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### On Return

Seven minutes. Enough time to eat a healthy serving of fruits before a meal, run across Harvard Yard in panic, and teach a young kendo player a lesson in respecting his elders.

It was a hot summer kendo practice in Japan, and I was fighting for my life against an 8<sup>th</sup> dan sensei in armor. Kendo is a Japanese martial art of swordfighting, using bamboo swords and body armor. He was about 60 years old and half my size, but he was taking me to school. Yet, after what seemed like an endless barrage of hits, he did give me an important lesson to take away from that day: always return to kamae, meaning center. You start with kamae, so you end with kamae. Always.

Always return to center. For kendo, it means to make sure that you end your posture as you started, always ready to defend and attack. NO openings for your opponent. Yet, for life, the lesson signifies something more: it instructs us to complete our journeys at their starting point, to dutifully leave our mark of passage at the site at which we took our first nervous steps, be it a geographical location, a mindset, or a system of beliefs.

Is this something foreign to us? Not necessarily. I mean, we see this tendency all the time in nature. Animals such as salmon or monarch butterflies will head back towards their home territory or breeding ground no matter what, overcoming dangerous journeys or memories of lifetimes. Whether the homeward bound trip guarantees a survival rate of 2 to 4%, or whether the journey takes three to four *generations* to complete, they come back and come back every year. Think this pertains to the animal kingdom? Not so... we humans, as a species, seem constantly drawn back to our origins. We end our symphonies on the same melody that we started, begin our 2011 under the same crystal ball that we ushered in 2010, and will walk out of the same Johnston Gate that we walked into during freshmen week. In life around us and within us, there seems to be a final pull towards "home."

However, what is the meaning of this "odd" behavior? I say "odd," as ending with the start seems very counterintuitive to our life experiences. Up to this point, we the community of Harvard have been taught to be the pioneering trailblazers, to overcome obstacles and explore unknown shores, never to look back. To return seems like revisiting the simple and innocent us of yesterday, at the expense of letting go of our successes today.

Yet, I believe in this lies the virtue of ending our endeavors at their start: revisiting our innocence and letting go of our successes. Primarily, returning helps us to compare ourselves against our former selves, so that we can see *and* evaluate the various changes that occurred within us during our metamorphosis. Often enough we hear the dogma "change is good," but seldom have we heard the distinction between the good changes and the bad changes. Growth, in terms of expanding intellectual and personal scope, is highly commendable. Nonetheless, increasing sense of cynicism, apathy, and skepticism that comes with time is dangerous. But as we compare and reflect upon *how* we were when

we started, we can regain the important convictions that we might have lost during the journey. Optimism for the future, passion for learning, and a desire for altruism and reciprocity... they do not have to be lost. By finishing at the beginning, we can consult our past to reorient ourselves again and again towards fulfilling our personal destinies and contributing towards the common good.

Furthermore, ending where we begin is crucial in that by making us to leave behind our triumphs, it shows us that our lives are not identified by their crowning moments but by the individuals whom we sought to be every day. By far the most renowned swordsman of the history of Japan, Miyamoto Musashi at the end of his life died as a hermit in a small cave. On letting go of it all and returning to his humble origins of training, he wrote: "In the void there is virtue, and no evil. Wisdom has existence, principle has existence, the Way has existence... spirit is nothingness." As shown by his example, through going back we see that what ultimately accompanies us are not victories, not titles, not legends, but the humility with which we sought wisdom and practiced our learning. Finishing in our first nervous footprints makes us to relinquish and retrace... but it makes us to understand that to be great is not to soar above but to walk among.

Friends, when life and bewilderment leads you astray, remember to go back to your origin; after all, there's no place like home. Thank you.