

Welcome class of 2013.5 and congratulations! Welcome parents, welcome faculty, alumni, friends. Hi Bubbie. Thanks everyone for coming.

In late autumn of last year, at the end of another long afternoon, a hawk landed in the yard of Rhode Island's only maximum security prison. All the men gathered around, but not too close, afraid that they'd scare it away with their shadows, the shuffle of their boots on the asphalt. It was, after all, the first bird that had landed in the yard for more than four months. My friend, let's call him Jacob, kept track of these things. Before it flew away—and it did, after only two and a half minutes, which seemed like forever, which seemed like far too little time—Jacob took out a pen and drew a sketch of the hawk on the back of his hand.

That Friday, like every Friday, I visited the prison to lead a poetry workshop with a public service group at Brown. That Friday, everyone was on fire about this hawk: about the slant of its beak and the color of its feathers, about how sincerely difficult it was to watch when it coasted silently past the barbed-wire perimeter they wouldn't be allowed to leave for another few decades. It had put everyone in a kind of vulnerable mood, to be honest, and so we agreed to try our hands at something we'd been talking about for a while, which was love poems. Some of the guys wrote poems to their grandmothers who had passed away since they'd been inside, others to the mothers of their children who had long-since remarried, whose names were still tattooed on the insides of their forearms. Jacob wrote a poem to the hawk itself, still smudged in blue across his hand. And everyone agreed it was hard, maybe the hardest thing we'd done all semester. The poems made fresh again the lives they missed and couldn't have. But when we were done, they insisted on sharing them, and nobody cried outright but a few of us did get a little teary-eyed. As Jacob would tell me later, "This is the most important thing we could be doing. If you lose heart in here, you're done." The whole thing was one of the bravest—or to use a word we like to toss around at Brown—boldest things I've ever seen, and I hope today to explore why that was, and what it could possibly mean for us.

Ok, so let's back up a second. I want to start with a question: what does it mean, really, to be bold? We throw the word on T-shirts a lot, and like, I love those T-shirts too, but what do we mean when we wear them? Because here we are, about to graduate, about to enter the "real-world", and boldness—whatever that is—is ostensibly something that we'll be needing when we leave here. And what I really *love* about Brown, is that so many of us leave here wanting to do good. Not to do well necessarily; but to do good. The "real-world" can be a pretty rough place, we've heard, and there's a lot of work to be done. Just to offer a quick laundry list, we need to overhaul the prison industrial complex, shrink this country's enormous income gap, dismantle patriarchy, fight racism and heterosexism, and not just the everyday bigoted kinds but the persistent, invisible, structural kinds, reverse environmental degradation, make sure everyone has access to medical care, higher education, and a decent grocery store, and do something so that we're not on the brink of apocalypse every time Congress needs to make a decision. Shoot, like that's kind of a long list. And on top of all of that whole mess, there's also climate change, which is what I've chosen to focus most of my studies on here. There are definitely, definitely days when I think that that wasn't such a great choice. If someone had sat me down freshman year and told me Dan, in order to avoid living on a planet that is hotter than it has been for hundreds of thousands of years, you're going to have to do your small part to help completely overhaul the global energy status quo which is currently making a lot of very influential people very wealthy, and it's going to need to get done in the next few decades or else millions of people in the developing world who had nothing to do with the problem are going to face unprecedented hardship. Just, like: "DANG! That sounds so hard! That sounds *so* hard." And it has been hard. When Brown last month failed to act with the urgency the problem demands, when Brown flouted its own ethics committee and chose to keep profiting from some of the country's largest carbon polluters, when Brown demonstrated the same basic lack of political courage that has stymied progress on climate change from the Senate to the United Nations: that was hard. That was heart-breaking.

Ok, bear with me though, I promise this speech is going to have a happy ending. The only reason I bring all of this up is to point out that there's a reason this same litany of issues gets repeated pretty much every commencement when an authority figure tells us about the "challenges your generation will inherit." And that reason is that a lot of these problems are really, really difficult and intractable. Doing good will not always be easy, or fun, or gratifying, or even successful. In the "real-world" it will be very hard to keep caring so much about the good we're trying to do. Which is not to say we'll stop fighting for it, it just means that it will be tempting to suppress, or sublimate, or otherwise distance ourselves from the garish, uncomfortable, beating heart of what made us want to fight these fights in the first place. And we can keep tip-toeing around it, but what that thing probably is is love. Straight up, totally embarrassing, capital-L Love. The kind where there's a human who is not you, and who is facing some sort of hardship, and you do what you can to help out because you care deeply that they be happy. To return to Jacob's words for a second, maybe this is what we mean when we say "don't lose heart"—that even when it's hard, even if it's the hardest thing you do, you can't let that central, motivating love get away from you.

At Brown, students have heart. Really just mind-blowing amounts of heart. Like my friend who will lesson plan like a madman night after night to make sure that the under-resourced high school students he's teaching are getting the best education he can give them, and then on the side he'll be taking them out to dinner just to check in, or editing their college essays, or giving them dating advice. Or all the students brave enough to follow their gut and buck the standard four year, single-school, crank-em-out college cycle, graduating in the heart of winter before anyone's even started their final papers. And one more shout out to all those courageous Brown kids who get totally naked and monologue in front of their peers to help the community grapple seriously with issues of confidence, body image, sexuality, and skin color. *Bubbie*, if you haven't heard about this we'll talk after. At Brown, we don't just know about these issues, we feel them. Another way of saying this is that we are

*vulnerable to the weight of the harms we seek to redress.* And now this is sounding like not the kind of thing you say in a commencement speech: like, “stay vulnerable, class of 2013.5!” But that’s what I’m saying. To return to my original question, I think this is probably the boldest thing you can possibly do.

Because, imagine right? It’s twenty years from now and you’re working at a small nonprofit somewhere, and it’s your seventh meeting of the day and all you’re talking about is fundraising, which is of course super tedious but also totally necessary for your adult literacy project, and Jim asks you to write the grant, even though he knows you have a million other things to do and as far as you can tell, all Jim really does is post cat videos on Pinterest, and it’s at moments like these when it will take courage and endurance and unflinching vulnerability to remind yourself that you’re doing this out of love. Now, I don’t at all presume to equate these frustrations with the real hardships Jacob and his peers go through every day in prison. This institution has afforded us immense societal privilege, and so as Brown graduates, we will probably never experience that kind of hardship. And it’s obviously not because we’re somehow better people than Jacob. You can just look at our illustrious board member Mr. Steven Cohen, whose hedge fund stole a sum of money that is six orders of magnitude larger than what Jacob stole, to know that this is a matter of privilege and not principles. Anyway, can’t get into *that* right now. It’s about 4:45, so as I’m telling you this, Jacob is probably sitting in the yard, which is just 20 minutes south of here, waiting to be escorted back to his cell so he can sit alone for 12 hours and wait for the bullhorn that announces the start of another identical day. I’ve been volunteering there for four years and I still can’t even begin to imagine how hard this is. But Jacob is one of the least cynical, most open-hearted people I know. This is not something that comes easily; he works really hard at it every day, he writes, he keeps an eye out for hawks. And if we want to do bold good in the real world, then we share in that glorious responsibility not to lose heart.

We all know how these ceremonies work. 30 years from now, you’ll look back on today and be like, ‘what did that kid say?’ Which is totally fair, I probably won’t remember either. But what we might

remember is how at Brown, we knew how to care deeply and then act on it. And what I'm saying is: 30 years from now, don't let that be a memory. Keep it real, keep it immediate, keep it heartfelt.

Congratulations in advance class of 2013.5. I know we can do it.