

Meaning Lies Here

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Before or after school breaks, I inevitably hear people talk about their friends from home—friends they've had since first grade or kindergarten. I have not spoken to a single person from my lower or middle school (who isn't my sister) in four years, and that is by design. This is not because any of them are particularly awful people, but in truth I avoid them because I'm embarrassed.

You see, I was a really angry kid in my earlier years. I'm not sure why, how, or when it began, but it was worsened by a negative experience I had that made me defensive. My bad temper was not well received by anyone. In fact, it resulted in what is basically the lower school equivalent of court mandated anger management therapy in second grade. (This is not a joke, a girl accused me of pushing her off a slide and causing her to fracture her arm. I would like to clarify, I did not push Victoria off that slide. I was an angry kid, yes, but I was not a violent one.)

When Covid hit, I got to spend a lot of time on my own. My siblings spent time in separate rooms of the house, either attending online classes or on the phone with their friends. No matter how much the two of them lamented not getting to spend time out of the house or with their friends, I truly didn't feel like I was missing much. It was peaceful being on my own. This period of solitude made me realize that if the happiest I felt was when I was alone, then my life was pretty sad. I didn't like the direction my actions were taking me and I didn't want to be angry. I certainly didn't want to be angry forever. So, by the time I returned to in-person classes, I had resolved to be better.

Now, before I begin to regale to you the tale of my world class lack of follow through, I want to give you all a little bit of context. I spent first through eighth grade at an all-girls Catholic institution. Most of us had been there since first grade or even earlier, and most people knew me as angry, and labels in a school that size are notoriously hard to get rid of. Though I'd resolved to be better, I didn't know what better even meant, let alone where to begin.

I spent eighth grade making attempts at conversation as I watched new students seep effortlessly into the class as if they'd been a part of the grade the whole time. I wasn't exactly angry anymore—I was jealous. I wanted to be that effortlessly easy to get along with and so I put my effort into learning about what the people in my grade found interesting and gave up on my own interests. By the time eighth grade came to a close, I decided the school had seen too much of me that I wouldn't be able to improve if I stayed.

Enter St. Andrew's.

I knew about SAS because my older brother also attended and graduated in the class of '21. I arrived at the school prepared for my fresh start and I was ecstatic. I had been with the same people for eight years and I was finally surrounded by a group of people who didn't know me.

Then my first problem arose. I was surrounded by a group of people and I was afraid of getting to know people authentically because in my mind authenticity just meant anger. It didn't occur to me that it could mean anything else.

When selected to give this talk, I was asked to reflect on what St. Andrew's meant to me, and that's really hard to sum up. People, mostly adults and teachers in this community, talk about "circles of care" or "you can't help but connect," and I guess I hadn't given it much thought until now. The thing about St. Andrew's is you make friends in the strangest ways, and you keep them because there's such a wide variety of interests and backgrounds here.

I suppose the message of this talk is mostly directed at the newer students, though I think it can definitely be applied outwards, especially as we seniors move toward college. You can be nervous to start over, be in a new place around people you don't know, but you should never worry about being yourself or branching out. Looking back, this is probably one of the more cliché messages I could have chosen, but if someone reacts badly to something you care about deeply, they aren't people you should want to be around anyway. I had a hard time getting out of my own head my freshman year, but I'm lucky to have found people I've connected with who I love and trust wholeheartedly.

So, what does St. Andrew's mean to me? I think the meaning is found in the small moments where you get closer to someone or yourself, whether that be gabbing with someone in your section of Andreans about Pokémon, or talking with the other art majors about their latest piece and their inspirations.

Meaning lies in getting a friend into your interests by making them sit through all three *Hobbit* films and still talking about them four years later. Meaning lies in your friends who maybe don't totally understand your interests, but who support them anyway, even as you watch them die a bit inside as they realize you've been playing Pokémon Go for the past twenty minutes while sitting at Starbucks (sorry Kayley).

Meaning is in moments where you can rant to a teacher about a topic you feel passionately about, and have them listen intently without being dismissive, like talking about one specific type of snake to your advisor while you should technically be working.

Meaning is in a faculty member listening to an issue you have and wholeheartedly offering solutions (even if the solution sometimes is just letting you sit on the grass and

pet their dogs).

Meaning lies in getting to explore interests without shame, like writing an entire Research Sem paper about the cultural effects of cannibalism while your teacher cheers you on, not grossed out in the least.

Meaning lies in being seen: a friend who asks you about your interests without being prompted; friends who understand that your displays of affection may be a bit different but they accept them anyway; friends who push you outside of your comfort zone from time to time because that's important. There is so much meaning to be found for yourself at St. Andrew's, no matter where you look. I think that's what makes the culture here so unique.

The SAS experience is whatever you make it, and I'm so glad that our grade has had these four years together and I'm beyond excited to see what's next for all of us.

As I move on to college, I will inevitably hear people talk about friends they have from back home that they've known since first grade or kindergarten, and I'll be able to join in. While I may not have known the people here for as long, and while Delaware may not officially be my home, I'd say I've learned enough here for it to count.

I encourage everyone to take advantage of their time here, even if they consider themselves introverted. Branch out and share with others. You'll be able to make connections that extend beyond your time here. I know I have and I will forever be grateful.