

The open curriculum and the rest of your life
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midyear completion ceremony
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Thank you, Margaret, for those very kind words. And thank you, Madame President, Reverend Cooper Nelson, Ayane and Daniel, esteemed colleagues, students, family, and friends for being here on this beautiful occasion. This has always been one of my favorite celebrations of the academic year, not just because of the raucous high spirits that it always seems to evoke but also because, in its own way, it embodies the unique character of this institution. At Brown, we support an unconventional philosophy of education, and so we celebrate those who take the road less traveled. You students who are here tonight took the promise of the Brown curriculum to heart: you charted your own path, made your education work for you, in your own time, your own rhythm, and, in some cases, in the face of personal risk or difficulty. And so it is a privilege and a thrill for me to be addressing you today. You are, in many ways, my heroes.

This is also a moving occasion for me personally. I am here today delivering what is essentially my last speech as dean of the College at Brown. The first time I was asked to address a crowd like this was in the fall that I began my new role as dean. That was back in 2006, for Brown's 243rd convocation. Now, seven and a half years later, it seems fitting that my last speech is a commencement—well, not quite that...let's call it the completion ceremony of the 249th and-a-half graduating class. Yes, that's you, the class of 2013.5... And, yes, I'm completing with you!

Back in 2006, of course, I was looking toward the future with a class that was, like me, embarking on a brand new journey at Brown. Today, on this wintry December afternoon, I cannot help but look back, and think about some of the things I have learned from this extraordinary community.

So, what do I see when I look back? Well, probably like you, I recall some very good times. I think about, for instance, the deep satisfaction of teamwork, of collaborating with my colleagues in the Dean of the College office in designing and creating new tools, like ASK and Focal Point, to support advising. I remember the joy of teaching a new class on songwriting

and performing with students on a final recording project that kept us in the studios late into the night. I recall the sense of personal victory that came with publishing a book that I had been working on for a decade. And I'll never forget the flat-out fun of participating as a judge at weekend events like battle of the bands or Dancing with the Profs.

Oh, yes, there were challenging times, too. And we got through them, didn't we? But one particular challenge I sometimes think about goes back to before the beginning of my time as dean—it has to do with how I decided to take this job in the first place. And so I thought it might be useful to tell that story, because I think it is quite relevant to the point that you and I have reached today—as we turn another corner in this not-so-straight line that we call our lives and step onto a new path whose destination is as yet unclear.

Now, I became dean of the College in 2006, as I said, but I had actually come to Brown two years before that—in 2004. Through the Plan for Academic Enrichment, I was recruited from the University of California at Berkeley, where I had been teaching for a dozen years. That was a very exciting move for me. I was thrilled to be returning to New England and to be together again with my family; I was thrilled to be coming to a school that, like my own alma mater, was devoted to undergraduate teaching; and I was thrilled to be in an environment where the study of music was fully integrated into the liberal arts and sciences. I became chair of Music the following year, and I threw myself into the business of the department: advancing a building renovation, hiring new faculty, supporting changes to the curriculum, and teaching and performing with students. It was deeply consuming work, but I loved it. And then something very unexpected happened. Toward the end of that year, just as I was making exciting plans for the next one, I was asked by the chair of a committee that was searching for Brown's new dean of the College to consider applying.

It was, to be honest, a confusing proposition. I was of course flattered to be asked, but I wasn't looking for a new job—in fact, I had been looking forward to continuing my work as chair—and I really didn't know how to respond. So I went to talk it over with the Provost at the time. I basically asked him what I should do. And, though he didn't tell me directly, he said something that I continued to think about for years. He said: “choose the path where you can do the most good.”

“Choose the path where you can do the most good.” That sounds like pretty good advice for a commencement speech. But one of the reasons I’m telling this story is that, at the time, it didn’t answer my question, because it wasn’t immediately obvious to me which path that would be. The implication, of course, was that a dean could do more than a chair, but in 2006 I wasn’t able to see it that way: I felt I could do a lot of good in the music department, and, after all, wasn’t music at the center of everything? Yes, I understood that the dean’s role involved more responsibility, but I honestly couldn’t perceive, from where I was sitting, how this new role could be any better than what I had been doing before.

You all know what decision I ended up making; but my point is that it wasn’t through any clairvoyance on my part. In fact, the path, at the beginning, was pretty unclear. A door had just opened, and I decided to walk through not so much because I believed that choosing this path would allow me to “do more good,” but because I didn’t know whether this particular door would ever open for me again. I had the chance to do something completely different, something that would require me to learn a whole new way of thinking not only about the University but about myself, and so I took it. And it’s that kind of decision—that choice—that I want to focus on for the next few minutes with you, because, though this is my story, I think it’s yours, too.

So what did I learn? Well, I did gain a very new perspective on the University, a perspective that was partly a difference of scale. Whereas previously my efforts had been focused on the faculty and students and staff in one department, now my work had to be directed to people in every department, and to people beyond the departments, and beyond the University as well. And though I continued to teach and write about music, I also found myself engaged with a much broader set of intellectual questions. I was thinking, and teaching, and writing about a whole new field: the fertile environment of self-directed learning that defines the undergraduate experience here at Brown. I became, in short, an expert in the “open curriculum.”

Which means, of course, that I learned even more—and in a different way—about what it means to make a decision, about the pleasures, and the perils, and the power of choosing. Part of the attraction Brown holds for so many students, as we all know, is its promise of the student’s right to choose. This is certainly one of the great pleasures of the open curriculum but it also has a

downside. Choosing can be difficult, and at times it can leave you feeling unsatisfied. Back in 1998 a social psychologist from Stanford did the research to demonstrate that giving people too many choices can raise their levels of anxiety and regret. It becomes easier to believe that whatever you decide, you probably should have picked something else.

I thought about this phenomenon a lot during my first years as dean, especially after hearing some students express dissatisfaction about their Brown experience. We tried to do something about it by developing new advising networks and new tools that would put better information into students' hands—to make the choices less overwhelming. But I also realized that there was a part of this phenomenon that we couldn't (or shouldn't) change, because it carried, in a sense, a positive value. To feel regret means that you are experiencing, in a very direct way, the responsibility of your choices. And that was exactly what the open curriculum was designed to make you do.

In fact, if there is one image that I will take away with me about Brown students, it is the image of you copiously annotating your course bulletins, or making pages of lists, or filling your electronic carts, before going “shopping,” each semester, to decide which courses will be best for you. This is the open curriculum in action. It may look like speed dating, but it's actually more serious. Registering for a course here borders on taking a vow: *do you, John, take this ECON, for better for worse, for letter grade or S/NC, in sickness and in health, 'til the semester do us part?* I've often felt that the registration button on the electronic shopping cart should say: “I do.” Why? Because it would remind us what all this choosing is really about. It's about taking yourself seriously enough to make serious decisions; it's about developing an adult relationship to your learning; it's about following through on your promises—putting your heart and soul into the thing you have just chosen. To put it most simply, it's about commitment.

This activity of making decisions—literally, making *up your mind*—is, in the most basic sense, the point of a college education, and as dean of this great college I would have to say that, far more than the facts that will soon fade from your memory, this experience of making, and keeping, your commitments is probably the single most important lesson that you now carry with you as you complete your education here at Brown. As I was preparing these remarks I was reminded, in fact, that at the heart of the Latin word, *collegium*, from which we get our word “college,” is the verb *lego*:

which means “I choose.” Education, in the end, is about ownership and responsibility. I think it’s a beautiful thing that our curriculum, which I have had the privilege of stewarding over the past seven and a half years, is designed in such a way that you are not just reminded of this fact, you have to live it again and again and again.

And I think you should keep this very much in mind, too, as you leave this place and prepare to make your next important set of life decisions. I know that the next weeks and months may be hard. You may feel that you have suddenly far too few options to choose from. A door may open that requires you to rethink your carefully made plans, and you may not know what to do, or where you can do the most good. But don’t forget: you already have a great deal of experience with this type of situation. You have spent four plus years becoming comfortable with the unknown, and skilled at moving forward with little more than the courage of your convictions. So it should be comforting to remember that your education hasn’t ended; it has barely begun. And if you keep the lessons of the open curriculum to heart, if you *own* this next phase of your education, by giving yourself with humility and grace and passion to all of your next endeavors, you will not only have the life-changing experiences that marked your time at Brown, you will also be able to continue changing the world—your world—for the better.

So, class of 2013.5, this is what I want to say in this bittersweet moment of parting: take the spirit of the open curriculum with you. Keep your commitments. And promise that you will always do the most good, *whatever* path you choose. Thank you for the incredible experience of these past several years, and for the privilege of serving as your dean. You will always be in my heart.