

Invocation

Fall 2022 Convocation—August 30, 2022

by Oliver Goodrich, Director of the Rachel Lord Center for Religious and Spiritual Life

Class of 2026, you have arrived at Bowdoin College in the midst of a perplexing moment in human history. Each day, with each new push notification we receive, we witness both the best and the worst of humankind.

We marvel as the James Webb Space Telescope glimpses the birthplace of stars, while we grieve the loss of innocent schoolchildren in Uvalde.

We find comfort in connecting with loved ones through social media, while we distance ourselves from those with whom we do not ideologically agree.

We build increasingly complex computers that give us unparalleled access to information, while we struggle to combat the proliferation of disinformation.

We move people and goods around the Earth with relative speed and ease, while in doing so we deplete the planet of its natural resources and resilience.

How do we hold together these extremes? What does this moment ask of you?

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke invites us to be patient toward all that is unresolved in our hearts, to love the apparent paradoxes of the present moment, and to live the questions. For when we live the questions, perhaps we will also live our way into worthy answers.

As you begin your time at Bowdoin against the backdrop of so many questions, the world eagerly awaits the contributions you will make and the people you will become. You have already demonstrated that you are students of uncommon promise and character. May your time at Bowdoin be a season of deep transformation that nurtures your capacity to live the questions.

May the state of Maine, its woods, its waters, its people—especially the Wabanaki who have long stewarded this land—inspire you and ground you as you grow.

May you flourish as you find your place in this community, making new friends, joining clubs, falling into and out of love, and experiencing the joys of academic discovery.

May you take the risk to make mistakes—whether in the lab or in the library, the studio or the sports field—and may you embrace the wisdom that failure offers; and when you fail, may you do so with grace and compassion.

Above all, may you cultivate the courage to not settle for easy answers, to speak out against injustice, and to live the questions. May these questions make a claim on you, calling forth all that is good in you for the sake of the common good. May it be so!

I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929)