

**Convocation Remarks**  
**Clayton Rose**  
**August 30, 2022**

I was once a college student. [PICTURE]

In the fall of my sophomore year, I decided to take a philosophy course on Plato's *Republic*.

There were maybe 25 students in the class, junior and senior philosophy majors and first- and second-year philosophy graduate students. There was one sophomore—me. I had absolutely no business being in that class, and struggled to keep up throughout the term, keeping my nose just above the waterline. The course was discussion-based, and there was one final paper that counted for 100% of the grade.

Toward the end of the term, we received the final paper question. I didn't just not know the answer, I didn't understand the question. I spent days and nights thinking about the question and how to get my head around it, getting nowhere. I became super stressed; I was going to fail this class. I kept thinking about it, but nothing.

One morning, while I was in the shower, something clicked. [PICTURE] I realized I had the essential issues, or at least I thought I did. I literally threw my clothes on and went straight to Professor Wick's office. After waiting for him to show up, I explained my ideas. He asked me a few questions and said, "I think you're on it." 45 years later I remember all of that like it was 45 minutes ago.

More on this later.

I loved college, absolutely loved it. And it changed my life.

But, as it all began for me as it is beginning for you, and in the way that life is often weird, I was both not ready for college, and so ready for college.

I didn't know how to study properly—in high school, I had gotten by on my wits and some natural gifts. I didn't understand or respect that the expectations and work in college would be very different. I mostly looked around and I knew I was overmatched by my peers—they had it all together and knew a lot more than I did (here's a spoiler—that's actually so not true). Sound familiar?

But I was also ready to learn, really thirsting to be in the college classroom and to get after all the incredible courses and the journey. I was ready to manage my life (my parents were great and gave me tremendous freedom, but here, at college, I was truly in charge and responsible, I wanted to own it). I was ready to begin to find out who I really was and what I was capable of doing. Does that also sound familiar?

College will be fun, exhilarating. It will be filled with friendship and comradery. You will take responsibility for yourself and make your own decisions, and work and play with an amazing group of students in an amazing community of faculty, staff, and alumni. It is the opportunity for a transformative and powerful education that will be with you for the rest of your lives.

And you have the gift of being a blank piece of paper—a clean slate—that you can fill in in any way that you want.

College is a place to shed yourself of unwanted baggage, to be relieved of any of the burdens of how you were known in high school that you disliked or grew tired of, or that just don't seem to fit you anymore. You have the chance to learn about yourself and who you want to be, and to change over time. Your friends, faculty, the staff here will embrace you for what you are, as long (of course) as you exhibit the core values of kindness, integrity, respect, and grace for others and responsibility for yourself.

This is a powerful gift, and this will be one of the few times in your life that you will have the opportunity to start fresh and to paint on a blank canvas.

Our faculty and our staff are devoted to you, and to your academic and personal success and growth. Your teachers will challenge you and push you, while also always supporting and mentoring you. The staff will encourage you to take responsibility for yourself, while at the same time helping you to think through the issues and manage the sticky situations. There will be work you find incredibly difficult and mistakes you will make academically and socially. You will doubt yourself, you will look at others from different backgrounds and wonder how to create common ground, you may well suffer heartbreak in your friendships and love, and you will wonder why you are the only one wondering about these things. Please, hear me, **YOU ARE NOT**. Far from it. This is part of college for everyone, and of the time that you will each spend here.

The day-to-day challenges, issues, and questions are all part of college. And dealing with them—successfully in some cases, not so much in others—is part of what makes college both great and important, and so deeply meaningful to so many of us for the rest of our lives.

So, don't wonder why every day is not "the best." Don't wonder why you are the only one wondering—you are not. Don't pay attention to the toxic fiction of social media that everyone else is living a life of rainbows and unicorns.

[PICTURE]

And *please*, and I cannot say this strongly enough, do not deal with the challenges, issues, self-doubts, or anxieties all by yourself. We are a community, we have each other, and we have among the best resources of any college to help you.

Now, why did I tell you the story of my class on Plato's *Republic*? Two reasons. While I was clearly overmatched in that class, I have zero regrets about taking it. I loved to challenge myself and try new things, still do. College is a place for you not to play it safe, but to stretch and push yourself, to try things inside the classroom and outside. Take risk, be creative, push your own boundaries. But, and here's the second reason I shared that story with you. Do not do what I did, and go it alone. Ask for help. I was an idiot for not seeking help—it would have saved stress, made me think better, and learn more. As I described a few minutes ago—and said to you on the Quad on Saturday evening—there is a big net here.



Another story from long ago.

One night, I was in the library writing a paper for a course that I have long forgotten. But I vividly remember sitting in a carrel struggling to sort it out and write something halfway decent. At that moment the professor who lived in my dorm appeared. He was an older guy who had fought in the Polish Underground during World War Two before coming to the US. He was one of the leading scholars in medieval French literature and linguistics—a star at the school and his field. He leaned over my carrel and said, “Ah, Mr. Rose, you are writing a paper?” I responded “yes,” and he said, “writing is like giving birth to a hippopotamus.” [PICTURE]

And off he went.

There it was, one of the great teachers on campus, and in a very funny and very kind way he was telling me to go easy on myself—that writing is hard for everyone. That learning and college are hard for everyone.

Bowdoin is a journey, one that starts now and lasts the rest of your life. Pace yourself, give yourself room to grow, to change, to change your mind, and to make mistakes. Seek help. Help others. Give yourself grace, and give support to those around as they do the same.

If you do these things, these *will* be among the best four years of your life.

It is fantastic to be with you for the beginning of our 220<sup>th</sup> academic year.

I want to thank my faculty and staff colleagues for everything you do for our students, for the College, and for one another. Your work makes it possible for our students to all receive a fantastic Bowdoin education and experience.

I want to welcome back our returning students.

And I am delighted to welcome our new students, both first-year and transfer students—we are so pleased that you have joined our community.

Class of 2026—our 509 first-year students—and our 8 transfers, today marks the start of a remarkable journey for each of you.

And with that, I declare the College open.