

Know Thyself: My Journey of Self-Discovery as a College Freshman

To me, “Know thyself” at this stage of my life means learning to see who I am beyond my accomplishments and failures. Growing up, I defined myself through measurable things: surgery at five that taught me resilience, academic achiever in elementary, SSLG president in high school, and with honors in senior high. These titles and medals felt like they were my identity. But now, as a freshman in college, I realize those were reflections of what I did, not who I am. Knowing myself today means understanding my inner landscape, my doubts, my genuine interests, and the person I become when no one is watching or applauding.

Entering college has profoundly challenged and changed my view of myself because for the first time, my usual formulas for success did not guarantee certainty. In elementary and high school, I knew the system: work hard, follow instructions, lead well, and recognition would follow. But college, with its unfamiliar environment and higher expectations, left me unsure and struggling during my first semester. I was eighteen, newly employed, and suddenly confronted with the fact that being a “big fish in a small pond” no longer applied. This experience mirrors the journey Rene Descartes describes in his method of radical doubt. Just as Descartes doubted everything he once believed to rebuild his foundation on certainty, I found myself doubting my capabilities, my identity, and whether I truly belonged here. It was uncomfortable and disorienting, but necessary.

Through this season of uncertainty and self-reflection, I have discovered both hidden weaknesses and unexpected strengths. My greatest weakness, I realized, is that I had attached my self-worth entirely to external validation. When grades came slowly and leadership roles were not immediately handed to me, I felt invisible. But this struggle also revealed a quiet strength: I am capable of adapting, even when it hurts. Slowly, this second semester, I am learning to study not just for honors but for understanding. I am learning to lead without a title. I am also discovering that my value system, previously built on achievement, is shifting toward authenticity and genuine connection. This process of self-examination is what Plato urged when he said the unexamined life is not worth living. I used to think I was examining myself by counting my awards. Now I understand that true examination requires honesty about our limitations and courage to redefine success.

Perhaps what has changed most is my relationship with failure and uncertainty. Sigmund Freud argued that much of our behavior is driven by unconscious forces and unresolved past experiences. Looking back, I wonder if my drive for academic validation was partly shaped by my surgery at age five. Being the child who needed healing, who had to catch up, I learned early that achievement

earned attention and care. That pattern served me well for years, but in college it became a cage. Recognizing this has not erased my desire to do well, but it has freed me to ask better questions: not just “What grade did I get?” but “Did I grow? Did I help someone? Did I stay true to myself?”

In conclusion, my journey of self-discovery as a college freshman is not a destination but an ongoing practice. Aristotle taught that virtue is developed through habit, and I believe self-knowledge is the same. It is not something achieved once, but something practiced daily in the choice to study honestly, to rest without guilt, to ask for help, and to extend grace to myself. I entered college unsure and afraid, holding tightly to the person I used to be. Now, I am slowly learning to release that grip. I am learning that knowing myself is not about having all the answers. It is about having the humility to keep asking the question, and the courage to live inside the question until the answer reveals itself in time.