

**Jackson Kernion '12**  
**Lowell House Student Speakers Series**  
***"The Difference Between Solitude and Loneliness"***  
**(advised by Van Tran)**

Solitude is very important to me. I love nothing more than being able to spend a day all by myself, working on my hobbies and having space to think truly interesting thoughts. But finding time to be alone in an environment of constant distraction can be immensely difficult. And so last summer I decided to get away from it all and engage in an experiment in solitude.

I was fortunate to receive the Michael C Christian traveling fellowship last year, and I used it to fund a trip of my dreams to Nepal and India. I remember telling my sister that I just wanted to spend a summer enjoying myself. No resume building. No expectations. And most importantly, no distractions. Nothing seemed more exciting to me than spending an entire summer on my own, with little internet, without a single soul to bother me.

So I spent 11 weeks in Nepal and India. I went on a 10-day silent meditation retreat, I worked on a farm, and I hopped from city to city in Northern India.

11 weeks is a long time and I spent much of it on my own.

But I think it's telling that the things I remember most from my trip were not the times I spent alone. Instead they were the moments I shared with others.

I remember the Indian man who helped me find my way back to the Hostel when I was lost. I remember a trip to swim in the Rapti river with my host family on the farm. And I particularly remember meeting the Lovelace family while trekking in the Himalayas.

At the end of my trip, I went on a 21 day trek through the Himalayas, where I viewed glacial lakes, climbed mountain passes, and reached Everest Basecamp. I spent much of this trip alone. Because I had chosen to take a difficult route and because it was low season, I would spend days without talking to anyone. Each day, I'd hike alone for 8 hours, find a lodge to stay, maybe read some books at night, and repeat the cycle again the next day.

This was kinda cool. But it was also kinda not cool. It's easy to romanticize solo exploration and rugged individualism, but the days I spent hiking the Himalayas alone were some of the lonliest days I can remember. For there was no one around who could challenge me, draw me out of myself, and no one to share my own interesting thoughts with. I just had what seemed like an infinitely long road ahead of me, and I dutifully trudged along.

And so the best part of my trek through the Himalayas was meeting the Lovelace family. There were three of them — Mrs. Lovelace and her two daughters Anne and Katie— and I met them on top of a mountain peak. The Lovelace's are from Idaho and I soon found out the Anne is Junior at—and please don't scoff—Yale. We realized that we were hiking the same route and so we joined forces for about a week. For that week, instead of hours and hours of time to reflect, think deep thoughts, and read I had true companions. It's true that you get to know people really

quickly when traveling together and I got to know the Lovelace's better in that week than I know many of my acquaintances here at Harvard. Instead of spending my nights reading, we would pick each other's brains and swap stories. I told them about my family. I talked to them more candidly about my experience here at Harvard than I do to most people at Harvard.

I'd like to think that we came away from that week together as close friends.

I sometimes wonder, though, if I would have gotten to know any of the Lovelace's as well as I did under normal circumstances, in the day to day hustle and bustle of life back home. For it's rare that I'm able to make time to sit down and really engage with people like that. There's a difference between the banter I throw back and forth with many of my friends and the kind of sharing of one's self that is the mark of true human connection.

It's not as if the Lovelace's were particularly amazing people - the kind that are difficult to find. I recognize people like them around me all the time. But I don't normally find the time to invest in the people who surround me at Harvard.

And so I look around this room tonight and I wonder how many of you are potential friends that I simply haven't had the pretense to invest in yet. I don't want to have to meet you on a mountain top to get to know you better.