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### **The Virtue of Not Knowing**

Good afternoon. I am honored to be here today with all of you to celebrate the academic achievements of Bowdoin students. I would like to thank the Internal Student Fellowships Committee for giving me the opportunity to speak today. I am also indebted to everyone who has inspired me in the story I am about to share with you.

I'm sure all of you have experienced that moment when you receive the exact hint you have been searching for to solve a problem, or when someone happens to articulate for you what you have always believed in, or when a prose, a speech or a piece of music that touches you so deeply that it gives you a chill down your spine. During my three years and two months as a Bowdoin student, I have experienced these moments of inspiration, both within and beyond the classroom. These are the moments that stick with us for a very long time. And I believe these are the moments that we should celebrate at Bowdoin.

Recently, I've experienced a moment when I was reminded that we should appreciate the idea of not knowing. It was also a moment of epiphany of what this liberal arts education means to me.

One Tuesday afternoon at Thorne, President Rose conversed with a group of students at lunch. I was lucky to be present. The topics of our conversation spanned from the different mentalities students from different class years have to facilitating more dialogues that push us outside of our comfort zones. Somewhere in the conversation, we shared the different ways we engage in learning on campus. One student said that we become who we surround ourselves with, and for this reason, the more we ask questions to the people around us, the more we learn and grow.

Then another student recalled what was to her the most exciting learning experience. Her drawing professor explained to her how our brain works in a simple way.

"When you see something," the student said, pointing at her eye, "your brain draws an association between what you see and something else you know, and that's how we are able to recognize things. But when you are drawing, you tend to focus too much on that association and forget to observe what exactly is in front of you."

Everyone at the lunch table nodded attentively, validating that experience, as she continued, "So my professor told us to get comfortable with the idea of not knowing what it is, and draw it as how we see it." The focus on not knowing, she said, was what she liked the best about the visual arts.

Her story really clicked with me, because it sounded strangely similar to my own experience. What I had learned in my political philosophy classes flashed through my mind.

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates categorizes opinion as imagination and knowledge as intellection. According to him, imagination or opinion hinders us from seeing the truth. Socrates also teaches us that when we think we know something, we probably haven't grasped the full truth. For

example, everyone knows certain things that are considered “good”, but who actually knows what “good” is as an idea itself?

I do not mean to say that imagination is evil, or having only some knowledge is a bad thing. Instead, I learned that not knowing is a gift and a virtue. This gift prepares us with a fresh mindset to learn without preconceived prejudices. A gift that allows us to be attentive to our senses and better absorb objective information. A gift that motivates us to ask more questions, and cultivates in us an appetite for always seeking more knowledge. Not knowing is also a virtue that keeps us humble. A virtue that prevents us from assuming we know better before we even start to learn. A virtue that makes us better listeners because we are more interested in hearing what others have to say than validating what we believe we already know.

So what if the next time we try to draw an object, we don’t assume that we already know what it’s supposed to look like? What if the next time we talk to someone, whatever their background may be, we try to learn something from them? What if the next time when we encounter cultures different from ours, we admit our ignorance and grow from it?

I am delighted to be able to revisit and reflect on what I had learned from class through a casual lunch conversation. The most exhilarating part of the dialogue, though, was to realize that my lunch companion and I had learned a similar lesson that extended beyond our disciplines through very different channels. That was a moment of epiphany, a moment of understanding what a liberal arts education can offer.

I’m sure as liberal arts students, we have all experienced the same excitement when we overhear someone yelling, “Courses are out!” followed by the anxiety of jotting down a long list and having to deliberate which ones to let go. For every class I register, I feel as though I have given up five other interesting classes. Or in the parlance of my friends in economics, the opportunity cost is pretty high. Will I regret never taking an art class, a biology class or a religion class at Bowdoin? Now I know that I don’t need to, as long as I have made the effort to explore. We can only take on so much adventure within four years. I have become convinced that regardless of what we choose to study here, we will be inspired, challenged, and sow the seeds of intellectual curiosity for our lifelong learning beyond Bowdoin.

Today, I challenge us to remind ourselves of the virtue of not knowing and seize every moment of inspiration that Bowdoin brings to us. Thank you.