In this essay, I would like to talk about two particular experiences I have had while a student at Bowdoin that have shaped my perspective on service. One was uncomfortable and relatively brief. It lingers in my conscience as a moment of personal shame, an instance in which I allowed myself to be overwhelmed by the depth and complexity of the problems facing our community, and chose consciously to look the other way. The other has been the source of some of my happiest and most fulfilling experiences at Bowdoin. The two are related, in my mind, because together they illustrate processes fundamental to the practice of service that are rarely subject to the level of scrutiny they deserve; they are the ways in which we construct and establish difference between ourselves and the people we serve, and how we conceive of and respond to needs in our communities.

As a first year, I signed up to tutor at Kennedy Park, in a study center run by the Portland Housing Authority. The description has not changed much in the four years since I started: “Volunteers provide tutoring after school Monday through Thursday for mainly immigrant and refugee children in grades 7-12.” What attracted me to this particular organization, as I remember, was the chance to work with students who came from another culture. I was hungry for an experience that would be exciting and exotic. (I was, though I didn’t know it at the time, a budding anthro major). And for that year, and for the three following, that is exactly what I got. I made friends with students whose names I had to try three or four times to pronounce, who wore hijab and spoke Somali, and who accused every male who came to tutoring with me of being my boyfriend. Going to Kennedy Park was stepping outside of the world I knew at Bowdoin and into one that
was full of new faces and new experiences. It was an exchange that I thought was mutually beneficial. I learned about their culture, and they got (much needed) help with their homework. They were young, poor, and refugees; that they needed my help, and that I could help them, was beyond obvious to me.

As a sophomore, I found myself with more time on my hands than I wanted to devote to homework, and so I began to volunteer at the Tedford Shelter in Brunswick. The objective the group, I believe, was to facilitate a dialogue between clients of the shelter and Bowdoin students. However, the clients were, for the most part, less than interested in casual conversation. For many, dinner at Tedford was the only hot meal they would see all day. Some suffered from problems with mental illnesses, others were simply quiet, consumed, I am sure, with their worries about their situation. One man, in particular, was so loud and conversational that he often provoked grumbles from the other patrons. And so I would help prepare the meal, and sit, nervously, next to someone who looked friendly. And I would try, every few minutes, to start a conversation. I was never rebuked, nor ignored, but my questions were answered in yes’s or no’s and rarely, if ever, returned. No doubt I came off as a pestering intruder, well intentioned, perhaps, but painfully naive. Each time I volunteered, I ran out of topics for conversation faster than the time before, more and more finding each to be too pointed or too unfeeling. I came, wanting to help, but most often left feeling as though I had intruded upon something deeply private. I convinced myself that I had other things to do, and I stopped going to Tedford.

I think, in a large part, my reaction to the visits to Tedford stem from my own proximity to the shelter, both physically and socially. Here was a place, not a half-mile
from campus, where there were people who had to think, every day, about whether or not there would be room for them at Tedford. Here was a place where people who looked and talked like me, who had gone to the same public schools, who had grown up in the same towns, had to wait outside, sometimes for hours, for the shelter to open at 5 so they could go in for their dinner. I saw myself, I saw members of my family, I saw the kids who sat in the back of my classes in middle school, and who had, by high school, stopped coming altogether in the faces I saw at Tedford. Never, in my time at Kennedy Park, had I considered myself so complicit in the system that produced the inequalities that had made my service necessary. And rarely, at Kennedy Park, had I thought that my service might not be enough to overcome the problems I was trying to address. At Tedford, these were realities that I could not ignore.

In all honesty, I am not wholly sure what to make of my experiences at Kennedy Park and Tedford. I still tutor at Kennedy Park, and I have volunteered at other, bigger shelters, both in Portland and at home. But when meals are served at these shelters, there is a counter between the volunteers and the clients they serve. I have not been back to Tedford.

I know from the emails I receive almost weekly from students who are interested in tutoring at Kennedy Park that we as a community are interested in service. I know from the many students I have seen hurrying in and out of the McKeen Center that we are dedicated to service. But before we undertake service, I think we each must ask what bridges, however artificial, have we built between ourselves and the people we serve. And what will it take to tear these bridges down? Four years later, I am still grappling with these questions. But I know, somehow, that not serving is not a solution.
I have come to understand service without bridges to mean finding the courage to place ourselves clearly and unequivocally in the communities we serve. To be brave enough to see ourselves and the role we play in the needs that we are trying to address and to see ourselves and the role we can play in their solutions. I have not been back to Tedford yet, but I hope to go someday.