

President Safa Zaki, 2024 Baccalaureate address

I am delighted to welcome all of you here today—family and friends of our graduating seniors; our honorary degree recipients and their friends and family members; trustees, alumni, faculty, and staff; valued friends of the College, and especially the Class of 2024. Congratulations. You made it!

I am also delighted to welcome the 75th governor of the state of Maine and the first woman to hold that post, Janet Mills. Governor Mills is not here today in her capacity as chief executive of our state but rather as the proud aunt of one of our seniors. We welcome you, governor, and your extended family to this happy occasion.

It is also wonderful to welcome two other people with the last name of Mills who have given such remarkable service to Bowdoin. The 14th president of Bowdoin College, Barry Mills, and his wife, Karen Gordon Mills.

Baccalaureate marks the official end of the academic year. Seniors, as your family and friends, and the Bowdoin community, come together to celebrate with you, today is also an opportunity to reflect on the experiences you've had here, and to look forward to what lies ahead.

There have been several moments this past month when we've been able to celebrate some of the amazing accomplishments of some of your classmates. Those opportunities to honor excellence in all fields are, of course, important.

But equally important, I think, is to remember something that the Canadian short story writer Alice Munro wrote in a story titled, "Too Much Happiness." Munro, who passed away last week at the age of ninety-two, wrote, and I quote: "She was learning, quite late, what many people around her appeared to have known since childhood, that life can be perfectly satisfying without major achievements."

If I might be so bold as to push back a bit on Munro, I think another way to think about that idea is to redefine what we mean by major achievements. I will talk more about this tomorrow, but I want to suggest that achievements are not only the visible and public ones.

They are the relationships you've built with each other over these past four years, the intellectual debates you've had with each other and with your professors, the walks you've taken through the many beautiful spots on campus and throughout coastal Maine, the times you've set aside work to support a friend or family member who needed you: these achievements are worth celebrating as well, these are the kinds of things that make life, in Munro's words, "perfectly satisfying."

In another of her stories, "Lives of Girls and Women," Munro writes this: "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable—deep caves paved

with kitchen linoleum.” In her stories, Munro both appreciates the kitchen linoleum—the humdrum details that surround and construct our lives—and explores the deep caves—the profound complexities and hidden layers that each of us contain.

She does this through her great gift of curiosity. One of her most quoted lines is “The constant happiness is curiosity.” One of my wishes for you is that you continue to do throughout your lives what I have seen you do here—be curious. Curious about ideas, about other people, about yourselves, about the places you live, and the places you’ll never see.

Curiosity is intrinsic to the structure of a Bowdoin education. Finding your path through disciplines, departments, programs, ways of knowing, requires curiosity and an openness to the unfamiliar. Your curiosity has served you well here—in solving problems, asking questions, engaging with new and complex ideas, and creating original artistic works. I know it will continue to serve you well. Curiosity will lead you to new skills and new knowledge. It will make you more interesting, and it will make your lives more interesting.

In a time when cynicism and judgment are often encouraged, it is not always easy to approach this world, and to approach people, with curiosity. I so believe in your capacity to do this work. It can be difficult, but it is also often just fun—and I believe, as Alice Munro did, that curiosity will reward you with a life of constant happiness. I wish that for each of you.