

My best friend had a pet tiger.

He and his tiger were inseparable, doing everything together from playing 80-base-two-person baseball to digging for dinosaur fossils. In the winter, they created exquisite snowmen (some turned into mutant evil snow goons!) and traversed the snowy woods on their sled, capping their long days in the cold by downing hot chocolate next to the fireplace.

My best friend's name was Calvin. And his tiger was Hobbes.

I met my best friend in the bookshelf of my parents' bedroom. To anyone else, Calvin and Hobbes were just comic strip characters, but to my imaginative six-year-old self, they were as real as anyone else. Soon enough, 80-base-two-person baseball became 80-base-*three*-person baseball and a few modifications later, their sled seated three. Every day after school, I'd leap off the bus, excited for another fun-packed afternoon!

But one day, Calvin and Hobbes were gone. Entering sixth grade, I acquired a newfound obsession with academic perfection. Ambition replaced imagination. Hours of play turned into meticulous study time. And so, Calvin and Hobbes faded from my life.

Still, as hopeless as it seemed for the pair of pathetic peripatetics, Calvin and Hobbes managed to creep back into my world. One day in Algebra class, I had an epiphany. "The product of two imaginary numbers," explained my teacher, "is a real number." It seemed inconceivable that abstract *imaginary* numbers could be interwoven with *real* numbers but yet, they were! Mind blown, memories of my corporeal yet fictitious friends flooded me—and with them sprouted a deep curiosity of the science that mixed imaginary and real.

Inevitably, my fascination with mathematics cascaded into a love of learning which, in freshman year, led me to attending community college full-time. Academically, it was heaven! Office hours invited lively discussions of the Riemann Hypothesis, Gershgorin disks, and Gödel's incompleteness theorems. The diverse perspectives of my classmates—ranging from ex-convicts to Nigerian pastors to Mormon poets—challenged my own middle-class ideologies and humanized debates of immigration and capital punishment. But the more college satiated my intellectual hunger, the more it isolated me; every friend I made eventually transferred away: again, again, and again.

It was in this isolation, however, that Calvin and Hobbes reappeared—this time while I scrolled through Quora, a Q&A site with compelling essays and stories. An unanswered question caught my eye—it was about Calvin—and after answering it, I found myself writing daily, striving to spread Calvin's imagination, joy, and humor through hundreds of answers. With them came a community unified by a love for the comic and my isolation melted away. One might measure my writing success by the millions of views my answers amassed or my title of 'Top Writer 2018,' but when I received a message that read:

*'Once in a while, you come across an article that is so absorbing, it takes your mind off of things for that period you read it. Some such articles are Quora answers. This answer is one such. Thanks for a good piece.'*

I realized both were fleeting compared to the fulfillment from hearing how my answers meaningfully impacted my readers—and I've chased that satisfaction of helping others ever since.

Even though I've long since lost my sled and baseball bat, the products of my two imaginary friends are undoubtedly real—as real as the best broccoli soup made by my ninety-one-year-old co-volunteer at Meals-on-Wheels or my Academic Decathlon math medals or the triumph of my tutees acing calculus. They're as real as the snow falling through the sky during a cold winter evening—and at times, when I'm sipping hot chocolate watching those crystals of ice illuminate the frosty evening, I'm six years old again, accompanied by a boy and his tiger. After a moment, I'm taken back to the present—a much different person, but with the same drive to help others, the same love of mathematics, and the same imagination I received from Calvin and Hobbes.