

Good afternoon and congratulations.

Today, I'm going to share the story of how I came to be a point-fiver. It is only one example of the many different paths that we each followed to reach this moment. My own path involved few choices — and a lot of hard decisions.

Senior year is a special time for any college student. I had so many plans for mine.

But we make plans, and God laughs.

It was a Friday morning in September of last year. I felt great. Classes were going well. I was absorbed in my thesis about language and identity in Ukraine. I lay in the sun on the Green, surrounded by my best friends. I was the happiest I had ever been.

But then the pain began. It started as a twinge in my shoulder — a twinge that intensified, before extending rapidly down into my body, until it was all encompassing, immersive, drowning, pain.

I was admitted to the ER, and then discharged. This happened again and again for days. No one believed me when I said I was in excruciating pain. They claimed I was exaggerating, lying, drug-seeking, hysterical. What does a girl have to do to get admitted to the hospital? Finally, on Monday morning, I was again rushed to the ER.

They told me an organ had ruptured. But by then, there wasn't time to find out which. Immediate and invasive surgery was the only path for survival. Suddenly, my life had an expiration date of mere hours. I prepared for the sleep of anesthesia, wondering if I might never wake up.

My physical souvenir from that nightmare is a long silverish stripe down the center of my abdomen. From afar, it looks like I have abs of steel. But the line is not straight; it's not symmetrical. It curves into a little hook around the right side of my belly button. It's imperfect. And like my possible pathways out of that day at Miriam — a little crooked, a bit imperfect.

That day, I received a crash course in adulthood: with all of my options looking sort of dismal and scary. Should I stay at Brown and salvage the semester, while undergoing an impossibly difficult recovery? Or should I take an unplanned medical leave, in essence giving up the life I was enjoying so much?

Brown left the decision to me, trusting that any one of its students would have the maturity and perception to make hard choices. It is the same trust that Brown places in all of us to be the leaders of our college lives — to be bold enough to do what's right for us. But taking control of our own lives can be terrifying.

Emerging from a traumatic health event and facing the truth that my senior year had veered off the course I had laid, I felt — perhaps irrationally — that preserving the four-year academic track was the most important goal. My world had been turned upside down. I was grasping for some feeling of groundedness. Graduating on time seemed like it would prove that I could land on my feet, and that outside forces wouldn't dictate my fate.

This was late October; I looked at what I had on my plate. Something that I had always viewed as a non-negotiable component of my education — a senior honors thesis — seemed an insurmountable challenge. My mind and body had been through civil war; I could barely sit up on my own. How was I going to trek to the Rock in the bitter cold, and spend hours at a desk writing about a topic that was far removed from the trials I had just experienced?

And, I thought, who even cares about Ukraine, anyway? Nothing ever happens there. Something had to give. I bid the thesis farewell.

Within a month, I regretted that decision.

By mid-winter, Ukraine was the hottest situation in the world. I watched the crisis there evolve, feeling exhilaration and enthusiasm about the progress of democracy, but also frustration and regret, as I realized that what was — and is — happening in Ukraine represents a pivotal moment in history. Yet I was missing my chance to write on it, just when Ukraine's future mattered most, and when my thesis topic was finally, *finally* sexy.

I needed more time. And I realized that I should find a way to make it happen. Really, I just had to ask.

So I went to University hall and laid out my case. Together, we identified my options, formed a support team, until I was in the position to delay graduation to write my thesis. In a way, it turned out to be fateful: I now have the opportunity to study a situation in Ukraine that is constantly evolving. It's the kind of work I came to Brown to do, because only here can I truly have the freedom to do it.

At Brown, a different approach to education is not odd, it's expected. By pushing us to direct our own educations, Brown positions us to be the leaders of our lives. And although it is sometimes scary and overwhelming, it can point us in new and exciting directions.

I expect that each point-fiver has a story to tell about how the drive toward a four year completion slowly yielded to other priorities.

For some of us, there were unexpected challenges that led us to reinterpret our Brown careers and reconstruct our paths. For others, opportunities arose that could teach us in ways that Brown couldn't.

And Brown offered us these paths, giving us guidance and encouragement, and, most importantly, let us walk out the door for a time, all the while keeping it open so we could return when the moment was right.

Brown's option for a mid-year completion allowed me to dodge the real disruption that my surgical adventure would have caused, and I was able to reboot academically and socially.

When I first saw my scar, I was struck by its power to mark me physically. But I slowly came to appreciate its power to symbolize my struggle, and ultimately, my triumph.

The “.5” tacked on to our graduation year accomplishes something similar: yes, it marks us, but it also signals our uniqueness and *symbolizes the distinction of our college experience.

Our journey here at Brown, even if it was winding and less predictable, will help us to know ourselves and to shape our own imperfection. And it will help us shape the various imperfections imposed on us, and to sculpt our choices into the different lives that we will lead for a while, and then carve into further refinement, again and again.

Now we look to the next period of transition in life. For me, it will be the hardest one yet. Because if one extra semester at Brown has taught me anything, it is how much I love this school and view it as my home, and how torn up I am to leave.

But my experiences of the past year and a half have also taught me that things have a way of working out. Just as my scar is not a straight line, neither were our paths through college. But I own the scar, because it's uniquely mine, it makes me special. And Brown let us own our educations, and make them exceptional and right for us.

Brown has quietly, and without much fanfare, prepared us to take advantage of whatever choices led us to delay graduation a bit. And the total of these years with Brown have quietly schooled us in the skills we'll need to navigate the *next journey of our lives — the journey that commences beyond the Gates, *and begins today.