

## Can anything good come from New Haven?

When I began my freshman year at Harvard, I was expecting an intellectually profound experience. And, to be sure, I found one in the classroom, where my professors challenged me to make insightful comments, complete large amounts of reading, and write carefully crafted papers—expectations I'm still trying to live up to.

Outside of class, however, many of my peers seemed more interested in running the world than in thinking about it—a state of affairs that appears to have occurred by design, not chance. Steven Pinker has recounted that, at an orientation meeting for new faculty members, he was told that Harvard aims to educate "the future leaders of the world, not the future academics of the world." Clearly, Harvard wants doers.

While action and reflection—the active life and the contemplative life—both have their place, thinking necessarily precedes doing. You can't do what you're supposed to unless you first know what you're supposed to do. And gaining that knowledge requires contemplation. Like all of us, I've always aspired to do something great in the world. For me, however, these four years are primarily a time to think. College is our chance to immerse ourselves in the wisdom of the past that shows us the way to live today.

Yet this all-important part of college was conspicuously absent from my life outside of class. The organizations I joined—like the students who led them—were focused on doing, not thinking. And, though occasional intellectual discussions in dorms and dining-halls were nice, I wanted something more.

A solution came from the least expected place. There's a biblical turn of phrase that asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" For us at Harvard, a more pertinent

question would be, "Can anything good come from New Haven?" The Elis may not have much going for them, but they do have a thriving culture of undergraduate debate, which I first witnessed during my freshman Harvard-Yale weekend. My roommate Todd had a Yale friend named Ryan who was staying with us. Ryan invited Todd and me to join him for an event his debate society was holding at the Cambridge home of one of the society's members.

I was impressed that twenty college students would spend their Friday night giving speeches for and against the resolution "Resolved: That Man Needs War." But what impressed me even more were the ideas exchanged during the debate and afterward. The students were not only well-versed in politics, philosophy, and economics; they were eager to engage with those who disagreed with them, rather than shutting down their ideological opponents. One Yale named Dimitri particularly embodied these qualities. Opinionated, well-read, and absolutely hilarious, he would jump into a conversation with anyone who had an argument to offer. He and I hit it off right away.

I kept in touch with Dimitri and Ryan, and attended another debate my over sophomore Harvard-Yale weekend. On Saturday after the Game, Todd, Dimitri, and I all headed back to Ryan's dorm in the predictably Gothic Saybrook College. Sitting around on beanbags and fold-out chairs in the wood-paneled dorm room, we came up with an idea: Todd and I would start a philosophical debating society at Harvard. Ryan and Dimitri offered to help us get it going, and our new organization could even serve as a sister society its Yale counterpart.

And so the John Adams Society was born—at least once we had cut through the Office of Student Life’s red tape. Every Thursday we meet, appropriately, in Adams House to debate resolutions such as, "Resolved, that Radicals Always Do Harm." Chairing the debates is exhilarating. When one of us speaks, questions, objections, and counter-arguments fly forth, filling the room with energy. After our debates, we adjourn to Tasty Burger, where the discussions continue. These events have given me and the other members the opportunity to meet and befriend other Harvardians—particularly our formidable freshmen—who recognize that ideas have consequences and want to figure out what the great ideas of the Western tradition mean for us today.

At the end of his seminal work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre proposes a solution to the moral confusion he has diagnosed in modern society: the formation of small communities centered on a shared conception of virtue. Although the creation of the John Adams Society was by no means so lofty an enterprise, it does show that MacIntyre's vision is possible. In the midst of a campus whose undergraduate culture prioritizes the bustle of constant activity, a few friends succeeded in creating a community based on the contemplation of ideas. I am confident that the ideas on which we deliberate in our debates will give us the wisdom to accomplish something truly great.