

What's the answer to a question you're frequently asked? What does it reveal about you?

People are often surprised to hear that I was in a fraternity. It's not a fact that I go out of my way to bring up. So, it generally arises after I've had a chance to get to know someone relatively well. I've also found that the surprise is regular enough that I now enjoy bringing it up in unexpected contexts. It's fun to watch someone you've known for a year or more open their eyes wide when they learn something new about you.

I was born and grew up in the UK but went to university in the US at the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) in Philadelphia. When I first arrived at the school I had some inkling of what a fraternity was but I don't think I had ever seriously considered joining one.

UPenn, although it is in the North East where these things are a little less well developed, has a huge Greek¹ scene. As such, the massive waves of memetic desire aimed at joining a fraternity quickly made it one of my top priorities. I was not a good student which made joining a little tough but at the beginning of my sophomore year I became a member of the Beta chapter of Phi Gamma Delta ([Fiji](#)). The fraternity completely defined my university experience and to this day I still see nearly all the brothers in my class every year.

On the surface I think people are surprised by this simply because of the basic stereotypes of what a fraternity is. Fraternities are as cliché American as apple pie. I'm British and Canadian now living in Toronto where the idea of a fraternity is very foreign. Fraternity life is focussed on big parties, large social groups and raucous evenings. I rarely go out, positively hate clubs and crowded bars, and do best in one-to-one settings. Fraternities are generally considered a hot bed for drink, drugs, and sex I don't do any drugs outside of an addiction to coffee, barely drink, and have a contained sex life. On first blush then the core attributes of fraternity life seem totally anathema to who I am.

At a deeper level though there are also a couple qualities exemplified by fraternity members that I lack and vice-versa. Generally frat stars are bold, direct and maybe even a little domineering. I can turn on that mode of behaviour once in a while but more often than not I am ambivalent and indirect. In a more positive light, I think I'm lucky enough to have some intellectual humility², something that is for the most part missing from fraternity life.

Most importantly, frat members have a reputation for frivolity. Jungle juice flows and bad decisions follow. The next day the reflections of members are characterised by indifference if not

¹ Fraternities and sororities collectively are referred to as "Greek" institutions

² I read the Black Swan by Nassim Taleb when I was around 14 and it had a profound effect on me. Though I must caveat that my love for Taleb has waned somewhat over the years as I have seen how he acts on Twitter. Never meet your idols.

even pride for the mistakes of the prior evening. Although I've engaged in my fair share of youthful mistakes, this kind of behaviour makes me uncomfortable. I am at risk of not practising what I preach but I do aspire to a virtue of nobility. Standing up straight, sitting thoughtfully, speaking with care, and avoiding the mistakes that come from brash behaviour all matter a lot to me.

So, for the people who know me, the idea that I was in a fraternity is hard to grasp. This certainly reveals a lot about who I am and who I've become since university. But, as much as it reveals about me, I think it also reveals something about our society.

The first Greek organisations were formed with the specific aim of [cultivating the Arts and Sciences](#), specifically through developing men and women that could excel in these fields. The social and charitable efforts of the fraternity I joined during my time in university certainly left a lot to be desired compared to these illustrious beginnings. It was nonetheless the case that this initial sentiment of greater purpose prevailed above the raucous behaviour³. At the very least, the fraternity was a self organised group of men who chose to offer a huge portion of their careers at university to the group rather than to their own partial aims.

Being in this group changed me in profound ways. I learned for the first time what it meant to have close male friendships predicated on more than shared interests or circumstances of time and place. I also learned what it meant to be responsible for another and how to fail in that responsibility.

I remember one event in particular that still makes me deeply uncomfortable. In my second to last year at university I took on the role of "study master" for the new class of freshmen that were pledging the fraternity.

"Pledging" is a period of probation for an incoming class when they have not yet joined the fraternity. During this period the new members undergo a series of trials and tests. The aim is two-fold. First, to create a shared difficult experience that can lead to bonding within the class. Second, to ensure that the incoming men are taking the group they are joining seriously. The pledging process means that it's not easy to join a fraternity which is also why it can be worthwhile.

As study master my job was to sit in a classroom every night during the week between 8pm and 10pm to oversee the pledge class and make sure they were using this time to study. These are hours when most university students are invariably out partying, getting dinner or slacking off. It's a real sacrifice for the group to spend that time working instead. It's also a good way to make sure that they keep their grades high and maintain a constant drip of seriousness during the pledging process.

³ I also must add the caveat that my frat was actually very special. The folks that I became friends with had a quality of taste and care that I have rarely, if ever, met in the world beyond that group. And, I would be proud today to introduce any one of my friends to *almost* any of them ;).

Unfortunately though, in this semester, I was the one who slacked off. I didn't bother going to the classroom to oversee the group for a few weeks. Foolishly I believed that they would show up anyway under the threat that if it was ever noticed that they weren't there it would mean even harder work during the pledge process.

As could easily have been expected, I eventually went back to the classroom one day to find it completely empty. It seems like a small thing, but when this was discovered my entire class in the fraternity fretted deeply about what to do. We worried at length about whether this lack of discipline for a period of pledging meant that the new recruits hadn't taken the process seriously enough. In fact, however ridiculous this may seem, I still have a tinge of fear that I harmed that year's ability to feel integrated into the whole by this lapse in judgement.

I took on a leadership position, however small, and by not showing up I potentially created long-term negative consequences for those I was meant to be leading. It's a lesson I won't forget.

In particular, they represent one of the first institutions a young person can join where they and their immediate peers are in charge. One of their first opportunities to create a space for themselves. Yes, there is a lot of partying involved when young people take the reins but there is some modicum of discipline too. Alone, collecting the fraternity fees and then managing the budget to ensure a packed social calendar, especially one that is in competition with dozens of other social calendars, is not a trivial feat. In a fraternity though this basic competence and institutional bureaucracy is combined with quite intense socialising rituals of pledging, shared housing, and communal meals. People who go through these institutions are altered by it in profound ways.

This isn't how our culture thinks about fraternities but I bet that with a little conversation you could hear something similar from the majority of those who have gone through this system. If I had to guess, I think the reason we are blind to these benefits is that we are deeply advanced in our postmodernism. Rather than simply a scepticism towards 'Grand Narratives' we have become sceptical to the possibility of beneficial group dynamics in general. We find it hard to believe that the institutions we generate - especially those generated by young men - could have a positive effect rather than succumbing to the worst devils of their constituents' nature.

I think that I come across - correctly or incorrectly - as mature for my age. I certainly prize nobility and thoughtfulness. Fraternities generally are considered the opposite of that. As Animal House illustrates all too well, a fraternity is regularly a den of immature, naive, and ill-tempered behaviour. Nonetheless, my experience of a fraternity was that while this kind of behaviour doubtless occurred the end result was the opposite. A group of boys got together with the aim of building something greater than the sum of its parts. They ended up coming out the other side of their shared experience as men. We faltered and fell and there was much that was misguided in many of our actions. Despite this, we aimed up and tried to do so together and received a certain maturity as the reward.

