

## THE UNDERGRADUATE

# Parenting, Redux

by CHRISTIAN FLOW '10

I SPENT SOME TIME on a Friday evening in March admiring the bathrooms at the Charles Hotel. They are remarkably nice: very clean, cloth towels, and everything motion-activated—even the soap dispensers—so you don't have to touch anything. Not quite the type of facility that I've become accustomed to. But this wasn't a customary evening. It wasn't just the bathrooms or the locale, it was the company: my full blocking group and all our parents, 17 people in all. We filled two tables at the restaurant, chatting and laughing like something out of a wedding scene in a teen movie. It was merry and awkward, and occasionally hilarious. It was the high point of Junior Parents' Weekend.

The dinner wasn't the only out-of-the-ordinary thing marking these two singular days in March. Harvard trots out a whole lineup of entertainment options for such affairs. There are receptions and suspiciously extravagant lunches in the Houses. There are lectures delivered by Harvard professors for the parents' intellectual enrichment. There are a cappella concerts, and addresses, and panels about undergraduate life.

But there's always plenty of unscheduled time as well, when parents are generally on the loose to shadow their children, attend classes, and follow them to meetings and social events. It's this time that poses something of a problem. The collegiate experience doesn't always pattern itself nicely for parental viewing. Would parents want to take a nap with you at three in the afternoon? Would they want to attend a sloppy happy hour? Maybe head back to the room for some aimless late-night Internet

searching? Probably not. But I was resolved to make a good-faith effort at showing them the ropes anyway.

This earnestness didn't emerge spontaneously. My original parents'-weekend experience in the fall of freshman year was wince-worthy, and I had never really forgotten it. I remember cleaning my room, taking a shower, and going to meet my mom and brother on Massachusetts Avenue. There's a picture of me from the moment I met them, staring sidelong at the camera, skinnier and healthier than I am today, just months removed from high-school track practice, not yet battered by semesters of poor sleep habits and even poorer dining-hall discipline.

In the picture, I'm still the rebellious teenager who couldn't wait to leave home, who insisted to my mother that fall that I had been living by myself for two months and hardly needed her care. I got a fever that first parents' weekend, had to catch

up on reading for an upcoming Expository Writing draft, and generally holed up in my room for most of the two-day event. At some point the College handed out a lot of free insulated maroon lunchbags with the Harvard seal on them—a development that made my much-younger brother pretty excited. I wasn't there to share in his glee.

Not again, I vowed this year. Junior Parents' Weekend was a chance to get it right, to make sure that this time around, my mom enjoyed herself. The rebelliousness of freshman year, the indignation, the stubborn intention of proving my own independence were long gone. The campus had become my home, and my mother and brother—also back for a second tour—were my guests. I wanted to teach them about what had become my life, my domain in the last two years. I wanted them to meet the friends they had only heard about over the phone, to get a sense of the activities that filled my spare moments, to understand the rhythms of the day-to-day.

In this respect, I think, I did end up having a more successful parents' weekend this year. But as it turned out, the most significant understanding imparted over the course of the weekend did not come from me. I greeted my family on a Friday morning in March hoping to show them a few things. Instead, it was the other way around.

THE WEEKEND started off inauspiciously: I got sick again—wonder of wonders—though this time I wasn't incapacitated. I showed up unprepared to my 10 A.M. Ancient Greek class and, in front of the dozen or so parents sitting around the room's periphery, delivered a rendering of Aristotle that was lackluster at best, atrocious at worst. My mom wasn't particularly impressed with the rigor of my Literature and Arts B Core either. Apparently 45 minutes spent comparing two of van Gogh's paintings isn't enough to satisfy my family's intellectual hungers. "I learned that stuff in tenth

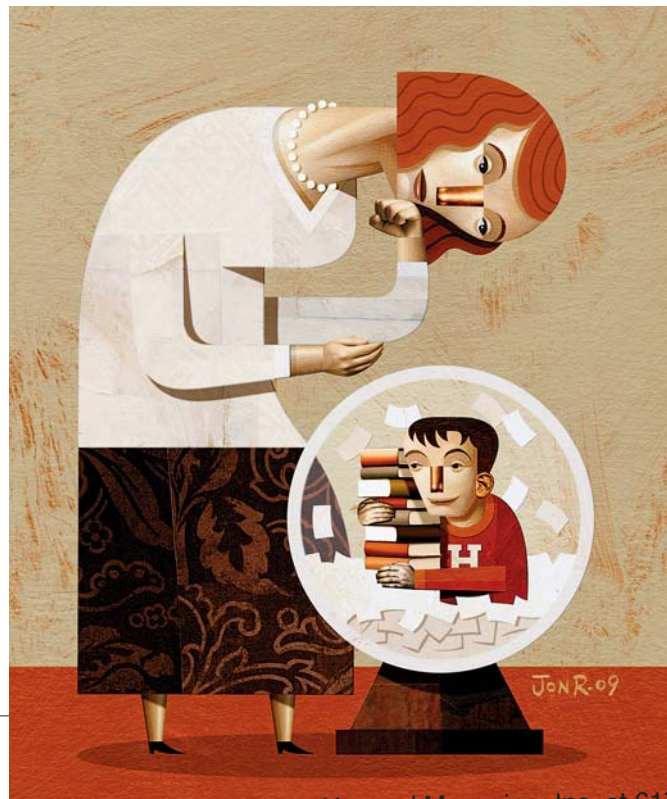


Illustration by Jon Reinfurt

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grade," my brother informed me. He wasn't lying. There was a reason why I had known some of the answers.

Late Friday afternoon, more fun and games: the parents came to a staff meeting at the *Crimson*. It was a discussion about a recently launched blog, about new media, about our coverage strategy, about demographics and philosophy and marketing—things that seemed remarkably important in our universe, in which Plympton Street loomed large. The parents sat together, squished on a couch in our conference room. One of them urged us to proceed as if they weren't there. Ten minutes later, they must have wished they hadn't and filed out, one after the other, leaving us sitting on our torn, black furniture. Out in the newsroom, somebody snapped a picture.

If there was a theme to parents' weekend, this was it. Somehow the presence of these adults, these outsiders to our little world, pointed us beyond its boundaries, making us aware of just how inconsequential some of the things are that consume our attention on a daily basis. Forced to imagine my college experience through my mother's eyes or those of the parents at the *Crimson* meeting, I found that things seemed smaller somehow, the normal gravity of the moment removed. All of a sudden, the usual obligations, activities, snarls weren't painted in the bold and urgent colors they usually were.

This dose of perspective was all the more potent coming on a weekend when the end of my undergraduate experience seemed more immediate than ever—when the University's president, addressing the assembled parents and students on Friday afternoon, noted that we sat before her contemplating, or beginning to contemplate, the end of our time at Harvard. There was talk of jobs, of 15 months until graduation, of the economy. And there was talk of entering Tercentenary Theatre wearing a cap and gown in May 2010.

Sanders Theatre has a way of raising the ghosts of the several freshman-year orientation events that took place there, those wisdom-laden addresses from Yard deans whose names, God willing, you never remembered afterwards. It's one of those places that, for me, has always felt like the beginning. And yet, there we

were, talking about the end. The juxtaposition was jarring. But it wasn't unwarranted. At our blockmate parents' dinner, it wasn't hard to make the connection: there was only one event that would bring everybody together again like this, and it involved leaving with a diploma.

In a way, this was sad. Our parents came whirling in, bringing the flavor of the outside world to our insular little universe at the precise time when it seemed to be careening towards its final turn. The pace of college life, especially at Harvard, is never slow. As a freshman, this was the thing that most surprised me: how the days seem to slide by, scheduled to the brim with academic or extracurricular responsibilities, or with fun. Two years ago, I recalled, my classmates had filled online message-boards with excited chatter about concentrations and campus organizations. Now, those same classmates were leading clubs and preparing for theses. How disorienting it was, at the very moment when these things seemed most important, to confront the notion that in only 15 months, blogging technicalities, not to

mention van Gogh paintings and Aristotle, would matter very little.

Not a comfortable realization, but perhaps a useful one: a reminder to savor a little more and stress a little less while we're here, to see the things that seem pressing now—the Lit and Arts B tests, the all-nighters, the interminable proof shifts at the paper—for the fleeting pleasures that they are.

Back at the Charles, the blocking-group dinner over, I started working on my mom to let my brother spend the night out with me—hitting a couple parties, maybe, and then sleeping over on the faithful futon back at Eliot House. When that failed, I tried to convince a friend's dad, a lawyer of some repute, to argue my case. (I seemed to be making some real progress before his wife put a stop to it.) Smiling me down, my mom held firm. Maybe, I thought later, that was for the best. College goes so fast as it is, and beyond that, who knows? Let the lad anticipate it while he can. ♡

*Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow Christian Flow '10 is busy preparing for his Greek examination.*

## SPORTS

# Class on the Grass

*Golfer Emily Balmert keeps carding milestones.*

THE EIGHTH HOLE at the Granite Links Golf Club in Quincy, Massachusetts, is an uphill dogleg right, a short par 5 at 401 yards. On May 8, 2006, Emily Balmert '09 was playing it in the Warren Smith Memorial Tournament, a fundraising event named for the late coach who started the Harvard women's golf program in 1993. Balmert struck a good drive to the crest of a hill on the left side of the fairway. Blocked from sight of the hole, she hit a four-iron for her second shot. Director of golf Fred Scherneck '89, playing in Balmert's foursome, was standing on the right side of the fairway about 80

yards from the green when he saw her ball hole out for a double-eagle 2, three under par. He gave a shout, but Balmert didn't let herself believe what had happened until she reached the green and saw her ball "happily resting in the hole."

Later that day, Balmert shared the exciting incident with her roommate Adriana Benedict '09, who has scant knowledge of golf, explaining that double eagles are the rarest of golf scores, far scarcer even than holes in one, which are a possibility on any par 3. As luck would have it, Balmert carded her first hole in one the following season. Once again, she recounted the event to Benedict, who re-