

Bowdoin Convocation Faculty Address, August 29<sup>th</sup> 2023

*Finding your Porcupine*

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Thank you very much for that kind introduction. I'm deeply honored, on behalf of all my faculty colleagues, to welcome President Zaki, our new colleagues, and most especially you, the Class of 2027, to Bowdoin, welcome.

I am mindful of the fact that there is now only me standing between you and a delicious lobster dinner, so I'll be quick.

I hope to tell you the story of seeing a wild porcupine. And by the end of the talk, I hope you'll appreciate the irony and double meaning of that statement, but for now you're probably wondering, "Why?" So, let's dive in.

The story begins just after dawn, about three years ago, a few weeks into the pandemic. I was and am especially vulnerable to COVID, so my doctors had ordered me to avoid people wherever possible, getting exercise in the form of very, very early morning walks, which on this day was at the Kate Furbish Preserve. That's just a few minutes south of here, you go down the Harpswell road, take a right just before you get to Five Guys burgers. Take a left shortly after Wild Oats Bakery (which does great cupcakes and salads, if you like cupcakes and salads) and there you are. The trail was beautiful, but I was feeling pretty sorry for myself, what with the general awfulness of the world on top of my own health problems, and the enforced isolation.

Things were about to get a whole lot worse.

I rounded a corner, I found myself face to face with a massive, horrible, scary-looking porcupine perched in the branches of a Douglas fir tree, just off the trail about head height off the ground. It was covered in thousands of gigantic needles and it had razor blades instead of feet. It was staring into my eyes...as if it were preparing to jump at my face.

I was scared out of my wits, I was terrified, or as we like to say around here, I was outside my comfort zone. I'd never seen a porcupine before. We don't have them in England. We have hedgehogs. Which is a bit like comparing Paddington Bear to Cocaine Bear. ...

And for some reason I genuinely thought that they can shoot their quills at you. So, I froze, waiting for the flying quills of doom and desperately trying to remember whether with porcupines you stare them down, make yourself big, or avoid eye contact and curl up into the fetal position. Which is what I felt like doing. As miserable as I'd been at the start of the walk, things were now about a thousand times worse now.

Spoiler alert: porcupines don't shoot their quills.

As I later discovered, they're very gentle and they're very passive, unless they're attacked or dating. (They have very retro dating habits, the less said about it, the better). They're not predators. They're vegans. (They eat bark, shoot, and leaves and yes, I've tried turning that into a clever punctuation joke about Oxford commas and no, it can't be done. If you can do it, let me know, and I'll put you on my Instagram page, which is...porcupine themed).

To be clear, the quills are very dangerous if you do get too close or if you go out of your way to provoke them, but basically if you don't mess with them, they won't mess with you.

As you've guessed, ever since that encounter I've been doing a ton of reading about porcupines and there's a load of amazing stuff that I would love to tell you about. Unfortunately, this isn't the time or the place, and as my wife has reminded me on more than one occasion, I'm not a biologist or a naturalist and I am not remotely qualified to talk about porcupines. (Sarah warned me about that, she said

someone might call me out about it, and I didn't realize, and I don't think she did, that that person would be Professor Zaki.)

But I'm going to share a story about Sigmund Freud and some porcupines because it is a banger...and important.

Back in early 1900s Vienna, Sigmund Freud was developing revolutionary ideas about psychoanalysis and he wanted to bring them to a wider audience than just Vienna. He also wanted to make a lot of money. So he figured he needed to go to America to do both of those things. So he wrangled himself a speaking gig, an honorary degree, at Clark University in Worcester.

But he didn't want to admit why he was going. Partly because he didn't want to look crass and commercial, and also apparently, he was really, really nervous about whether his mission would succeed or not. So whenever anyone asked why he was going to America, he told them that he hoped "to see a wild porcupine," because he had never seen one before.

Now his friends, many of whom were psychoanalysts themselves, saw straight through the subterfuge and pretty soon in European intellectual circles, the expression "finding your porcupine" came to refer to anyone who was desperately trying to deflect their own anxieties about their true hopes and fears. And we'll come back to that.

But the theme wasn't as off-brand as it seemed because a few years earlier, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer had famously used porcupines as an allegory to explain the entire human condition. Freud loved the idea and later developed it in his book, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. This is Freud quoting Schopenhauer on the so-called "porcupine's dilemma." Now I want you to listen carefully because I think it's off. Listen carefully, this is a paraphrase of the porcupine's dilemma.

"A company of porcupines crowded themselves very close together one cold winter's day so as to profit from one another's warmth and so save themselves from

being frozen to death. But soon they felt each other's quills, which induced them to separate again. And then, when the need for warmth arose once more, it brought them nearer together. ...So they were driven back and forwards from one trouble to the other, until they had discovered a mean distance at which they could most tolerably exist. In the same way, the need for company drives humans together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and disagreeable qualities of their nature."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, for humans, loneliness is unbearable, but real intimacy is impossible. I'm English, so I don't know anything about the human condition. But from a purely porcupine's point of view, that parable is complete malarkey.

For one thing, it's factually wrong, okay, porcupines don't behave like that. Also, while we're at it, it's not a 'company' of porcupines; it's a 'prickle' of porcupines. More importantly, it doesn't actually make any logical sense if you roll it around your brain for a couple of minutes.

For one thing, if porcupines can't deal with "a cold day" in winter, why do they live in Maine? Don't laugh too hard, you'll be asking yourself the same question.

Second: I don't want to be indelicate at this otherwise classy occasion, but if porcupines can't get close to each other because of all the sharp prickles...do you see where I'm headed? How do you think we get more porcupines? (Porcupettes). You'd think Freud would have thought of that. But my hunch is that he maybe wasn't doing much thinking maybe he was repeating what he'd heard, or what everyone knows.

And we'll get back to that soon.

Back to Freud. He gave his talks at Clark, but then instead of going to schmooze and market his brand in some major city like Manhattan, or DC, or Brunswick, he accepted an invitation to visit a rustic cabin in the Adirondacks in upstate New York to hang out with a neurology professor from Harvard and some other 'stans,' or admirers of Freud. And eventually, on a somewhat joyous day they

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer *Parerga und Paralipomena* 1851 Part II, 31 quoted in Freud *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* 1920 (New York: WW Norton, 1959) p.33

were eating griddle cakes and going on hikes – someone found a porcupine. They ran back into camp saying, “We’ve found a porcupine!” And the story goes that Freud was super excited, he booked it out of his cabin at top speed to check it out, but when they got closer, they realized that it was a porcupine, but it had been dead for several days. And the story goes that Freud walked slowly up to the decomposing carcass, prodded it with his walking stick, and said, “It’s dead.” Soon after that, he went back to Austria, and never came back to America.

Back to the original story. I am still on the trail and scared out of my wits.

But after a while I realized the air wasn’t exactly thick with ... quills. I wasn’t under attack. The porcupine was just hanging out on the branch, staring at me quizzically, and then she got bored...and she went back to sleep, leaving me mesmerized but also captivated. ...I have returned to the trail often after that to see porcupines and update my Insta. I saw them pretty regularly, not all the time, after that, but it got me through a bleak, bleak time...And I assume porcupines were on a lot of my other walks that I had been doing before the pandemic. They had been there all along, I just hadn’t looked for them.

So, what’s the moral? I think the tale raises several points.

The unplanned encounter and my subsequent fascination with porcupines was another visceral lesson of what it means to count nature a familiar acquaintance and lose myself in generous enthusiasms. It reminded me of the transformative power of learning for its own sake – not for a grade or for publication, but because the world is endlessly fascinating and none of us know more than a tiny, tiny fraction about it.

You all know my wife told me I’m not qualified to talk about porcupines. She’s right. I’m not. But I am, we all are, qualified to learn about them.

Now you may be sensing with dread that this is about to turn into one of those speeches where you’re told to “follow your passion.” Don’t worry, it’s not. The advice

isn't wrong, but what do you with it when you discover your true passion when you're 57, and it's porcupines? I leave you to figure that out for yourselves.

I should note that my true passion is, of course, my amazing wife, Sarah, who is over there, and my amazing son, Colin, who isn't here today, and my amazing daughter, Jenna, who is a singer and will be here at Bowdoin doing a gig next week... You should all go. I can't believe I got away with that! Maybe I didn't.

Second point. If you're thinking to yourself that the real message of this talk is: 'Beware of strange, old men with European accents mansplaining porcupines,' then congratulations! That was exactly the point.

Put another way: ...Always be skeptical. Ask questions. We all believe a lot of nonsense just because we heard it one time, or because everyone knows something is true. Porcupines shoot their quills. Porcupines huddle together for warmth. You have to double major. Only economists get good jobs. I can't dance. The professor is always right.

It's all too easy to project what you want to believe onto something that you don't really understand just to fit your narrative, as Freud did with his preposterous porcupine parable.

Keep questioning your assumptions about the way the world is. Keep an open mind, look for the evidence, and check that it all makes sense.

Third point. Be honest with yourself, and with everyone else, about what your true goals are. What you genuinely want out of college and out of life. Don't ever be afraid of what other people think. And as my dad said, there is really only one competition that matters, and that is the competition between you and the person you want to become. Don't waste your time searching for metaphorical porcupines.

That said, I do strongly recommend that you go out and look for actual real porcupines. By which I really mean: Go out and explore! Find out about Brunswick! Explore Maine, there's an amazing, beautiful, incredible state and wonderful world waiting for you...Don't waste your time, enjoy it.

Finally, and most importantly – don't worry! Things which may seem really intimidating at first – porcupines, a campus full of strangers, or maybe even your professors, look at these guys – they usually turn out to be really great once you get to know them a bit. You guys, you theatre full of smart, expectant, no doubt wonderful people, you all probably don't self-identify as scary, but I've been terrified of you for weeks...But here we are and maybe I needn't.

Class of 2027, welcome to Bowdoin! We wish you every success, and we look forward to meeting you in class tomorrow. Thank you.

