

## **Weird Like Me**

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Shortly after I started teaching philosophy, I was afflicted with a student who personified everything that stood in somewhat hostile opposition to me. Each day, he was there in the front row of my introductory class, wearing his baseball cap backward and exuding cocky self-assurance that was mixed with a pinch of disdain for formal education. While I readied myself for class at the front of the room, I'd try not to listen as he talked to his buddies about how much he drank at the most recent party. I was sure he thought that I was weird, but I knew better. I had, after all, pursued my Ph.D. not because I expected to get a job (philosophy positions are a rare and wonderful thing) but because I wanted a credential that could transmute my natural weirdness into eccentricity. I wanted alchemy, and I had it. In the classroom, I could be myself, no matter what others might think of me. In the classroom, I could tell my stories, no matter what others might think of them. I still like to tell stories, and I hope that some of my stories help some of my students to see different things or to see the same things differently. That is, of course, the hope that encourages me to share this story with you now. I can never guarantee success - sometimes stories don't fit - but they are mine to tell anyway. And I reminded myself, the day that I introduced my class to Descartes, that students who partied, and who wore their caps backward, and who viewed me with probable scorn, didn't matter. I owned the room.

"So," I concluded near the end of the hour, "Descartes is saying that for all you know, everything you see, and hear, and taste, and feel, and smell could be nothing but an illusion, something fed to your mind by an evil demon bent upon deceiving you. But you don't even need to believe in that demon, do you? Maybe your mind is responsible for generating the totality of your experience. Maybe your entire existence is nothing more than one amazingly coherent and well-coordinated hallucination. It's possible, right? I've wondered about it. I can't remember how old I was, but I must have been six or seven because I remember what house I was living in,

when all of a sudden, while I sat on the living room floor watching T.V., I thought, 'What if none of this is real? What if I'm not a little girl, with a poodle named 'Wiggles,' and a canopy bed? What if I'm *really* a disembodied space alien, the *only thing that ever existed* , and I got so *lonely* that I had some kind of break down and started to hallucinate everything - my mommy, my daddy, my doggy, my dolls, and *everything*? And what if after awhile I'll stop hallucinating and just be all by myself, floating in the dark, alone forever?'"

At this point, some of my students were looking at me as though I'd dropped in from Mars. Among this group, not surprisingly, was Mr. Baseball Cap Partier. He was gaping at me, but I didn't care. I'm not weird. I'm eccentric. I continued. "Well, it didn't take long for me to freak myself out, so I went to the kitchen where my mom was making dinner. I didn't ask her if I was a disembodied space alien, of course, because I knew it didn't matter what she said. After all, if I was a disembodied space alien, my mom would be part of my hallucination and so any reassurance she might offer to the contrary would be empty. So I just made small talk with her and before long I felt better. But I realized, of course, that I *shouldn't* have felt better, that I hadn't solved the problem. I had only found a way to ignore it."

I dismissed the class, but Mr. Baseball Cap Partier lingered behind. "Did you *really* think that when you were six or seven years old?" he asked. "Yes," I unapologetically answered. And then he said something that changed my life forever. He said, "*So did I!* Only I made the mistake of telling my mother and I was in therapy for eight years." In that moment, everything separating that student from me was dissolved into our much deeper sameness. He was no longer someone opposed to me, but someone with whom I shared something important. He was no longer a student, but a person – someone here on this planet with me, muddling through the human experience as best he could with the resources he had, just as I muddle through as best I can with mine.

Remembering that has enabled me to see the abiding commonalities between my students and myself, and this has allowed me to relate to them differently. It's not that my

students put off writing their papers. It's that we all - my students and I – are tempted to postpone unpleasant tasks and are often genuinely overwhelmed with too much to do in too little time. It's not that my students are too wedded to their smart phones. It's that we all – my students and I – are social beings who need connection, especially when we are far from home. It's not that my students are uninterested in my subject. It's that we all – my students and I – can feel disempowered by an extended conversation that systematically forces us to acknowledge the expertise of another while giving us very limited opportunity to talk about our own particular passions. Thanks to that fellow in the front row with the baseball cap, I've tried to remember that students aren't another species to be analyzed from the outside-in. They are fellow human beings to be understood from the inside-out. They aren't lazy while I am industrious. They aren't normal while I am eccentric. I'm weird. We're all weird. And some of my students are weird like me.