

I've always been fascinated by bulletin boards. You know, the ones you see in detective movies, with the red string and the mugshots and the newspaper clippings. Something about it just feels right: the organized chaos, the connections, the way all the crisscrossing strings always manage to point to a solid conclusion, boldly circled in red marker and surrounded by arrows.

It would be nice if real life could work that way, but it doesn't. In real life, everyone's working on the same board, and even simple things like conversations end up turning into messes of color and energy that seem impossible to make sense of. So, early on, I decided to keep my little section of the board as empty and organized as I could. If I stuck to what I knew, I thought, life would be simpler. Back then, simpler meant better.

Things changed a few days into my freshman year, though, when I got an unexpected offer. A student I had never met had heard that I was interested in a roleplaying game called D&D during a class icebreaker, and emailed to invite me to a small D&D club he was creating. There it was – an opportunity, long red string attached and branching off into the distance. Immediately, I wanted to ignore it. Accepting meant I'd be jumping headfirst into tangled, terrifying, and unfamiliar territory, on *purpose*, and I was terrified.

But, against all instincts, saying no seemed worse. I desperately wanted to learn D&D, and I couldn't refuse just because I was *scared*. So... I said yes. I reached out, grabbed the string, and was immediately greeted with a barrage of unknowns– impromptu character creation, seemingly endless rules, and, god forbid, *actually talking to new people*. I watched the people I was playing with having fun with their characters, weaving through the ever-changing crisscrossing strands with apparent ease. In comparison, I felt stuck, unable to find the space to express myself. I could barely even muster the courage to say more than a couple sentences per session.

Looking back, I think my path out of that rut started as a simple observation. I started to notice that every time someone put up an idea, at least one person would go up to add to it, supporting it and in turn *strengthening* it, creating a web of ideas that grew to a size I never could've imagined. Slowly, month by month, the realization set in: there had always been space for me. I just had to throw my ideas into the ring, and even if they were bad, my new friends would help me make them better. All of a sudden, that mess of energy felt freeing, instead of cramped.

It took me a whole *year* to get comfortable with just those few people, but afterwards, I felt like I had crossed a hurdle worthy of all that time. I gained not only a group of good friends, but also an incredibly valuable mindset that I still carry with me today. Community is now an integral part of my creative process; my favorite way to flesh out an idea is to talk it over with my trusted friends and factor in their input. I've learned to find people who are strong in the areas that I'm weak, and vice versa, so we can help each other succeed. Having other people provide both honest critique and encouragement fuels my creativity, allowing me to approach my projects with renewed drive and dedication.

Collaboration is a ridiculously powerful tool when used right, and I was taught to properly harness it from just one opportunity – just *one*, out of *thousands*. I'm done boxing myself in, alone and stagnant. It doesn't matter how long it takes, how hard it is, or how scared I am. I'm determined to grow, one red string at a time.