

## Imagined Communities

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests—

During my freshman fall, in Professor Mohandesi’s class about Postwar Europe, we were introduced to the term “imagined community.” Historian Benedict Anderson coined the phrase to elucidate the rise of nationalism, explaining that nations are nothing more, really, than imagined communities. “The members of even the smallest nation” he writes “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” As I sat in that class, looking around the room at all my classmates I didn’t know, whose lives up until that point might have been utterly different from mine, I remember thinking, what a powerful thing—to feel bound in some way to people entirely different from you, whom you may never know or touch.

When Bowdoin let out suddenly last spring, I spent a few months in the subdued Brunswick that most of you had to leave behind. Some nights I’d bike aimlessly through campus, and it was strange and still and quiet, a tangible absence that kicks off an animal instinct in you, a sinking but not entirely explicable knowledge that something is off—not right. It was hard to believe that this little place had been my whole world, as it was many of yours. We breathed, ate, and slept here, did a good bit of growing up here, learned and invented and failed and learned to start again. It’s almost hard to believe, if you haven’t experienced it, how much these two hundred and fifteen acres can contain—world-shifting academic discoveries, triumphs of music and art, life altering friendships, four years of vivid memories layered and echoing through every hallway or dorm room or dining hall. And yet in the last snows of last April, there were no footprints cutting through these quad pathways.

Soon we will be scattered across the country and the globe again and these four years in which we all briefly converged will start to look like a rare and happy accident. But if remote schooling this past year has taught me anything it is that Bowdoin, although not a nation, does resemble a kind of imagined community, anchored in our collective minds, powerfully unshakeable because we—students, professors, parents, everyone—believe in the image of our communion. This collection of buildings is only Bowdoin because we believe it is, and if it exists, then so too does our very real, lasting connection with each other.

And though in ten, twenty, thirty years we may be able to understand little of most of each other’s lives, we will almost all know the precise feeling of walking across the quad on a crisp fall morning towards Thorne for brunch, or the distinct coziness of being buried on an empty floor in the stacks, or the way the land suddenly becomes so vast in the last stretch of the drive to Simpson’s Point. And soon, we will probably all know what it is like to deeply miss a place like this one, to accumulate a small list of the things you wish you’d done, to wonder when you can find your way back to Maine again, where the clouds and the color of the water and the taste of the air are just different somehow.

When I lived in Reed House my sophomore year, we were once paid a visit by some Bowdoin alumni who had lived there back when it was their fraternity. They were all white-haired men, ages I can’t even picture myself being, but we were as thrilled to meet them as they were to meet us. We’d slept in the same house for one year, generations apart, and we probably

had little else in common. But to love the same place—the same community, the same walls—it turns out is a kind of incredible power. It’s a connection across time and space and history, a connection I feel every time I happen upon an old Bowdoin yearbook, or see someone in New York or Amsterdam or Portland with a Bowdoin hat or phone case or sweater. *I know nothing about you, but we know some shade of the same kind of love.*

If this year has taught me anything, it’s that community can be everything. That it is important to hold the people you feel bound to close, that that can make all the difference in weathering the unpredictable tides of history. And it has taught me to be unequivocally grateful for the powerful imagined community I have found here, which is ours to shape even in the coming years.

We learned at Bowdoin that connection to place is important, but so is being connected *by place*, by choosing to make this little stretch of community home for four years. I’ve learned here that place can bind you together long after you’ve left it.