

Thank you, Dean Bergeron. Congratulations to my fellow graduates, and thank you to all the family, friends, and teachers who are here today.

We, the class of 2010.5, have traveled such varied and distant routes to land in these December seats. The diversity of our paths is remarkable -- farming in Virginia, singing across Europe, working at home in order to afford more semesters. Founding a magazine, creating green jobs in Oakland, caring for a sick loved one. Healing yourself, electing our president, learning to produce radio. Researching school lunch programs, traveling across Latin America, walking through mountains and unpolluted air. I am immersed in our stories every day, but they are still inspiring and dizzying. Though we have only begun, the final lines of Jhumpa Lahiri's book *Interpreter of Maladies* already come to my mind. Her narrator says, "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination."

Despite the range of our journeys, they are certainly connected. A couple months ago, I was with a friend of mine who is graduating today, and we ran into a friend of hers. This woman said to me, "oh, are you point-five, too?" We realized a few minutes later that we hadn't learned which point-five year we each belonged to, and laughed, remarking that all point-fivers seem to be part of the same class. In thinking about this invisible web of mid-year graduates and what composes its fibers, I immediately think of the word balance, and one balance in particular: between patience and urgency.

The first time I had this tension presented to me so explicitly was by scholar Arjun Appadurai, in an article he wrote about three civil society organizations in Mumbai, India. He

calls their strategy a “politics of patience” and concludes by saying, “For those concerned with poverty and citizenship, we can begin by recalling that one crucial condition of possibility is the ability to meet emergency with patience.” His application of this idea is not far-fetched for many people in this room, for we possess dedication to grappling with the biggest and most intractable challenges, and many people’s time away embodied this in some form. Yet as I started turning this idea, this articulation, around in my head, I appreciated what a wise lesson it is for how we move in the world each day.

During my years in Providence, many of my greatest teachers have been people who have arrived in this city recently themselves. Providence is vibrant with a confluence of the experiences, languages, sadnesses, and fierce hopes of people from many places. Like others of us, I’ve been blessed to be part of some of their lives. It is excruciating to watch people’s drive to realize their dreams often stymied by high unemployment rates, lead paint, crippled urban schools, racism. But this is usually met by people’s overwhelming patience – a patient gratitude, really. For those who must live with deferred dreams, in refugee camps or hotel cleaning jobs, a relentless resolve often pushes them forward. And those whom I’ve seen survive this best, out of necessity, have bred a moment-by-moment acceptance of the here and now.

I teach an English class in Olneyville, a neighborhood in Providence that is overwhelmingly inhabited by Latino immigrants. I often arrive in the evening weary from a seminar or paper writing or just cramming too many things into a day, as we are prone to do here, but that melts away as soon as I step into the classroom. I immediately have to slow down, as I explain yet again how to put your tongue between your teeth to pronounce t-h. Yet it is never boring, because there is an effervescence in that room, a palpable yearning for joyful, secure, free lives – and for today, to be able to pronounce a new word. Olga is forty-six and Guatemalan

and comes everyday in a businesswoman's skirts and pumps. After she came with a migraine a couple days in a row, I told her she really could stay home and rest. She struggled with English for a moment and then told me in Spanish, "But, there are so many words to learn, so many things I want to say. It will take me many years, so I must try every night."

A balancing act, too, has been part of how we approached our lives as Brown students. We have been students who value academia as well as other methods of learning and knowing, who grow in classrooms but also yearn for other ways of seeing, who itch to interact with the world in tangible, complex, embracing, and challenging forms. The shape of our urgency and our patience is different for each of us, but we sought to honor both of them by the compromise of time away, time off, time spent differently or elsewhere – but then by coming back. Competing desires and responsibilities are, no doubt, present for every person; the choice becomes how we pay them heed, whether we listen to the questions they are asking, in what ways we allow them to be manifest in our lives.

It is this balancing of our urgency and all it can achieve with the patience of questioning and reflection that I hope we will take with us from here. By going away, we were given a renewed opportunity and perspective to take advantage of the profound blessings of a Brown education. But also, a better viewpoint and more fodder for awareness and critique – a tension we will hopefully push in all areas of our lives. If we did not struggle as students, in some way, we would not leave; if we did not struggle over leaving, we would not have come back.

May we continue to grapple with the complicities with which we are a part, to question how we spend our time, to consider alternatives. By filling out a leave taking form, by taking the agency to veer off the well-trod path, we established ourselves as question-askers. Why are we here? Why are we leaving? With probing comes risk and doubt, but also thoughtfulness and insight and often, greater clarity.

In a graduation speech he gave at Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace did not urge graduates to think in a certain way, but to think about *how* to think. He tells a story: there are two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" As we attempt to balance pushes and pulls, imperfect options, and the many iterations of beauty and fulfillment that can define our lives, David Foster Wallace's message might be one of the most essential to keep with us: know the water, interrogate the water, savor and be patient with where we are swimming, but keep paddling towards something warmer and clearer.

Many of us have been ridiculed, in jest or in seriousness, for not going with the flow, for not buckling down and doing what's laid in front of us, for asking uncomfortable questions and pushing too hard. Usually, it would be much easier to take the world as it is presented to us, to not cultivate urgency about one's own life and our lives collectively. But doing this and then learning how to live with it sustainably, in a precarious balance, can be a place of profound learning.

My hope for us is that we find meaningful and emancipatory reasons to move fast, but that we are able to live slowly within this. Toni Cade Bambara was a twenty-first century African-American writer and activist. In her life and work, she confronted subjects that would cause most to burn-out or despair, and yet, in the words of Toni Morrison, "there is no division in her mind between optimism and ruthless vigilance." That, Bambara teaches us, is what makes us capable of living better than is expected of us. With courage and gratitude, may we contribute to the triage, but live joyfully. May we maintain the fierce urgency of now, but keep patience alive.