Columbia is not a perfect place. That statement should not come as a surprise to anyone who has worked or studied here. There are things that happen on this campus that are completely inexplicable, unavoidable, and sometimes, downright wrong. Unfortunately, we can’t change bad tenure decisions, cutbacks in financial aid and departmental offerings, awful athletic seasons, or life in New York City.

What we can do, however, is change ourselves, to try and make life better here for everyone. While it is unlikely to expect much from an apathetic student body, every year you do see a few souls who stand out in their work to improve Alma Mater. We can all learn something from them. If I can (badly) paraphrase John F. Kennedy, we should ask not how Columbia can change for us, but rather, how we can change to make it better.

How do we go about doing this? There are three goals we can all set for ourselves. First, we can help
others in the Columbia community. We always talk about helping others in the Morningside Heights community, which is certainly a worthy vocation, but this is a little different. Maybe its New York’s artificially competitive atmosphere, but it seems that people on this campus are too protective and proud of their own accomplishments, and as a result are too competitive and too sparse with their praise for others. We all complain about Columbia’s advising system, even after the creation of the house system. How much better would things be here if students could, without the benefit of a structured advising system, help each other through sharing advice, experiences, and ideas? It would certainly cut down on the competition and occasional ugliness that follows from the current system.

Second, we can all stand to lose a little bit of our egos. It seems that too many student leaders get so wrapped up in their causes and agendas that they become self-absorbed. When this happens, the good cause tends to disappear in favor of résumé-building and self-aggrandizement. It’s gratifying to see that this didn’t happen with the AIDS Quilt project that’s coming to campus this weekend. Whatever you think of the merits of having the event on campus, all of the people on the committee have worked very hard and very selflessly to make things happen. Although there are a few students who stand out as having initiated this effort, none have stood out in the wrong way. This seems to truly have been a team effort. Finally, we can all learn to be a
little more patient—to grin and bear it. This is a university. The schools here teach many disciplines. Some areas of study, programs, and extracurricular groups are better funded than others. Some are neglected entirely. This does not mean that the neglected areas are unworthy. It just means that something else would have to go. When we complain about the lack of an Asian American Studies department, would we really be better off, if in creating this department, we had to make major cuts in two others? Because this campus has so many diverse peoples and interests in it, it is impossible to satisfy everyone immediately. In the seven years I’ve been here, there have been plenty of changes for the better; in the next seven years, there will undoubtedly be plenty more.

I’ve tried very hard to live up to these three goals in my seven years here. I have to admit, I had a good role model. My father, who passed away three years ago today, was a Columbian for 40 years—first as a student, and later as a physics professor and an administrator. He didn’t give up on Columbia when things were going bad in the 1960s. He did everything he could to make this place the best university in the country. He served on, and in some cases, helped spearhead, committees that brought women to Columbia campus, that guaranteed housing for undergraduate students, and that changed the science requirement to make it more significant. Even while doing that, he managed to teach his classes, always be there for students (even his son, when he made
mistake of taking “Physics for Poets”), grade his exams on time, and still have time for his research and writing. Perhaps most importantly, he was modest enough not to want to take credit for what he had accomplished. He’d probably be mad at me for praising him like this if he were around to hear it.

Even if students can’t change to help improve Columbia, there is another way to look at this school and its imperfections. It may not be something we want to deal with as students, but the real world that awaits us after graduation isn’t exactly a kind place either. Lots of things go wrong, often without warning or explanation. Sure, Columbia has its share of stinkers who sit in administrative or bureaucratic offices and use their positions to get on a power trip and make students feel small. But isn’t this a good preparatory tool for what we’re in for after we get our diplomas? Students at other schools might think they have a blissful existence, not unlike a second four years of high school, but they’re in for a rude awakening once they graduate.

Having been hardened by New York and the lifestyle at Columbia, we may well be ahead of the game.

Jeremy Feinberg, Law ’95, makes use of the metric system on alternate Fridays in Spectrum.

Balancing the Scales

Jeremy Feinberg