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The Last Page: Class: Act

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CLASS: ACT

Every new semester reminds me how awkward it is introducing myself. The first day of class is efficiently predictable since the players know the rules of the game by heart: professors know to distribute a syllabus, offer a course synopsis, and take questions; students know to let professors do their thing so class can end early. If you're like me and take a lot of discussion-based classes, you can expect some obligatory "get to know each other" exercise to piggyback: the professor introduces him or herself, gives a brief but impressive education and employment summary, and then asks the class to do something similar—"Tell us something about yourself."

You mean, like, now?

Even before the *f* sound brings teeth to lip you can see the kids closest to the professor panic as if they were stuck in a car with a bee, scanning their vocabulary for flattering adjectives while trying to figure out if the professor is going to go clockwise or counterclockwise around the room.

So why is such a simple question so scary? Because under closer examination the inquiry is less innocuous. Because, as far as the class is concerned, your history starts now. A bunch of kids put on a show telling everyone how they want to be seen, even though the truth is that people are so complicated any given answer is going to be unsatisfying. It is possible that a person's view of his- or herself and the actual defining characteristics show up in the middle of a Venn diagram, but there is a reason that space is so small.

Most will sub an introspective answer with a Mad Lib: "I like to (verb) (noun)." If you say you like park skiing, you're implying that you're a sweet athlete; if you say you relish the depth of red wine (presumably as a 21-year-old), you're hinting that you're a liar. If we were more honest than self-conscious, the most common endings to "I like ..." sentences would have something to do with melted cheese or syndicated television, but nobody willingly exposes himself as "that guy" (which is sad because vices can be sympathetic and humanizing and are often more telling about a person than which California baseball team they root for).

Perhaps we cannot be trusted with describing ourselves—and why should we be, considering we're summarizing ourselves not for our own benefit, but for that of others? Maybe it's a job that requires an outsider because we simply cannot be objective about the process. We always want to be seen as admirable or desirable, and if that requires us to brag or lie, so be it.

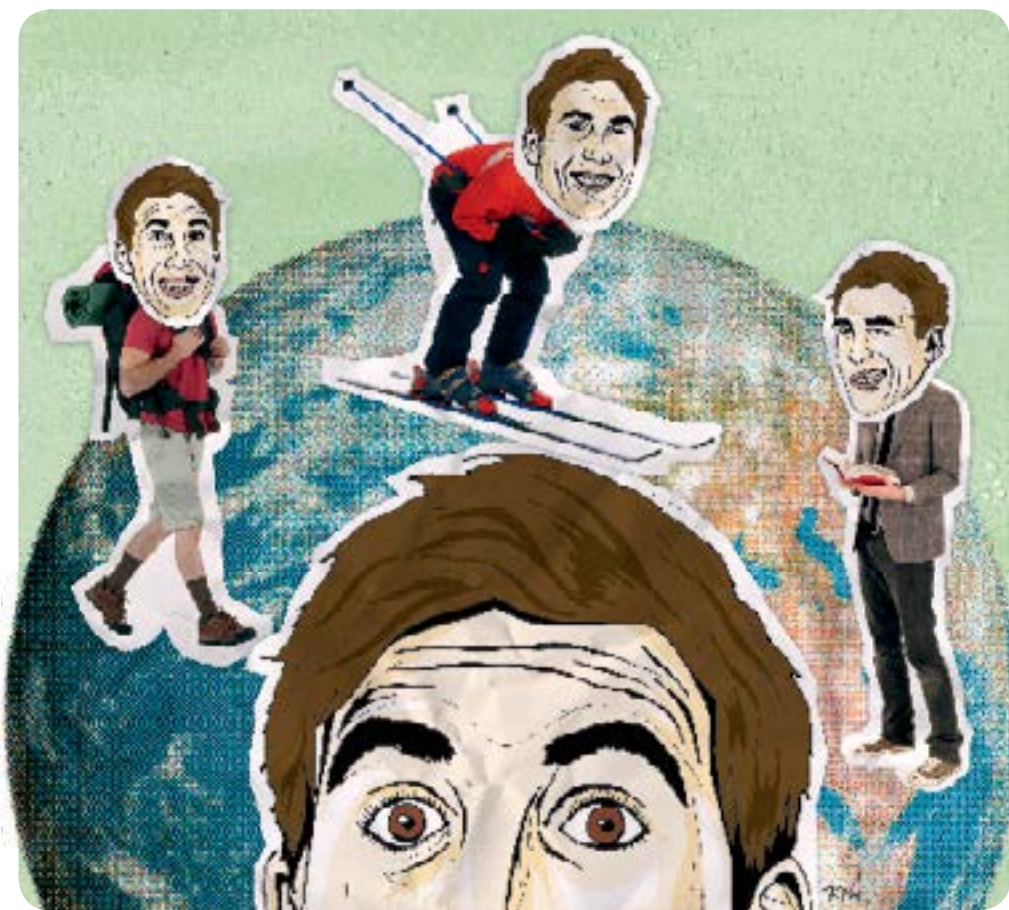


ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT P. HERNANDEZ

As an English major the variation of "Who are you?" I hear most often is, "What is your favorite book?" Even though it is more targeted and multifarious in that it gives an example of your taste or style or sense of humor or some other unquantifiable aspect of personality, it still bums me out.

The fact remains that you are using someone else's creation to illustrate your identity. I realize that in our postmodern era it is a lot to ask that we create something new to define ourselves, but the questions we need to be asking should be more personal: What are you most proud of? What is it you like most about yourself? What are you best at? These are the trauma-inducing questions that are worthy of a student's fear; questions that inspire answers that in a single sentence can tell people what you enjoy the most, what you do with your time, and what you value in life: sentimental answers, as opposed to reductive ones.

So I'm sitting in class at stage left when the professor decides to go counterclockwise—I'm up first. I can't say I like sandwiches again. Nobody laughed the last time I said that and it was

humiliating. I am the King of Pillow Talk but I really don't want to deal with the implications of saying something so alarming. My top-played artists are The Cool Kids and Regina Spektor, but I'd almost rather people think I was some kind of sexual deviant than be called a hipster, so let's give that a no, too.

Luckily I've thought about this stuff before so I skip over the crazy and answer: *I am really good at crossing busy, four-way intersections.* I can only pray people will take this to mean I grew up in a city and I'm impatient. Not impatient enough to shadow ambulances through red lights but impatient enough that a steady-lit hand means, "you've got this I can see you have to be somewhere by the way you're rad."

Your turn.

Julian Giarraputo '12, an English major from Queens, N.Y., was briefly an economics major but can no longer remember why. He is currently a blogger for insideColby.com, which features content "for students, by students."