

The Most Important Course?

by MADELEINE SCHWARTZ '12

THIS PAST SEMESTER, my junior spring, I went to my blockmates with a question that had been troubling me for some time. Was Harvard encouraging us to think about the meaning of our lives? One said no. She had expected more of such conversations in college. Another, who spends a good deal of time studying Tibetan Buddhism at the Divinity School, said many of his classes had been about exactly that. He was satisfied for the most part. A third friend asked *why* Harvard should encourage its students to think about their lives when so many end up leading empty existences without any meaning at all.

How should a person live? In my three years at Harvard, I feel I have rarely been asked the question. My courses tackle writers like Plato or Augustine, who spent their time trying to define the good life. But talking about the personal implications of a text in section would be gauche, and I can't imagine trying to bring those conversations to the busy Kirkland House dining hall. Late-night chats with roommates, such a vaunted aspect of the "college experience," don't really happen when one roommate is shadowing an emergency-room shift at Brigham and Women's, and the other one is finishing up a problem set due the next day.

APPARENTLY, I am not the only one who feels

a little at sea. For the past 20 years, Gale professor of education Richard Light has interviewed Harvard College students on the verge of graduating. Around 2007, he told me, he started to notice a trend. Even though undergraduates were content with the academic education they were receiving, many felt unprepared to take on bigger questions. One student told Light that although his classes had equipped him for work in chemistry and physics, "Harvard forgot to offer the most important course—a course in how to think of living my life."

With the help of dean of freshmen

Thomas Dingman and Hobbs professor of education Howard Gardner, Light set up "Reflecting on Your Life," a voluntary discussion series for first-year students eager to explore those very ideas. In three group sessions of 90 minutes each, freshmen talk about the tenets by which they make their life decisions. Topics vary. One assignment has students write down what Light calls "core values" (which is more important: kindness or fame? kindness or intelligence?). Another asks them to contemplate the meaning of leadership and the purpose of their own educations. The

classes are led by faculty members or administrators and take place in the spring of each year, once the excitement of college has settled into a day-to-day routine.

The program has been quite popular, to the surprise of its creators. "We expected there to be 15 or 20 students interested in talking about this," Light told me. But in the past three years, the program has had an average of 150 students—10 percent of the freshman class.

I'VE BEEN SURPRISED at the relative dearth of such conversations here, especially when compared to the sorts of talks that I had in high school. I spent the second half of my junior year at the "Maine Coast Semester," a four-month program in Wiscasset run by the Chewonki Foundation, an environmental organization. The school is located on a large farm



where the students also work, in part-time shifts. Community discussions are central to the program, and so once a week, the entire school (40 students, plus faculty members and farmhands) comes together in the wood-paneled dining room and talks about how to run the place.

Our daily routines were centered around thoughtful discussion. During my time at the school, one group of students surveyed the carbon footprint of our activities, and presented reports on eating pineapples or taking long showers. When it snowed heavily late into April, the school came together and spent a good 20 minutes talking about whether it was better to clear the paths with salt, quick and effective but terrible for waterways, or to work together and scrape the ice off them. We left the meeting carrying shovels. More often, our conversations took the place of deeper talks: To what extent should one include others in decisionmaking? What is the value of physical labor?

The closest I've come to an organized search for meaning at Harvard is in my Moral Reasoning Core course, which I fulfilled this fall with a class on ancient philosophy. We read Plato and Aristotle, and talked about definitions of the philosophical life. My favorite encounter was with Diogenes the Cynic, a Greek philosopher who spent most of his adult life in a basin, naked and eating raw onions. He was so famous, even Alexander the Great came to pay his respects. Diogenes, who believed that men should disregard the trivialities of social customs, was unimpressed. When Alexander asked if he could do anything for him, Diogenes replied, "Move over. You're blocking the sun."

But no matter how striking the readings, there's a limit to how much you are expected to let them win you over. Conversations are subsumed in the substance of course requirements—papers, note-taking, sections where half the students are watching the clock and waiting for the end of Thursday. When reading the fourth-century *On the Pythagorean Life* for class, the most immediate question is not "What does this mean for me?" but rather "Can I write five pages on this before next week?" It's still schoolwork.

A FRIEND at Carleton College told me that her entire school was recently invited to discuss "How Rich Is Too Rich?"—a

question I wished had been brought up during the first few weeks of February, when it seemed like half the campus was putting on suits for consulting-firm or investment-bank interviews. My roommate was among them; she bought three different skirt suits to meet with firms. For the week before the event, conversations in our room focused on headline length. When I asked her why, after two years of volunteer work at Harvard, she was now going in for consulting, she told me it would be great preparation for a life in public service. Did the others at her recruiting events feel that way? "I think mostly it seems like the thing to do after Harvard. And it pays."

In the first few months of the economic crisis, in my freshman year, Harvard organized conversations led by its president on the market meltdown, and forums about the economic processes that had led to a worldwide collapse. Even today, I am frequently invited to discussions at the Kennedy School about "leadership," or talks where experts compare schools of thought on the invisible hand. Despite all this, we rarely come together to discuss the moral side of what it means to go out into the world looking to make money.

It's too bad, because it's been my impression since the beginning of my time at Harvard that there is an expectation that each one of us leave this place ready to make an impact on the world outside. I wonder at the idea of creating potential leaders whose decisionmaking has never been challenged in any way more demanding than by the critical-thinking skills that a history class or a Core lecture provides.

I've heard the concern from peers that personal conversations about "big questions," when forced, will just make students uncomfortable and be of no use. When I asked Dean Dingman whether "Reflections" would ever be required for all freshmen, he told me that the idea had been quickly dismissed: "It would make it something that students took because they had to—another Expos program."

I understand the apprehension. Freshman week, our entryway came together for a conversation about race led by a member of the dean's office. The discussion was slow-going, mostly marked by cautious silence.

But while I admire the effort the administration has made in trying gently to prompt

students to think about their lives, such a meek approach is unlikely to ever really shake undergraduates out of the daily drive that Harvard encourages. By the time I was invited to participate in "Reflections" my freshman year, my inbox was so full of e-mails from the *Crimson*, where I had just become a staff writer, and messages from other publications I was compiling that I don't think I even noticed that I had received it. I had no idea that the program existed until I learned, while researching this column, that two years earlier, Dean Dingman had asked me to think about the very same questions that were now preoccupying me.

If Harvard is to fulfill its promise that a liberal-arts education can form individuals, not just prepare them for careers, it needs to push its students in a way that Introductory Economics cannot.

In the past few years, the Business School has made ethics a greater part of the curriculum. At the last two Commencements, graduating students have taken an "M.B.A. Oath" to serve the "greater good," and the school recently appointed a professor of leadership as its dean.

It's too soon to know whether these reforms will have an actual impact on the way businesses are run, or whether the graduates will just pay lip service to the idea of ethical finance. What an enforced emphasis on ethics does do, however, is remind people that careers do not exist on a straight and narrow path, and that there is more than one way of leading one's life.

I hope that the College can follow up on this lead. The Office of Career Services recently hosted an "Etiquette Dinner" over J-Term at the Sheraton Commander in Cambridge. An etiquette expert explained how to eat soup at business dinners and when to take off one's jacket. According to the *Crimson*, the students who participated found the event very useful for upcoming job interviews. Perhaps next J-Term, we can come together as undergraduates for something a little more substantial. 

Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow Madeleine Schwartz '12 is still chatting with her blockmates.



Were conversations about the meaning of life part of your Harvard experience? Do you think Harvard should do more to encourage such discussions? Visit harvardmag.com/extras to answer the question and see what other readers had to say.