

Be Present . . . and Breathe

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President Troha, platform party, faculty, staff, and friends please join me in welcoming Provost Bowen, new faculty and staff, and, of course, the Class of 2018 into the Juniata family. How many of you are excited to be here? Raise your hands. How many people are nervous? Be honest. How many people are nervous?

Not to worry, I'm nervous, too. I'm an art historian—I usually teach in a classroom with the lights down and pictures on the big screen. Standing here under a spotlight with all of you looking at me and no pictures behind me . . . yeah, it's a little scary. But I suppose a little nerves in a situation like this is okay, so I'm just going to take a deep breath and roll with it.

At opening convocation the speaker is supposed to provide words of wisdom to the incoming freshman class. When I found out I had to give the speech this year, I was a bit apprehensive because the bar for these things has been set pretty high recently. I mean, Dr. Belle Tuten led several other faculty members in song at the closing convocation in May, and Professors Bethany Benson and Matt Powell led everyone in a choose-your-own-adventure story last year. So my first thought was, "How can I top that?"

My first instinct was to craft a speech telling you about the things I learned as a student at Juniata. Way back when, I was a quiet, shy student, terrified of speaking in public, probably sitting in those same seats, excited and nervous, about to start my journey through college. I thought I could tell you about the classes I took, the professors I worked with, my study abroad trip to Japan, Pig Roast and Senior Week—well, maybe not those—all within the context of providing words of wisdom that you'd likely just forget as soon as you left the auditorium. But, a speech like that would be about me, and today is about you. So instead, I'm going to give you some tools and just a little advice to help you succeed, not just here at Juniata during the next four years, but as you move out into the world beyond this campus.

You may have looked in the program, seen the title of this talk, "Be Present . . . and Breathe," and found yourself wondering what it might be about. I chose this title because I think the two pieces of advice it suggests are things that we take for granted, or don't do often enough. Take breathing, for example. It's something we all do, something that we have to do to stay alive, but how often to you

“think” about breathing? Okay, maybe after your third trip walking up to my office on the fourth floor of Good Hall and you find yourself feeling out of shape, or maybe after a 100-yard dash at football or track practice, but beyond that, how often do you really just sit down and focus on the air moving in and out of your lungs? I’m guessing not very much, right? Most of us just take the life-giving force of our breath completely for granted. Breathing is the simplest, most natural thing in the world, but it’s certainly not easy. That said, there are some good physical reasons for us to take some time to stop and breathe. Slow focused breathing can calm your nerves, ease anxiety and tension, and lower your blood pressure—all good things when you’re in college, especially when you’re feeling stressed out during, say, midterms and finals . . . or when you’re standing in an auditorium full of people staring at you.

Since breathing is so good for you, I thought it would be worthwhile to take a few minutes to focus on it. I want you guys to do something with me. I want you all to sit nice and tall in your chairs, legs uncrossed, hands resting lightly on your legs. Now, close your eyes. It’s okay, close your eyes, I’m not going to have Chad Herzog drop balloons or confetti or something from the ceiling. I promise. Just close your eyes and notice your breath. Don’t change anything about it; just notice where you are right now. Is your breath shallow or deep? Fast or slow? Is it easy or labored? Now, place your hands on your stomach, just below your belly button. Notice the expansion and contraction of your belly as your diaphragm moves up and down with each breath. In a world where we are constantly running from one class or meeting to the next, are always connected to our smartphones, and are feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work we have to do each day, we find ourselves feeling rushed. When we feel rushed, or even nervous, our breath tends to be shallow; and when our breath is shallow, we’re not breathing fully. So let’s take a few minutes to practice breathing fully. Allow yourself to take a nice deep slow inhalation through your nose. As slowly as you inhaled release the air in your lungs with a long, even exhale. Notice how the movement of your torso expands to make room for your lungs as they fill with air. Try that a few more times. Inhale . . . Exhale . . . Notice that as you focus on breathing into the belly your breath slows down. You can slow your breath down even more by counting. Inhale to the count of four . . . Exhale . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . And again . . . If we had more time, we’d extend the counting to six, and then maybe eight or even ten, but this is something you can practice on your own at any time.

You can open your eyes and release your hands, and notice how you feel. Do you feel calmer, less nervous, more clearheaded? I’m guessing at least some of you do. So, why do I recommend that you practice this breathing technique? It’s simple: because college is hard. I heard a gasp from the administration at that statement. I’m sure the President and Provost—and maybe even many of you—are sitting there saying, “First breathing exercises, now this? What is she doing?” I’m not telling you that college is hard in order to scare you. I’m telling you that because it’s a good thing. The things in life that are difficult are the things that challenge us, and if you didn’t want to be challenged, and didn’t want to

learn, you wouldn't be here. So what do you think I'm going to suggest you do in the face of all of the challenges you're going to encounter during the next four years?

Stop and take a few long slow deep breaths.

Which leads to the other part of this speech's title: "Be Present." This piece of advice can simply mean showing up—you have to "be present" in class if you're going to do well. And then, of course, there's the old sports cliché that "90% of winning is just showing up." You can't win the game if you're not present on the field, right? But there are other ways of being present, too. What I'm referring to is being present in the moment, and being aware of what's going on at a specific moment in time. And do you know what? Being present in this way is directly connected to that breathing exercise we just did. When you consciously slow down the breath, you focus on the present moment.¹ You forget the past and stop agonizing over the answers you wrote on your last organic chemistry exam and you can forget, even if for a moment, the stresses of the future and the next paper you have to write for your CWS class. When you slow down your breath, you clear your mind and you end up being more focused when you get back to work. By taking a few minutes to breathe, you'll actually end up writing a better paper. Keep that in mind.

Breathe, and be present are my two main pieces of advice today, but I have one more that's related to them: don't be afraid of change. I can see those of you who know me well trying to stifle a laugh, thinking that this is a funny piece of advice coming from me; I mean, honestly, given my love of routine I think I may have been a cat in a former life. But, seriously, I've come to realize change is good. It's really good.

We grow up. We move. We meet new people. We learn new things. Each event, each person we encounter changes us, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in bigger ways, sometimes in ways we may not recognize for years.

Everything you've done in your life has led you to this moment—right here, right now—has led you to become the newest members of the Juniata community sitting here in Rosenberger Auditorium ready to embark on the next big adventure in life. You're excited and nervous. We've already established that, but I'm betting that most of you haven't thought about how this experience, and how the very people sitting next to you, might change you.

Periodically taking the time to slow down your breath and to be fully in the present will allow you to be more open to the possibilities of what these experiences and people have to offer.

Everything you do during your four years at Juniata—study abroad, internships, work study positions, capstone experiences, and yes, even participating in Storming of the Arch, Mountain Day activities, tenting for Madrigal tickets, Pig Roast, and the myriad other wonderful Juniata traditions—will

shape you into young men and women who will leave campus to go on to do amazing things. So instead of passively letting change happen, embrace it, seek it out, experiment, and try new things!

Are you coming into Juniata as a student who excelled in physics and chemistry in high school? Take a ceramics class or a theater class. Who knows, you might find that you love the arts—but I mean really, who wouldn't love the arts—the Art Department here is fantastic! Does everyone “back home” know you as a star athlete? Well, why not make a name for yourself by getting involved in community service, participating in service learning opportunities, or making the next big discovery in an applied archaeology class at the Field Station? Perhaps you'll find a passion for something you didn't even know existed. The beauty of a liberal arts education is that you have the opportunity to try a lot of different things. In choosing Juniata you bought into the idea of the liberal arts, so don't complain about the dreaded “Q” requirement. Embrace that math class, be present in the classroom, breathe through the stress of studying for exams, and be open to receiving the lessons you'll learn from your peers and the professor.

When we finish this ceremony today, you'll process out of this auditorium with your classmates, ready to continue on this exciting journey of college, and as you do so, I'll invite you to remember: Be Present . . . and Breathe!

NOTES

1. Donna Farhi, *The Breathing Book: Good Health and Vitality Through Essential Breath Work* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 5. See Farhi's book for more information about the benefits of and various techniques used for breathing exercises.