Those who labor in the Earth are the chosen people of God...whose breasts he has made his peculiar

deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”

I am confident that virtue survives, even flourishes, in the lives of the hardworking, decent people of the Midwest. And we, the Harvard community, would do well to learn from it.

Thank you.