

Welcome, everyone! Thank you so much for being here with us today.

I'm gonna miss this place. I love Brown. I love the classes, the people, the trees on the Main Green, even the fake one. But there's one thing that absolutely bothers me, and once I started noticing it, it was very hard to stop.

We, Brown students, don't look up before we cross the street.

You know what I'm talking about. It's that in-between class rush, after the 12:50 classes let out and before the 1:00 classes begin, and there's an endless stream of people rushing into the road between J Walter Wilson and Faunce. We're glued to our phones, glued to our friend's faces, glued to the next thing that we're running late for. And I'm just as guilty of this as anyone else.

But I realized – it's arrogant to assume that the world will stop just because *we're* in a hurry and *we* need to go someplace. And, yes, 99 times out of 100, we have a good reason. We have a *great* reason. We're running to print out our paper for our class on the philosophy of happiness. We're catching the bus to go to a local high school to facilitate a workshop on climate change. We're meeting a friend to practice the piece that we're performing on Friday. And, yes, 99 times out of 100, cars will stop. But I'm not here to give you a lesson on traffic safety. This is about looking up. This is about pausing—pausing to look the driver of the car in the eye, giving them a nod, giving them a smile. In our rush to get to the real world, we forget that we're already here.

This speaks to something deeper and broader, something that moves beyond the Van Wickle gates—the danger of normalization. Normalization: the process of making normal. Normal: conforming to the socially-accepted standard.

How many times have you had, or witnessed, an interaction like this?

“Hey! What's up? How are you?”

“Busy! But good! How are you?”

“Same, same, busy, but good!”

And it's great. Everyone's busy, but good, busy doing good things. Busy is normal. Busy is normalized. But maybe it's also okay to be busy *and* good. Or not busy and good. Or busy and bad.

There's a man walking across a field, and he encounters a tiger. He starts to run but he comes to a huge cliff. He sees a vine hanging over the edge and he grabs hold of it, swings over, and starts climbing down. But he sees that there's also a tiger below him! Then, two mice, one black and one white, scurry out from a crack in the cliff and start to chew on the vine. Tiger above. Tiger below. And two mice chewing at the vine. A wild strawberry, small and bright, is growing out from the rocky wall. The man plucks it and eats it.

The poet Ellen Bass describes this moment:

*Oh taste how sweet and tart
the red juice is, how the tiny seeds
crunch between your teeth.*

During my sophomore year, my friend and I decided to take salsa lessons. It was the middle of winter. Every Wednesday at 7pm, we would bundle up, bike up to Alumnae Hall, and learn how to move our feet and bodies. And we were terrible at dancing, don't get me wrong—but it was our strawberry. Salsa was sacred, nonnegotiable. No matter how many midterms were chasing after us, no matter how normalized it was to just pay attention to the growling above and the growling below, every week we would dance the sweetness of that strawberry.

Normal is dangerous. Normal makes us forget that there are other ways of being. It makes us forget that you can be not-busy, that you can cook dinner with your housemates and not feel guilty about all the work you have. (Shoutout to my housemates.) But on the flipside, normal is also dangerous because when something falls outside the normal, it's deviant.

People often speak of point-fivers with an assumption of deviancy. We strayed from the normalized path. We're non-traditional. Something didn't go as planned. Something went wrong.

Let's dissolve that story. It doesn't have to be wrong, or right, or not normal... it just is, and here we are. Four years is a great amount of time to go through college. So is three and a half. So is four and a half. So is five, so is seven, so is ten.

Let's also dissolve the normalized story of what it means to be a point-fiver. Not all of us here chose to take semesters off to have an adventure or develop our professional careers. Some of us had semesters of grief. Some of us worked, hard, to support our families. Some of us didn't leave Brown at all, but stayed right here, going to lectures we weren't enrolled in, learning to move through this city as a resident rather than a student.

Some of us transferred; some of us are coming back to college after being away for some time.

And some of us flew through our classes eagerly and are graduating a semester early. For some of us, our time away was devoid of agency, forced upon us by normalized, mandated ideas of how students should think, act, and feel. And when people are forced into normalized boxes, injustice is born.

I don't know all your stories. And I don't pretend to. Writing this speech was really, really difficult. For those of us who took time away, I don't know if leaving was a

strawberry for you or if coming back was a strawberry or if both were juicy and raw and stinging and crunchy and sour and sweet and soft all at the same time. I don't know if leaving took more courage or if coming back did. I don't know all your joys and exhilarations and sorrows and regrets but in the words of Mary Oliver,

*Tell me your despair, yours, and I'll tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.*

What I do know is my own experience as a small person in this big school. And what I've seen is that if there's one thing people here are good at, it's identifying and resisting injustice. We hold each other, and our school, accountable. We refuse to normalize behavior like sexual assault. When I first got here, I couldn't stop *smiling* all the time because people genuinely care about things! Like, shoot—the amount of passion and heart at this school is tremendous. Back in high school, it was really, really cool not to care about anything. The less you cared, the cooler you were. (It got tricky when you had to pretend like you didn't care about not caring). I've seen that apathy is the enemy of good, and there is so much good here. People recognize that what is normal is not necessarily what is right.

And often, the first step in resisting normalization is—a pause. Pausing to look the driver of the car in the eye, giving them a nod, giving them a smile. Pausing to eat that strawberry. Pausing to feel with someone else; pausing to let your jaw go slack with gratitude. Pausing as the last of the leaves fall, before the first of the finals begin, to sit in a big room and celebrate.

I'd like to share one of my favorite poems by the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. It goes like this.

*The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.*

*Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.*

*No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.*

*I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.*

Congratulations, class of 2017.5! Now go forth, refuse to be claimed, and snip fresh mint into people's tea.