

# Making Mingling Manageable

by CHRISTIAN FLOW '10

MIDWAY THROUGH my senior year of high school, my father and I attended a welcoming event for already-admitted members of Harvard's class of 2010. We walked in, were given nametags and directions to the drink table, and were turned loose. Hello, Harvard Club of Baltimore.

Once I had my ginger ale, or water—or whatever it was that my 17-year-old self decided to drink—I remember being shocked by the realization that I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing. Navigating ballrooms filled with unknown people wasn't something they taught you in AP biology, and it certainly didn't make much sense to me. For one of the first times in my life, I was awash with the realization that talking to people could be stressful and demanding. (In the interests of transparency, I'm not counting any of the early times that I talked to girls, because I think those fall under a different rubric, and because often on those occasions I cheated the system through heavy preparation or by cueing myself with a notecard full of talking points.)

My father seemed a good deal more prepared to deal with the situation than I. I'm really not sure how much socializing the food scientists of the Beltsville Instrumentation Sensing Laboratory do, but the man apparently felt himself equal to the task of moving us to the center of the room and making us accessible to the masses. A bold move, I thought to myself, as I

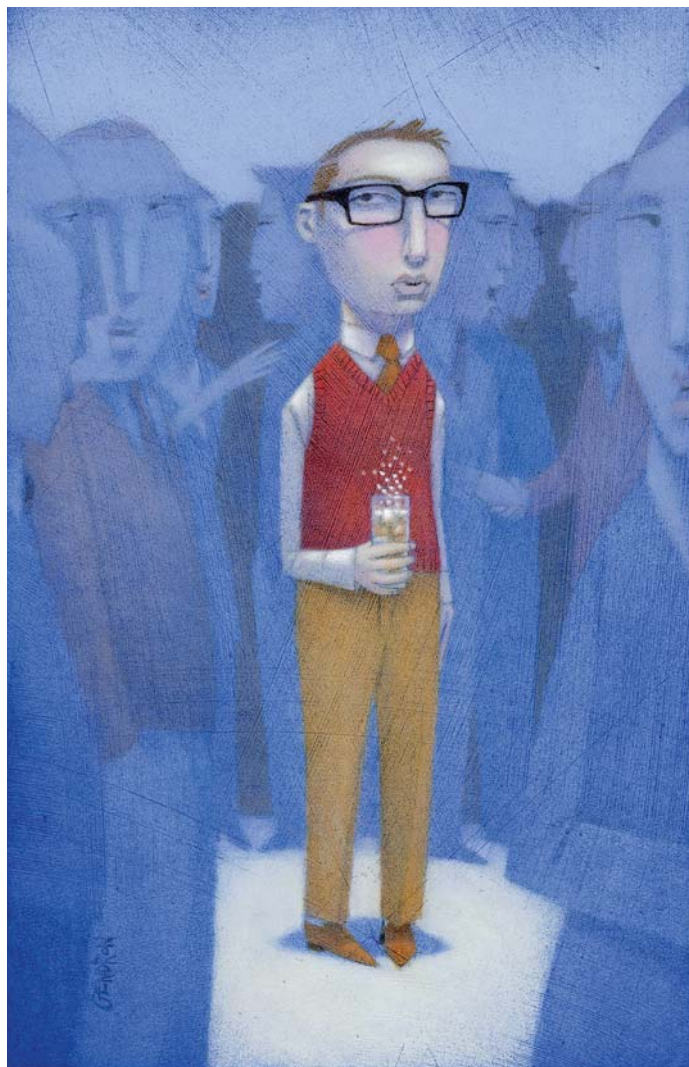
stood there dressed in a sweater vest, sagely nodding during breaks in the conversation and idly wondering when the food would be served. *Not well-suited for beginners.*

But begin I did. This was my introduction to the strange science of mingling: a discipline that demands moving through a room full of people you don't know, minimizing silences, and somehow contriving that a few of those present re-

member your name before the event is over. In a larger sense, however, it was a taste of something, a nagging sense of doubt—a mild discomfort, perhaps—that would become commonplace as I packed myself off to Cambridge and my post-secondary years. Never in my life have I thought harder about how human interactions work—the subtle forces that inform them, the framework that sustains them, the consequences that attend them—than in the two-plus years I have spent as an undergraduate.

I SHOULD PROBABLY NOTE at this point that I'm not particularly shy, particularly reflective, or particularly prone to self-doubt. So when I say I've "thought hard" about this stuff, I'm not suggesting that I've mulled it over on long walks by the Charles or sat in my bathrobe listening to doleful music and writing in my journal about it (I don't own a bathrobe). But it's hard to avoid these thoughts once you hit college. In the first place, if you went to a cozy prep school like I did, you quickly realize that the sort of commonality that existed in high school, where everybody was constantly tripping over each other in the same classes and on the same athletic teams, disappears quickly when there are 1,600 people in your class, and not 100.

All of a sudden, it's possible to know somebody and have remarkably little in common with him. The guy who introduced himself at an ice-cream



social freshman year; the one who sat two seats over in section last semester; the one you met at an uncomfortable, sophomore-year, final-club punch event—these people are not easy to talk to. Encountering them puts you at high risk of awkwardness: the state of having to labor unduly hard to maintain a conversation. *Are you still majoring in social studies? Really? Yeah, I've heard it is a lot of reading.*

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*Me? Classics...Yeah... [silence]...So how are you doing otherwise?*

Besides being remarkably boring, these sorts of uneasy exchanges make me wonder—somewhat uncomfortably—just how much common ground good conversation requires. Which then usually makes me wonder—even more uncomfortably—how petty and ridiculous it is that I worry about these things at all. Aren't there people in the world with bigger problems on their plates than whether they can get through a conversation? How disappointing is it that I spend time thinking about these things in the first place? And wouldn't I, at the very least, be a better person if I spent my mental energies on other things?

Unfortunately, this sort of perspective is not entirely easy to maintain when, from the admissions-information session right on through, you're reminded that Harvard's biggest asset is its people. Harvard's people. *Get to know them. Network.* How? Well, why not by mingling?

At some point it stopped being optional. Freshman orientation events, student organization events, recruiting events, departmental teas: you can't avoid these things. They're sunk into Harvard like crimson dye into a class banner. To encourage more student-professor interaction, there are professor appreciation dinners in the residential Houses, accompanied by mingling in the master's residence. There are mingling all-stars: 20-year-old flesh-pressers with campaign experience who rest two fingers on your elbow while they're talking to you. And sometimes there are even prizes on the line for the mightiest minglers: part of the

Rhodes scholarship vetting process, I have been told, is a cocktail event.

EARLY ON in my Harvard life, I made a subconscious decision just to give up on it all. I wasn't going to have it anymore. I wouldn't play by the rules. I would transcend them. Or, more aptly, I would burn them to the ground. I guess I thought if I flouted the conventions of mingling and

bad dining-hall conversation, the awkwardness couldn't touch me, and I could set my mind to more lofty concerns (I'm still trying to sort out what exactly these were).

I tried to steer clear of mingling events. If I did have to go, I skipped the pleasantries and started asking questions that were calculated to throw the conversation off the beaten path. *Forget where you're from—do you know any good jokes? What's the biggest fight you've ever had with your parents and why? What sort of a path did you tread to get to Harvard?* I tried to go no limits. I was Ken Kesey and his bus full of Merry Pranksters, but instead of doing LSD and messing with policemen, I was speaking a little too directly and messing with the bounds

of conversation. And like the Pranksters, I cultivated a disdain for smooth operators and politicking. If you played within the system, you perpetuated the system. And that meant more horrible mingling events.

Of course, the thing about Kesey and his band was that, in time, the hated hierarchies and conventions of the outside world managed to find their way onto the bus after all. The seemingly visionary often becomes nothing but a new kind of conformity. Likewise, when I look hard at my conversational boundary-pressing, it occurs to me that, in its own way, it had the contrived and strategic air I claim to detest in standard cocktail-party conversation; that its benefits were somewhat limited (assistant professors don't like to be asked about their tenure bids); and that it was, at its root, nothing but a calculated defense mechanism. Instead of confronting awkwardness and inanity, I had been finding my own inane way to run away. So there's more work to be done. That's fine: I'm still only a junior. I'll give mingling another try. But I'm reluctant. It's downright difficult. And notecards full of talking points just don't work at cocktail parties. ▢

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*Berta Greenwald Ledesky Undergraduate Fellow  
Christian Flow '10 is going to Staples to get some more notecards.*

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## Buzzing In

IT'S A SPORT where the mind is the only muscle worth working, where players flaunt their ability to memorize textbooks, and where hand exercises have been prescribed as a means of improving buzzer speed. It's called Quiz Bowl. And, big surprise, Harvard is good at it.

Led by a cast of characters that includes seniors Kyle Haddad-Fonda, Adam N. Hallowell, Julia Schlozman, and John D. Lesieutre—all four of whom played on the team that won a national Quiz Bowl championship last spring—Harvard's program has built itself into an organized outfit that boasts a treasurer, fundraising schemes, occasional recruiting efforts, and, says Haddad-Fonda, about 25 regular participants. The cur-

rent lineup is complemented by such luminaries as sophomore Meryl Federman, who last summer won \$75,000 on *Jeopardy!*; second-year law student Bruce Arthur, who competed as an undergraduate with powerhouse University of Chicago; and freshman Dallas R. Simons, a former star on the high-school circuit.

"The team easily goes 10 or 12 deep," says Dennis Loo, a Virginia Tech graduate and former Quiz Bowler who, when not acting as the Harvard team's de facto head coach, supports himself by gambling professionally. "You have any of a dozen people who can be mixed and matched into a top-25 team at nationals. It's a nice problem to have."

As a testament to its stability, Harvard is able to field multiple teams at the small tournaments held most weekends on the