

## David Roux, 2024 Bowdoin Baccalaureate Address

Thank you President Zaki, trustees, faculty, staff, alumni, students and almost graduates. I am delighted to be here today. My Mom would have been delighted by that overly generous introduction, and my Dad would not have believed a word you said.

This is the part of the program where you are normally subjected to a volley of gratuitous advice in exchange for a lobster dinner and diploma tomorrow. We are going to do something different, take a different tack, and be, I hope, a little more provocative about what's coming next for the Class of 2024.

I want to talk today about risk in life in the real world—beyond the cascading semesters on this beautiful campus and incredibly idyllic setting. And in particular, I'm here to tell you that running with scissors, riding your bike without a helmet, and crossing the street when the sign says DONT WALK are all permissible behaviors—in fact, these kinds of transgressions are the foundation for a more fulfilling life. Wouldn't that have been helpful to know as a freshman?

But before we talk more about the benefits that come from deliberately playing with fire, we need to focus on the “inner you”—the person we all are deep inside.

As my wife would testify—we've been together for forty years—I'm not naturally introspective so I'm on dangerous ground when I preach the virtues of mindfulness. But I've come to believe there is no more important posture than quiet reflection about where you are right now—in the moment. We all spend too much time worrying about what happened last month and fretting about what might come next, when we can actually affect is right now, right here. These are the moments, the people, and the events you can change and you can experience fully, but only if you're fully present for them. So be open, withhold judgment, seek understanding, particularly invest in relationships, and always act with integrity and purpose in your HERE and NOW.

But...be careful of who defines your purpose. Too many people, young and old, waste their time trying to divine the intentions and opinions of others before they act. You can't control what other people think, but you always have the power to make up your own mind—and change when that is appropriate. I would strongly counsel you to lessen your dependence on what others think—especially what they think of you. Be wary of the great evil which is envy, the rising tyranny of TikTok, and the illusions of others' make-believe lives on Instagram. I call this disease “comparisonitis.” It's more dangerous than Covid, it's definitely contagious, and will become a chronic condition if left untreated. So don't become what other people think of you. Your true self is inside, not an outside veneer subject to the likes and dislikes of social media opinion.

In particular, I'd like to emphasize the notion of personal agency—acting at all times like you are in charge of you—and therefore responsible for your own future. I think of it as being

“at cause,” where you set your own course, live your own values, and focus on your own inner life—all of which gives you an internal gyroscope to steady yourself through the inevitable turmoil that life will throw at you. Your core values should animate everything you do.

In contrast, don't be “at effect,” adrift in a world happening to you, buffeted by tides of random circumstance—breaks and misfortune. It's like complaining about the referee's balls in a game. Life isn't like the weather; it doesn't just happen like rain and wind and sunshine. You can and should manage your own journey, with the full expectation there will be bumps in the road and unexpected detours BUT with an unswerving eye on maintaining pace and progress.

I commend for your attention the key concept of momentum. Be going somewhere. Have a direction, which also gives you focus. You are much more likely to hit a bullseye if you have a target. And that means foreclosing options in the near term to create more opportunity in the longer term. Jerry Rice, an NFL Hall of Fame football player with three Super Bowl rings, was fond of saying about his rigorous training regimen, “I do today what others won't, so I can in the future do what others can't.” Said another way, make your right-now moments count.

Which brings us back to the subject of risk—taking chances, acting boldly, going to uncomfortable places—and my favorite, occasional mischievous misbehaving. Skinny dipping comes to mind as a personal favorite. Plus a long list of scary things which worry parents and annoy college administrators.

When I speak to new college graduates about their budding careers, I often hear their concerns about managing, avoiding, compartmentalizing, and insuring against risk. They cite myriad dangers: bad bosses, dead-end careers and the wrong places to live. It seems that no one wants to make a mistake. Turns out everyone wants to get an A on this first test of life, like it is some kind of college exam.

However, what's often missing from these conversations is any appreciation of what wonder risk-taking brings—the value that might flow from taking chances and making some inevitable mistakes, including big ones. Here's the rub. Unfortunately and awkwardly, risk is also intimately and inextricably associated with reward—and by that I don't mean financial, I mean more holistic life outcomes—deep relationships, meaningful work, opportunities to contribute to the larger society. These are the things that matter most, and you'll need to put yourself on the line to meet those goals. It's definitely not like college, where if you do your work and wait patiently, freshman become sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

You've probably already heard a lot about managing risk. They'll talk about playing the field and keeping your options open. There's a ton of advice out there about careers, friends, romantic relationships, and geographies—where you might live and work. It's the “world is your oyster” kind of theory, in which you are advised to say “YES” to everything and sample

broadly from the whole wide world buffet. You may even have gotten a graduation card recently which says there are NO LIMITS to what you do and where you go.

That all sounds enticing in theory, but in practice this line of thinking is DANGEROUS NONSENSE. Here's why.

In the real world, building a meaningful life is about learning to say "NO," firmly but politely. I know it sounds counter-intuitive, but it's critical for you to thoughtfully foreclose options by making deliberate choices, focusing on what matters most and going deep. In situation after situation, I see reward flowing to specialization—in the form of demonstrated competence, exciting work, personal satisfaction, daily happiness, contributions to society—the whole big bundle of gratification.

Turns out whether you are an aspiring musician, hard-charging journalist, environmental scientist or budding entrepreneur— monomaniacal focus and getting good at something is what matters most in building a foundation for your future. My advice to you is "learn your craft." Don't board a bus, learn to drive the bus. Otherwise, you are unwittingly playing a personal lottery, hoping to catch a lucky break or get hit by a friendly bolt of lightning. While that could happen, it's bad planning and a terrible life strategy.

Now, I'm not against dabbling, sampling different options, and exploring the world around you. I'm simply saying that the wandering minstrel is unlikely to become Bad Bunny or Taylor Swift, playing arena rock'n roll to legions of fans. Somewhere, sometime you're eventually going to need to pay your professional dues—whether you are an artist, musician, teacher, lawyer, or doctor. It's always the same story. Whatever you intend to do, learn to do it well.

In particular, I'd argue that a general destination is more important than turn-by-turn driving directions. I'll forewarn you, there are many detours ahead because life's journey is always disorganized, poorly sign-posted, and never linear. There are no straight lines ever. You'll instead need to embrace the idea of more flexibility—be obsessed with where you are going, not how you get there. Focus on the what, not the how. Which means your planning and prediction capabilities aren't nearly as valuable as your reaction and coping skills. I think adaptability is the ultimate ability. And that's because...

There is a joyful and beautiful randomness to what's coming next. The delight in life IS the raw uncertainty of it all, which often looks like risk but is really just random experience washing up on your personal beach. So accept the risk, manage the consequences, adapt to the rest, and keep your eyes open to the opportunities which lurk there, often in plain sight but disguised as an unwelcome surprise.

At commencement tomorrow you will have assigned seating. But once you get that diploma, it's going to be a free-for-all around where you go next. I'd emphasize and underscore, you have a choice about where you sit in the great theater of life. Just

remember, the world values competent actors who can play a role more than the most enthusiastic and avid spectator. Don't be in the audience. Get yourself on stage and play your part. Be a cast member and share your experience with those closest to you—your personal ensemble.

These trusted relationships comprise your “outer self,” the outside you. Not a fake digital hall-of-mirrors reflection, but the accreted strength of personal connections forged over a lifetime with family, friends, and special partners. These relationship bonds are your exoskeleton, the powerful support system that makes you more than you, and at the same time creates a bulwark against harm and disappointment.

My favorite line from Shakespeare comes from Hamlet, when the unstable Prince of Denmark says, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” Be sure that man had other issues, but he was entirely right about the power of attitude to change your perspective and in doing so, change your life.

In parting, my simple counsel is to do three things to manage your attitudes:

Firstly, Be mindful of the inner you, know yourself without judgment. Be self-aware, heed your own counsel, make your own path. You are in charge of you.

Secondly, Seek avidly and accept gratefully as much risk as you can tolerate. It is an integral part of a fully articulated life. You'll be emboldened, provoked by the challenges and rewarded for your intrepidity.

Finally, get ready to share those experiences, good and bad, with your family, friends and especially your lovers—they are your outer self. That sharing reflex will make you stronger and more complete.

Good luck, best wishes, and enjoy the lobster bake! Go Bears.