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One of college's most exacting lessons: roommates

A relationship imposed by mysterious administrative forces may prove to be a most cherished bond

September 21, 2012|Mary Schmich

Dear College Freshman,

How's it going? Sleeping too little, eating too much? Glad to be away from home and yet a little homesick?

Perfect. You are having a genuine college experience.

But let me get to the real reason I'm writing: How are things with your roommate?

If you're living in a dorm, you probably have a roommate. Getting a roommate is as fundamental to freshman year as saying goodbye to your parents, your high school friends and your old bedroom. The roommate is a rite of passage into adulthood.

But who the heck is this person?

All of a sudden there's a stranger breathing next to you at night, making noise when you're trying to sleep, invading your most private space. It may be the first time in your life you've been so intimate with someone so unknown.

I am here to tell you, dear freshman, that if you're having trouble adjusting, relax. Your roommate is part of your education.

I've been thinking about the unique nature of the roommate relationship since I got a note from Beccy not long ago. Back in the Ice Age, in precisely this week of September, in our freshman year, we were assigned to live together.

Exactly why we were matched was never revealed. Freshman roommates, then and now, are assigned using some formula as mysterious as the recipe for Coke.

As best I could fathom, Beccy and I were tossed together because we'd both expressed interest in "English," a major made for students who had no idea how to define the word "career."

Beccy was nice. Super nice. But our differences quickly flared. On the first full day of our life together, I woke up to a murmur across the room. I cracked one eye open.

My new roommate was sitting in a chair near the window doing something we Catholics did not do. She was reading the Bible, aloud.

I panicked. Who was she? Why was she in my room?

Bible reading was just one way Beccy and I differed. Beccy hummed. Did she have to hum? And Beccy was a dedicated student. Did she have to be up and out to class before 8 a.m. when I was trying to sleep until 10?

Only years later did I realize that I was, in fact, the bad roommate, the one who invited late-night crowds into the room, the one whose boyfriend, to put it discreetly, hung out at all hours.

Beccy and I became friends anyway.

In our junior year, Beccy left college, got married and set off on a life different from mine. And yet something about sharing that space our freshman year, learning to accommodate each other, the simple fact of having witnessed each other at 18 glued us together for life.

Never underestimate the bond with your life's witnesses.

"What a long way you've come," Beccy said in that recent note, "since you wrote those immortal words, 'Destiny is a sad word, fate an even sadder, but reality the harshest in its unretractable truth.'"

What? I wrote that dreck? Oh, yeah. I remembered, but only because my freshman roommate had.

And this, dear freshman, is one beauty of a freshman roommate. Decades later, your roommate will remember things about you that you had forgotten, how in your passage to adulthood you cried over lost love or bad grades, how you said or wrote or did the dumbest stuff.

Give your roommate a chance. That person is a piece of your destiny, a word that is not as sad as I apparently once thought.

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