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645 words (650 maximum)

Common App Prompt: Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community or family.

The lost feeling dropped in my stomach and ballooned out of control, taking up all the space until I thought I would throw up. Panic buzzed through my entire body. On my own for real now, I had no clue what to do.

On that first day of the Academic Connection program, I was completely out of my element, floundering for a space in this new world. I attached myself to the group of girls that paraded by me and trailed behind the beautiful RA as she chatted comfortably with the crowd. I fretted over my insecurities, wrapping them around me like a cape.

Later that same week, curled in the corner of the giant, empty common room, I sat alone with a book, awaiting the beginning of Board Game Night. Two people entered with the games and began to set one up to play together. I glanced around at the emptiness of the room, unsure what to do with myself. I did not have anyone to play with. My anxiety increased as people trickled in and began to set up games with their friends. My suitemates were all tucked away in their rooms. I had the thought to flee and read by myself in my room, but then I saw people about to start a poker game.

Unable to resist the temptation of the games, I joined in surprisingly easily. After a few hands, I settled into the rhythm. Over the course of the evening I began to feel comfortable with the group as we transitioned to other card games. As we played BS, I found myself joking with the boy next to me and chatting like I would with my friends at home. I uncovered my place in the group. I was pleased to discover that even on my own, in a new situation, I had my identity.

I began to define myself in the differences between people. Playing Capitalism, Egyptian War, Spoons with my suitemates from China, Texas, Southern California, I discovered our different styles. Shiwen was musical, introspective and sweet. Elizabeth was competitive, dryly humorous, and intellectual. Mariana was quiet, generous and passionate about biology. And I was me - enthusiastic, kind, nerdily excited to connect my learning to real life. As I discovered my own traits, I felt my confidence growing.

It was refreshing to walk on my own. My terror about going to college receded as I realized that I could be independent. I bounded along the path to the Cognitive Science building. I took in the trees and sculptures in John Muir College and marveled at the Geisel Library as I entered the unfamiliar classroom. I felt strangely at peace, as if I had found my place among my class. I was reeling from the mind-blowing concepts of Cognitive Science. Doing such meta things as using my brain to learn about how human brains learn, or practicing the words on my tongue as we studied Linguistics thrilled me. I spent time with passionate classmates expanding the volume of my knowledge as I pushed the boundaries of my independence.

For me, adulthood did not come at my Bat Mitzvah, when I was surrounded by familiar, supportive people. It came over four years later, when I was surrounded by strangers, forced to become familiar with myself instead. I discovered the dynamic of being with people, alone. I discovered how to interact as an individual; I took complete responsibility for my well-being; and I learned how to learn in a new environment with ample distractions and free time. Now, I continue to feel like an adult. My identity manifests in the way I interact with people, and the way I handle myself. This transition was a long time coming, but the catalyst of Academic Connections nudged me over the brink into adulthood.