

President Zaki, Dean Scanlon, esteemed colleagues, and students and families, I am so very honored to have the opportunity to speak with you today. The title of my talk is “The Other Walden.” In it, I hope to shift our understanding of Walden from a pond just outside Concord, Massachusetts, into an emblem of the free, spirited and engaged inquiry that you have devoted yourself to here at Bowdoin. As we come together to celebrate your accomplishments, I would like us to reflect on that education, and how each of you will find ways to put it into practice long after you have graduated.

As many of you know, I am a literary scholar. One of the reasons I love to read is that when we open a book, the world we live in comes to seem less fixed and more open to change. As the Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde tells us in her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” “poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.” Each of us is a poet when we lay the imaginative groundwork for the world we would like to bring about. Each of us is a poet when we enter the unknown guided by the reservoir of creativity we hold within. Poetry, Lorde tells us, is not something we make time for later, after all our other needs have been met. It is a survival skill. A way of moving from where we are to where we want to be.

Let me tell you one story about building such an architecture. Thoreau moved into his unfinished cabin on Walden Pond on July 4, 1845. He chose the day, he tells us, by accident—an unintentional grounding of his own personal declaration of independence in America’s revolutionary history. We should not believe him. In 1845, the country was in tumult. Pro- and anti-slavery factions fought over the annexation of Texas, a slave-owning state whose admission into the Union would all but guarantee the legal persistence of slavery. Annexation also meant war with Mexico, and in the year that Thoreau moved to Walden, the pro-annexation, pro-slavery candidate James Polk had just won the presidential ticket. On the very day he carted his books, writing desk, and a few pieces of furniture from his family home in Concord to his cabin, Texas legislators were signing off on annexation.

How are we to understand this move? One can, of course, criticize Thoreau for turning his back on these political debates and escaping to Walden. How can one choose the life of the mind in a time that seems to demand rapid action? When everything in the world is in crisis, how can one take the time to watch loons and squirrels and study ancient Hindu scripture, as Thoreau did? Isn’t this selfish? I suspect many of you can relate to these questions. How often have you found yourself lost in thought and in your classes as the world burns and its sirens seem to scream out for your attention? How often have you wondered whether reflecting on the world is a pleasure we can no longer afford? These are the very questions that haunted Thoreau when he set out for Walden with the famous words, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.” Notice how he fuses thought and action, theory and practice, life and the mind into a single act.

I want to suggest to you that Thoreau’s retreat is not about leaving society, but rather about carving out a space for contemplation within it. It is about building a new architecture for a new way of life—one that won’t end in war and slavery. Many of us like to imagine that Thoreau built his cabin further out in the woods than he did. But when he looked out at the horizon, he could see the outline of the village where friends and family went about their lives. His cabin walls had wide chinks through which the wind blew and the sounds of woodcutters and songbirds drifted. The windows and doors were unpaned and unlocked, and friends often made a day of a trip to the cabin. One passerby, he tells us, even inspected his sheets while he was out on a walk. She found them less

clean than they ought to have been. Walden, he is trying to tell us, cannot be separated from the world it is in dialogue with.

When I teach *Walden*, I ask students to leave the classroom, spread out across campus and return with map of where they think Thoreau would build his cabin were he a student at Bowdoin today. Some students find a spot next to busy Bath Road, where they hear the passing cars announcing the world's affairs just as Thoreau was reminded of them by passing trains. Others find their Walden in Smith Union. Still others hear it in the very idea of a small liberal arts college where we not only learn the skills required to make a living but also deliberate and practice the ideals according to which we will live our lives. The goal, we come to understand, is not a sanctuary *outside* of society and history, but rather a space of temporary retreat that fortifies further engagement with it. To be in Walden is to insist on a space of moral and intellectual freedom, but it is also to keep the town forever in our sight.

These days, it's hard to ignore the fact that colleges and universities across the country have come under fire. Every day, students, professors, and staff wake up and renew our devotion to the very educational enterprise that is being constructed as a threat, rather than a strength, of this country. We hold discussions, go to rehearsals, and work as research assistants in laboratories knowing that our laboratories are on the brink of losing their funding; knowing that our peers are afraid to speak freely because their visas may be revoked; knowing that our faculty risk losing their employment because their fields of study have been deemed hostile to the national interest. We are learning how very fortunate we are to hold these spaces together. We who can exercise our freedoms, must, and we must help make this campus and all campuses into places where students, faculty, and staff do not live under fear. And when I say fear, I mean real fear: the fear of being arrested, expelled, fired, and deported, all of which we have witnessed on campuses around the country.

As we gather to celebrate your incredible achievements today, we are also affirming the value of the education that helped you to arrive at this moment. When I was asked to give this talk, I knew immediately that I would speak about Walden. It's my favorite book. I hoped to invite you to consider the way that what you have experienced at Bowdoin will remain a vital complement to the 'real world' that lies ahead. When Thoreau left his cabin, he described himself as a "sojourner"—a temporary resident—"in civilized life again." In doing so, he claimed that the intellectual and moral practices he refined at Walden would remain available to him, as they will for you, long after he left. My hope is that each of you will permit yourself what can so often be dismissed as a luxury, but is, in fact, a necessity. As we have seen, swift, unthinking actions can inflict tremendous suffering on workers, families, students, immigrants, and the environment. In such a climate, deliberation is itself transgressive.

I hope you will indulge me with one last story about Thoreau. One July afternoon, as he set out from his cabin Thoreau crossed paths with the town tax collector. He was promptly arrested for refusing to pay taxes to a government that had launched an unjust war in order to keep one sixth of the population in slavery. Thoreau had built his cabin to be open to the world. Now, he was imprisoned in Concord Jail behind an iron door and walls of stone. Despite this radical change in circumstance, Thoreau once again argued that this removal gave him a better vantage on the world. "It was like," he wrote, "traveling into to a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town-clock strike before, nor the

evening sounds of the village...I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.” We cannot, Thoreau tells us, understand our society without grappling with what it excludes and represses.

It might seem strange to you that I am ending my talk on this day of celebration by landing us, at least metaphorically, in prison. I do so to emphasize the transgressiveness of thought, the real danger it poses to the structures and systems that so often pass as a brute fact of our world. To call such thinking free is not only to emphasize its independence, but also to stress the ways it is what the theorist and educator bell hooks called “a practice of freedom,” a practice that moves us towards a more just world. As we gather today to celebrate your accomplishments, I invite you to also honor the capacity each and every one of you holds in your hands to build a new architecture for our lives.