



How Does It Feel to be on Your Own?

Joanna Michelson, Brown University graduate

There's just something about Bob Dylan. His songs used to irritate me before I got to college but now, suddenly, they make sense. Take his most classic, roll-down the car window, speed-inducing "Like a Rolling Stone." After several minutes of tuning and searching for the right chords, he begins to croon in that endearingly Bob Dylan voice, "How does it feel to be on your own?"

He supplies several answers throughout the song. Riding through freshman year is like driving in that car with the windows down, headed down the coast. Bob asks how it feels and answers himself, ". . . no direction home." This seemingly confusing answer is very normal for first-year college students. What direction is home? You seem to be headed somewhere exciting, but where will you end up? It is very common in September to sit around and talk about "home." At first, "home" takes the conversational form of high school, high school friends, and family. Leaving the place that shaped you and gave you the strength to apply to college is very strange.

Everything on campus will be new. A computer randomly assigns you to a room, a hall, a section of psychology, even a lab-partner. Suddenly you are surrounded by interesting people your own age. College at first may seem like camp with homework. The mail-room and long-distance phone calls take on important meaning. Time and experience put space between you and the objects in the rear view. As the first months pass, and college feels more permanent, you begin to feel what you considered "home" is changing. You are in charge of creating your own routine and your own sense of place. Often times your first friends and connections at college will be the people who live next door or on your hallway. Everyone is anxious to feel at home at college and the most convenient place to form a new family is with your neighbors. You may never have lived with a roommate before arriving on campus. Learning to respect space and to communicate will soon seem more important than becoming blood sisters. Friendships between roommates are very special and often evolve on their own.

How does it feel? Bob Dylan suggests, "Like a complete unknown." Even the simplest tasks may seem more complicated than they were at home. Broken ATM cards, elusive advisors, lost room keys, malfunctioning computers, salad bars in three languages, and hidden classrooms may seem like the crisis of the hour. Starting your engine at college is rarely smooth. A sense of humor and perspective is crucial.

As you settle into your dorm room, you may look around at the posters and pictures that you brought from home. Your eyes may wander over to where your roommate hung her Confederate flag and placed her lava lamp. Everyone else may seem to have it more together than you do. But know that all freshmen question themselves and their direction. In this new world you are a complete unknown to everyone except yourself. You may notice it in small ways like the slang you use or the food dishes you miss. Freshmen love to take their new freedom to experiment with new lifestyles, hair color, or types of people. Your confidence will grow as you realize that you are finding your own path.

How does it feel to be on your own? You will find it exciting and liberating. College students live inside their own patterns that are out of sync with those of the rest of the world. Since classes generally start much later than

they did in high school, you may find yourself staying up into the early morning and sleeping through breakfast. On weekends most parties and dances won't pick up until after 10:00 p.m. It becomes reasonable to start the rented videos at 2:00 a.m. It becomes normal to eat pizza and Powerade at all meals vaguely called "brunch," "dinner," and "study break." College students share this unique culture, and along with the bare feet and frisbee comes a sense of camaraderie.

Social life at college offers many choices. In one night you may eat Thai food, discuss evolution, go to a frat party, and play a game of badminton. There is much more space to explore different circles of people and events. Have fun and find people who share your values. Challenge yourself. Join the newspaper staff, try out for crew, take ballroom dancing lessons. Extra-curricular activities are places to test old skills and build new ones. If you find that your hallway friends don't share your love of camping, join the outdoors club and open yourself to hard-core hikers.

How does it feel to learn on your own? Because most schools require students to take only four classes a semester or quarter, you are able to focus on what interests you most. Freshman requirements generally address broad, human issues and questions. You will be learning from professors for whom philosophy, medicine, education, or physics is LIFE. You will find yourself in discussions which draw on what you learned in high school and hearing voices very unlike your own. Many freshman classes are lecture-size. You may at first feel swallowed by an impersonal room larger than your high school auditorium. But lecture classes attract some brilliant speakers. Seek out the professor or his assistants. The responsibility for the work is different from the way it was in high school. Academics may at first seem more casual than they did in high school. Some classes will grade based on one test and one paper all semester. In between, graded work will be weeks when all you need to do is read. It is easy to fall behind without the gentle pressure of quizzes or worksheets, but the sense of achievement (and relief) after a semester is powerful.

As you pass such crucial landmarks as your first all-nighter, first college Halloween, and first college snowball fight, being on your own seems lighter. Freshman year takes on a new flavor as you return from winter break. You realize that you know more people, you know better how to read (or skim) for meaning, you know what hours and what dishes to avoid at the dining hall. The entire year will introduce you to ideas and choices that are new to you, but steering a path becomes easier. At times you will still feel like a rolling stone, the random days moving past you faster than your motor can keep up with. But all the stories, problem sets, spontaneous dance parties, frozen yogurt cones, and calls home slowly will take shape and seem less random. Like Bob Dylan after testing his chords and his voice at the beginning of his songs, you will ultimately make music.