

Brianna Cunliffe, “A Luminous Endeavor”

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests:

As we speak, the ocean a few miles to our east is readying itself to be filled with stars.

When I came to Bowdoin, one of the first things I did was to pile into a big white van with strangers and go winding off into the thick Maine dark for the vague promise of something “really cool”. A hurricane was bearing down on my coastal North Carolina hometown, and a different cyclone was brewing in me— a terrifying lack of certainty about who I was, and whether it would be enough. So naturally, I buckled up, jammed in beside strangers and stumbled through the pines on our way to plunge into the pitch-dark sea.

There was no explanation for what would come next. Just an invitation to jump. Once we did: the blue-green bloom of a thousand living, warm stars, following the motion of our heaving bodies, dancing in tandem with the burning sky. Adrift in utter strangeness and a beauty so deep I was afraid to breathe and scare it away. I felt my smallness beating in my chest, the oneness filling up my lungs. Certain I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Wading out at Simpson’s Point, or plunging off the dock at the Schiller Coastal Studies Center after the fall of the summer dark, you may bear witness to one of Maine’s true wonders: the bioluminescence. tiny algal creatures who have adapted to give off light, brimming in the lapping waters around the fingers of the coastline. For those of you who never got the chance to see the bioluminescence, I recommend a post-graduation midnight dip. It’s well worth bearing the cold.

We have held one another through unimaginable upheavals, both global and intimate. An all-too-fragile global peace, a deeply flawed justice system, a paralyzed world facing a climate crisis, and the absence of loved ones who were supposed to be here today— these things, and many more, have let us down. But not one another. Still, we spark, together, against that uncertain darkness. And still, as summer rolls around again, the cold Maine ocean is filling up with stars.

If you are anything like me, perhaps the single biggest thing you’ve learned from a Bowdoin education is that you don’t have the answers. You have ideas, lots of them, and good ones, ones worth taking seriously. But there is no final word to proclaim, evangelize, or export, no one size

fits all solution. There is only a rich variety of people and places grappling with our current intersecting crises as best we can. A drifting, diffuse, and luminous ocean. There is only our obligation and our sincere desire to help. There is only the invitation to jump in, and then make room; lead the way, and get out of the way, amplify new voices and sit with silences. Look for the heart of the matter, the space where most good can be done, rather than listening to our egos. No one can tell us what comes next. This is both a hard and heartening reality: alone, we cannot hope to prevail. But we are never acting alone.

Together, I have seen us find joy in the work of it. And it is work, to build something new rather than just criticizing. Unglamorous and stumbling and honest work. But I know we are up to the task.

These have been as promised by the Offer of the College, been generous enthusiasms. Swimming in cold water, getting in over our heads in contradiction, in conversations that have been the best education I could have hoped for. Talking to scholars and advocates, farmers and fishermen. Talking to people... and listening—listening not as a supposedly objective, above-it-all observer, but with warmth, presence, humanity. I have counted myself lucky to see you bringing your whole selves to the work of better understanding the world. Seeing who you are—your experiences and passions and the questions and doubts that flow from them— not as an academic liability but as a wellspring of resilience, insight, and strength.

It is a generous enthusiasm, this almost willfully foolish thing we try to do here: to embody our hopes in the way we carry ourselves, the way we treat one another.

The ocean looks like nothing but a dark expanse, until you're in it, and then it comes alive. You see your friends' bodies throwing off sparks, see stars congregating around your own seeking hands.

We cannot fix the world by ourselves. But we can shape new worlds together- worlds that begin with questions, with faith and with intention, with the way we listen, act, and breathe together.

To the people who have taught us, fed us, housed us, guided us, and inspired us: thank you. To you, my friends: Congratulations. We celebrate today the worthwhile endeavor of learning together. It has been a true privilege.

Wherever you are going, if it's an elementary school classroom or a theater backstage, whether it's back to the library or into the backcountry, I hope you know how you make the world come alive. How your motion illuminates the unseen, how it brings new patterns into being. How integral you will become to your future community, and how irreplaceable you have been and will continue to be, in ours. I hope you know that you are loved.

I wish you love and fulfillment, I wish you wicked problems to solve and a brilliant group of friends with which to solve them. I hope you trust the dark water to fill with abundant light once you take the plunge. I hope you find your own constellation to call home. Thank you for lighting this dark with me.