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My Very Own Ithaca

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The first time I read *The Odyssey*, I was a freshman in high school and I'm pretty sure I SparkNoted the whole thing. It wasn't that I don't enjoy reading, I just couldn't relate to the story.

If you don't know, The Odyssey is the epic journey of a man named Odysseus who leaves his home in Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War and faces many (and I mean many) trials on his voyage back home. He has to deal with everything from giants to seductive nymphs to the wrath of pretty much every God (Odysseus is really good at pissing off the Immortals).

Even though some pretty cool stuff goes on in The Odyssey, my fourteen-year-old self just couldn't get through the text. The epic is overpowered by misogynistic themes and long passages of Odysseus complaining about how much his life sucks. So I wasn't all that excited when I learned that for my first literature class of college I would be rereading The Odyssey. Despite the fact that I had to read the first five books (chapters) of The Odyssey for the second day of class, I waited until the very last minute to start the reading.

I was totally shocked when, an hour or so later, I had finished the required reading, but didn't want to put the book down. I was totally enthralled by the story and even though I knew how it ended (I mean who doesn't), I read most of the text in one sitting.

Maybe it was four years of analyzing literature in high school, but now, reading The Odyssey at such an important juncture in my life, I could relate more to the epic. While I wasn't necessarily homesick like Odysseus, every day as a freshman in college felt like I had just washed up on some unknown shore. One of the most common themes in The Odyssey is that of xenia, the ancient Greek concept of hospitality. Every time that Odysseus is welcomed into someone's home, both him and the guest participate in a series of complicated steps of hospitality. Odysseus, after sharing his lineage and extensive gratitude for the host's hospitality, is offered a bath, clothes, food, and when he leaves, parting gifts. Even when he hits rock bottom, after losing his ship and all his crew, he still maintains this high level of social conduct.

While this might be an extreme comparison, I feel a little like Odysseus every time I'm introducing myself. When you start college, you leave the mold that you developed over time with your friends and family. You are a total stranger to everyone you meet and can be literally whoever you want. This can be exhilarating, yet overwhelming. Giving a good first impression over and over again is exhausting. I can't count how many times I've told someone I'm a Journalism major. When I go back to my room at night, I find myself analyzing every social interaction and wondering what I should have done differently.

I soon picked up a few lines that can get me through a night of introductions. For example, people like that I'm from Chicago, and the scars on my arm from a childhood playground fiasco always are a good point of conversation. Still, these lines seem to become more and more dull each time I use them and no longer pack their original punch.

Though some might argue that the hardest trials for Odysseus in The Odyssey are when he faces the most barbaric monsters of the world, these tasks never have the same mental strain as being accepted by those of your same race. Say what you will of the cannibal cyclops Polyphemus, but at least he doesn't care who Odysseus is, he just wants to make him his dinner.

There are many reasons why Odysseus misses Ithaca, though I believe one of the biggest is that he knows there he will be accepted immediately. Some have said that The Odyssey is the first recorded case of nostalgia. In this case, Odysseus's nostalgia is so powerful, it helps him escape temptation time and time again.

While my nostalgia isn't this epic, being at college has made me more nostalgic for the familiar. When we spend time with old friends and family, we often find ourselves slipping back into our comfortable, childhood roles. Going out into the world in contrast can feel like you constantly have to prove yourself. It's important to remember, though, that like Odysseus, our past will always be a part of us and this is not something to be ashamed about. Odysseus's travels made him realize how important his home is and even when he is thousands of miles away, it can still provide comfort.

For me, my hometown will always be where home is, but college isn't a million miles away.

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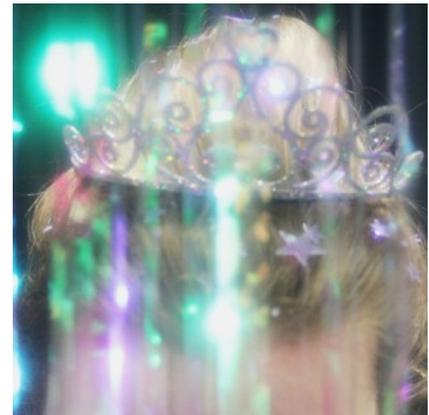
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