

Halfway Heaven: Diary of A Harvard Murder

By *Melanie Thernstrom*

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With the advanced development and international reputation of American higher education, an increasing number of international students come to the US to pursue college degrees. These students, though both talented and intelligent, typically encounter a transitional problem once they arrive in what is generally considered to the new student a “strange land.” Faced with a different culture, many new students often find themselves at a loss when trying to approach the new society, experience unexpected hardships when adjusting to the new environment, and feel uncomfortable when socializing with people of a different culture, particularly in an environment where others are more concerned about fitting in to their new environment on a new campus than extending a welcoming hand to international students. Some new international students become so isolated and depressed that they fail to succeed in the situation, and as a result, fail to finish their studies. For those students, the transition from one culture to another proves a serious problem as well as a crucial factor in the success or failure of their academic pursuits and the realization of the “American Dream.” Subsequently, at least one dominant question to be addressed is how should colleges and universities help international students transition successfully to their new international and academic culture.

Halfway Heaven is the true story of two female college students, one from Ethiopia and the other from Vietnam, both of whom attended Harvard University. To these two girls and their families, admission to Harvard University was a dream come true, an educational achievement in itself. The failure of one of the students to adapt to the new culture, however, not only destroyed the “American Dream,” but resulted in the loss of life as one student killed the other and then committed suicide. In this book, the author, by drawing on the astonishing diaries kept by the murderer reconstructed the inner life of a deeply troubled college student, struggling against isolation and depression, uncannily self-aware, and desperate for help, and explored why the “might have been prevented” tragedy should not have taken place.

There are six chapters in the book. The first chapter described what happened in 1995 at Harvard University when Sinedu Tadesse, a 20 year-old junior from Ethiopia, murdered her roommate, Trang Phuong Ho, an immigrant from Vietnam, and then committed suicide. The book also provides coverage of the campus response and the reaction of various offices on campus to the murder-suicide. In Chapters Two and Three the author described the two students, exploring the possible causes and correlations to the incident by examining the cultures from which they came from, their families, their childhoods, their educational backgrounds, and their motivation and goals for attending college in the United States. The findings of the exploration showed that their cultures,

families, and goals contributed considerably to the problems they encountered in their transition to the new culture that resulted in the tragedy.

Chapter 4 is a description of the students' experiences at Harvard and, in particular, the metamorphosis they underwent to fit into the collegiate social life. For Tadesse, who excelled in the educational system of her home country and had always earned good grades instead of a social life, the academic reinforcement she had relied on disappeared and the loneliness she had suffered in Ethiopia intensified. The loneliness, isolation, and depression from which she suffered made her life at Harvard miserable and she never 'found' herself, either academically or socially. On the contrary, things were quite different with Ho. She was very outgoing, interactive, and thoughtful, going around to greet everyone in the morning and again in the afternoon. She did not seem unduly stressed about her grades, and although she had also experienced many problems in her freshman year, in particular, dealing with problems such as her parents' divorce and her sisters' difficult freshman year, she 'found' herself and she fit in during her sophomore year. As a matter of fact, even the lonely and isolated Tadesse was influenced by the cheerfulness and friendliness of Ho, and without even Ho's knowledge, Tadesse believed her to be her best-friend.

Having examined the two students' cultural and educational backgrounds and their Harvard experiences, in Chapter 5 the author challenged the knowledge, qualifications, and especially the responsibilities of staff in the Mental Health Service at the Harvard with questions involving complex issues such as: to what extent can a large, diversely populated institution be responsible for the welfare of its students? Are mental health issues given, or should they be given, the same attention as other wellness programs? Who, if anyone, was responsible for the death of the two students? Could anything have been done to prevent the incident?

At the conclusion of the tragic story in Chapter 6, the author wrote about her memory of Tadesse and Ho, referring to the incident as a "loss is so overwhelming that all reflection seems to collapse into a sense of inevitability..." This is a powerful story, and one that everyone who works with college students should read and be familiar with. Very well written, the reader will find the story to be moving, disturbing, and will recognize the offices involved with the two students. Although there never will be clear answers to individual incidents like this, there is a great deal that can be learned by the student affairs profession about looking for warning signs, caring for students, and making efforts to see that all succeed.