

# WHY I SAY "POP"

Sometimes diversity turns up in something as simple as a soft drink.

My parents moved right after I left home to go to college. The move was expected. My father had been working in another state for eight months, and realtors lured potential buyers into our constantly clean house throughout my last summer at home.

The timing was good. The moving vans stayed away until my senior year concluded with long-awaited commencement and summer-time graduation parties. I graduated surrounded by the familiar faces of friends and teachers and in the same school system I had entered twelve years before as a kindergartner.

As my family prepared to move, I spent the long summer preparing for college. Moving concerns were muscled out of my mind by the reality of leaving home. When I finally said good-bye to my high school friends at the end of August, any sense of sadness we felt vanished with the thought of approaching adventure.

But in the days before I left, I sometimes said good-bye when no one was around me. I said it to my cleaned-out bedroom, to my backyard of climbable trees, and to the square of driveway where my basketball hoop stood. We built the hoop when I was eight using an old telephone pole and leftover lumber.

I said good-bye to my home because I realized leaving for college would forever alter its significance to me, but I also knew these farewells could be for more permanent reasons. A few weeks into my freshman year I picked up the phone and learned from my mother that my end-of-summer good-byes

were appropriate. My parents were moving, and my new home was transplanted someplace strange and far away from the old.

My family hadn't moved since I was two years old, so this was my first experience with being uprooted. The first few changes were primarily academic, mostly a mess of paperwork to fill out and new coordinates to memorize. But other changes proved more

confusing. I struggled with the experience of living in the triangular system of new house, college, and old home. When introducing myself to new friends, I had to add the corollary of where I lived after explaining where I was really from. I sometimes felt lost

because so much of the first few months of college depends upon where you call home. Everyone at college exhibits the oddities of their backgrounds in a blend of words, emotions and idea, all new and sometimes shocking.

College also shows how conversation — and especially language — can define who we are and where we come from. I marveled at the way my Southern roommate pronounced the word "cement" by slipping the sound of "sea" into the first syllable, and making the word completely new to the ear. We used to kid my friend from Minnesota about how her long vowels made the words she spoke as round as the 10,000 lakes in her state. The thick Queens accent of a friend across the hall demanded instant respect, and the California slang of other friends kept me current on the lingo of my generation. Because I arrived without an accent from the green suburbs of Ohio, I found myself borrowing the voices of those who lived around me, incorporating both the measured drawl of my Southern roommate and the New York authority of my hallway neighbor.

But the greatest and the most amazing audible

distinction between college students — from all over the United States — is in the way we ask for a can of a carbonated beverage. No other linguistic test works quite as well, or divides the country so easily among friends and roommates.

My southern roommate would ask for a "coke" even if he wanted a Sprite, thanks to corporate dominance and long-standing regional traditions. For the South, Coke was it.

Trend-setters from the twin coasts of New Jersey and California arch over the continent with their old-fashioned preference for "soda." To these fast-moving so-

phisticates, no other word is even close to correct. And because I grew up in the sensible Midwest of Ohio, I just say the oddly funny word, "pop," when I want something cold to drink.

From the vantage point of college, home is a place that grows further away even when we don't move. Nervous freshmen, independent for the first time in their lives, find a certain comfort in the company of friends from their own high school, state, or even region. Some know the great joy in finding someone with whom they can discuss the strip malls, restaurants, football games, and street names they both grew up with. No matter how random the connection, favorite stories from high school are exchanged as each remembers the place they call home a little clearer than before.

Coming from a small town in Ohio, I usually don't find those hometown conversations at Harvard. But occasionally in the academic bustle of Cambridge, or at my new home in the suburban mini-worlds of New Jersey, I feel the urge to bravely ask for something cold to drink, and to let people know where I really call home.

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