

# A Year In Review

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## INTRODUCTION

Hello everyone! Welcome to the third installment of my year in review series. It's been a whirlwind tour, and I've split my time from July 2015 – June 2016 between co-op and school. As such, it seems appropriate that I divide my time in this review accordingly. I'll spend some time reflecting on co-op, talk about my school experiences, and conclude with a reflection into the great beyond. Are you ready? Let's go.

## NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST<sup>1</sup>

The interesting thing about being on co-op is that the market for friendship is dramatically different from that which has been the norm up to that point in life. In elementary school, finding a friend usually involved strolling onto the playground and finding somebody to share a swing with (at least until rivalries formed, which then usually involved throwing sand or wood chips), and in high school, one spends a seemingly infinite amount of time locked inside classrooms with the same people every day for nine months out of the year. You may not like everyone that you spend your days with, but at least there's a readily available market. College is more of the same, with the exception of residence halls, which always breed interesting opportunities to meet people (almost as well as they breed disease in the communal bathrooms). On co-op, however, I was struck with an entirely different situation, especially during my third term in Boston.

Boston is a great city (scratch that, *phenomenal* city), but my initial frustration was that I knew absolutely no one in a 600 mile radius. I began work to find that my co-workers have an average age between 30 and 40 years old (don't tell them that I said that), and found that there were no other interns at my site. Therefore, the market for easily accessible friends was essentially zero, and this was in stark contrast to the environments that I was used to. For the first two weeks, I vehemently abhorred the fact that I had to do everything alone. I went to coffee shops alone, went shopping alone, explored the city alone, and went out to eat alone. Don't mistake my message, I do these things alone when I am in Cincinnati surrounded by friends, but the fact that I was being forced to do them alone by virtue of the fact that I knew absolutely nobody annoyed me. The only semi-genuine contact that I had besides work-jabber and scripted introductory conversations was done via text message or occasional phone calls that zipped information from Massachusetts back to Ohio.



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<sup>1</sup> I hesitate to begin my reflection with one of the greatest clichés of all time. That said, it's famous for a reason

All of the above combined to make my first couple of weeks in Boston miserable. However, as any therapist or over-enthusiastic self-help devotee would tell you, it's exhausting to walk around hating your life 24 hours per day<sup>2</sup>. As the weeks went by, though, I got tired of being tired of being tired of Boston (if that makes sense at all). The interesting thing that happens when you give up on being frustrated with your situation is that you gain a clearer insight into what's actually going on. When you stop using your energy to be frustrated and start using that energy to be in the moment (oh goodness, another cliché!), some interesting observations develop. In my case, I realized that even though I was doing everything alone, I was doing the things that I actually wanted to do! I went to coffee shops because I love exploring different types of coffee (I ~~probably~~ definitely have an addiction), and I love being in the atmosphere of a café, where there's lots of noise but it's always quiet. I love people-watching in this transcendent<sup>3</sup> atmosphere, and I love wasting away an afternoon looking out at the street while becoming absorbed in a book with a good cup of coffee (bonus points for a peaceful snowfall). In short, I realized that the things I do alone are the things that I – not my friends, not my family, not my classmates – that I like to do and that I enjoy.

So, being alone is a blessing and a curse. Humans are social creatures by nature,<sup>4</sup> and it's important to spend time with people outside of work. However, this year has also taught me to appreciate the silence. I've learned to cherish the times in my life when the only one that I have to worry about pleasing is myself. I don't have to set up plans weeks in advance, and I don't have to pick activities that everyone in the group will enjoy. I love hiking, and when I'm alone and I want to go hiking, I just pick up and go! It's when the people around us are silent that we can finally hear ourselves speaking. I listened to what I was saying, and it has made my time in Boston infinitely more rewarding.

## BACK TO SCHOOL

Going back to school after working a normal-people schedule for four months is similar to falling through a frozen lake. This happened to me twice this year<sup>5</sup>, but lucky for you, I lived to tell the tale. I'm not going to bore you with the details of thermodynamics and separation processes, so I'll skip right to the personal aspects of spring semester 2016, and tell you that over the past year I have developed a love-hate relationship with technology<sup>6</sup>. For a chemical

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<sup>2</sup> To clarify, I actually love my job, but that only takes up 8/24 hours per day, so I was annoyed 16 hours of the day, or for math aficionados, 67% of the time.

<sup>3</sup> There's a fancy word for you. Maybe it'll soften some of the clichés that I used earlier

<sup>4</sup> No scientific background for this, by the way. I'm just guessing. I recognize that not *everyone* loves people, one good example being Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov. If you don't know the name, do some googling, and be prepared for autocorrect to have a fit when you do

<sup>5</sup> The school thing, not the lake thing, although I have fallen in a frozen lake before, and that's why I'm allowed to make the comparison

<sup>6</sup> I also developed one with burritos, but that's beside the point

engineer who wants to specialize in industrial automation, this may seem counterproductive. Let me explain.

I love technology because it's actually useful. I read a wonderful book this year on how tech helps offload the mundane scheduling tasks from the brain and frees up more time for creativity. My calendar at work keeps me on-track, and sending e-mails and making phone calls is much more convenient than posting letters. Mundane calculations that would take hours to complete by hand can be completed with one keystroke, and, let's face it, who doesn't love videos of cats (other than dog people)? For the purposes of life organization and productivity, technology is pretty sweet.

I hate technology because of its general tendency to atrophy personal relationships and squelch genuine face-to-face contact. I ran an interesting experiment one night that illustrates this point. I was having a group of friends over, so I decided to abandon my phone for the duration of the evening. I turned it off and dumped it in another room in order to physically separate myself. After what felt like an hour (really only 30 minutes), I became *physically anxious* about the fact that I hadn't checked my phone.

This brings up an interesting question. When was the last time that you went to a restaurant, or to get coffee, or to the library, or went anywhere without checking your phone at least once or twice an hour? Have you ever noticed yourself picking up your phone subconsciously and, before you know it, you're mindlessly scrolling through Facebook for the fifth time in the last hour? I definitely do this, and it bothers me.

What I realized this year is that, when we compulsively check our phones, we are essentially saying that the people around us can't give us what we need. Examples:

"Bilbo, you're not funny enough for me, so I'm going to scroll through memes while we're supposed to be eating dinner."

"Becky, you're not entertaining enough for me, so while we're supposed to be watching this movie that I picked out in the first place, I'm going to text Jon about how *absolutely marvelous* the chicken teriyaki that I had last week was, because that's more entertaining than a movie, obviously."

"Freddy, I don't feel like you're giving me the emotional support that I need, so while we spend every day living together as a *married couple*, I'm going to roam about online forums and blogs to find people there who can support my issues."

As I said before, I noticed that I was part of the problem. *I did this*, and once I became aware of it, it became absolutely maddening. From that point on in the semester, I made a conscious effort to put my phone down when I was with other people, and to stop checking it compulsively when I was alone.

## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Where is this reflection going? It all comes down to the theme of the past year, which is *listening*. In the last section, I talked about how I learned to listen to myself in the times when I am alone. The same goes for the times when I'm not alone. What I've learned this year is to listen – actually, genuinely *listen* – to the people who I spend my time with. When you pay attention to the people at the dinner party instead of your cell phone, you may pick up on the fact the Suzie seems more reserved than usual. Maybe she needs someone to talk to? Or, you may notice that Dan is actually hysterical, and that he's a stand-up comic, and that he has a show in LA, and that he wants to take you on a trip to LA to see his show, because Dan is *wayyy* better than that video of the kid after the dentist<sup>7</sup>.

The same idea works in reverse. If you're feeling down or looking for support, why not try look at the people around you. If I just lost my pet snake (something I'm massively upset about), and I'm at a café with my two besties, odds are that staring at my phone is just going to make me feel secluded, alone, and out-of-sync with the folks who didn't lose their pet snake today (which is probably everybody). Alternatively, I could actually *talk* to my friends, and I'd find out that they're a much better pick-me-up than some random dude on Facebook from the Snake-Losers Anonymous page.

I know that the paragraphs above sound preachy, but this is what I have noticed in my life, and I've taken steps this year to change that. When I'm with people, I try to actually be with them, and not with someone else hundreds of miles away over a virtual text message. I've found my interactions with people more rewarding, and that I am able to connect with people on a deeper level when I'm actually 'there'. Therefore, if I had to pick one word to describe last year, it would be *listen*. I need to listen to myself, and listen to the people that I am with. Over the next year, that's going to be my goal. Maybe it should be yours, too? Let's copy-paste ourselves into the moment, instead of copy-pasting that stupid cat gif that we've all seen eight times. Let's listen to what the world is saying, and maybe we'll hear something interesting for once. Let's be in the moment – whether that's with other people or with only ourselves – and not in the cloud. Let's sign out of Facebook, grab some friends, and go on another great adventure.

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<sup>7</sup> I'll concede that I've seen that particular video many, many times, and that it's hysterical