

Nick Jaroszewicz
"Understanding Others"

The comment was straightforward and biting. "I'm fascinated with religion, because I'm an atheist, and don't understand how anyone could believe in God."

Rarely in my time at Harvard have I been at a loss for words. Anyone who has been at a Lowell trivia night, or been in a section with me, knows that I rarely refuse a good-natured argument. Yet here, in this wonderful dining hall where I have connected with so many friends, was a person who finally made that motor of a mouth lose its words. After a few feeble attempts to tell my story, I gave up.

There was only one part of this statement that hurt me. "I don't understand how anyone could believe in BLANK." Even now, the comment still irks me. Here we are, among the most diverse people in the world, and yet, surrounded by that, was a gap in understanding. No matter what I was going to say, this person had admitted they was never going to understand my point of view. I went home upset, wondering if I truly belonged here.

When we first drove the 18 hour trip from Cincinnati to Boston back in the Fall of 2010, my parents seemed a little worried I would go through some kind of brainwashing process once at Harvard—maybe I'd become a Communist, spend too much of my time contemplating my own existence at Walden Pond, or something like that. Looking back, though, they may have actually been worried that if I had a different value, belief, or opinion from my high achieving classmates, I would feel alone.

So in this moment, what was Harvard, I asked myself. Was it filled with people like this person, who wouldn't give me the time of day because I had a different belief? Was this the reality of my four years here?

No, that's not the Harvard I know.

When this doubt creeps into my mind, I think back to my first experiences at Harvard. One of my first encounters in my home was with one of the kids next door—Matthew. He was barefoot and locked himself out of his room, and needed someone to find HUPD. I happily obliged, and a friendship was born. And though Matthew and I found similarities in height and maturity—something I hope he takes as a compliment—we found differences in habits, beliefs, and choices. He remains my best friend today because we took the time to understand each other—not just our similarities, but our differences.

Our travels through our next three years—and differences—were deep and wide—and not just from his room in Currier to my own in Lowell House. Our sophomore year, it took us to Chicago, Illinois, where I worked in a bank, and Matthew worked for a certain presidential campaign headquartered in Chicago. Both different parts of Harvard, yes, but parts of Harvard that exist, and can exist together.

We could have been the smartest, most intelligent and social people—and yet if we had thought, as the person in the Dining Hall did, that our opinions were the only understandable ones, we would've blocked out our friendship and our own growth through that. I learned on those late night Problem Set study groups, Monday nights in Millennium Park, and weekends with our friends that our lives

transform not when we silence opposition and badger each other with our own opinions, but when we respected each other as fellow students, thoughtful people, and friends.

While we no longer live next door to each other, those nights in South Hollis and Chicago still resonate each Saturday night at the Homeless Shelter, where we spend time doing the things we love, helping others, and cooking and eating homemade deserts. If I have a problem, I'm sure to talk it over with Matthew there, because no matter what his opinion may be, I respect it for how well thought out it always is.

So when someone says, "I don't understand how anyone could believe in something", I think back to my discussions with Matthew. I think about how *my* Harvard is not defined by failures of discussion and loneliness. Instead, it consists of an active talk about differences—not to put down what we don't believe in, but to learn from each other's perspectives. These simple yet transformative conversations, and the work towards understanding has been my favorite part of my time here. These discussions are, to me, the true representation of Harvard—everyone has a story or an opinion worth listening to. To understand others, you're only a discussion away. Thank you.