

Commencement Address: Finding your Ithaka

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Commencement Address 2022

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President Troha, Provost Bowen, my fellow members of the Board of Trustees, the wonderful professors Jill Keeney & Donna Weimer and the rest of the amazing faculty, incredible staff, honored guests, and members of the class of 2022: thank you. Thank you for this honor.

I graduated from this institution almost exactly 21 years ago—on May 13, 2001, which also happened to be my 22nd birthday. This coincidence of these events resulted in a lot of jokes about my *super* expensive birthday gift and the huge party Juniata threw for me. When I told my family about this weekend, my brother resurrected the joke: heck of a way to spend your birthday this year!

I can't predict the future, but I have to tell you, I have already marked off this weekend in 2043 on my calendar for whatever fun Juniata has in store for me.

All jokes aside, I am truly humbled to be standing here before you. I was speechless when President Troha called me and I pondered these remarks for weeks. To the delight of the small humans in my household, I dug out old graduation pictures for inspiration. I tried to explain what a big deal this is. Their response: "Do you have to wear the outfit? You look like you're going to Hogwarts."

Graduation speeches are supposed to be full of advice, so we can start right here: if you ever need a reminder of how fundamentally *un*important you are, have a conversation about it with a 6- or 8-year-old.

To be fair, though, they hit right on target what I felt: I'm *not* important. I'm not the graduation speakers from those pictures—I haven't reached the pinnacle of my career or achieved unparalleled success.

How did I get here?

When I graduated, Donna Weimer—professor of communication, and extraordinary human being—gave her senior students a little parting gift. I still have mine: there's a note, full of her wit and wisdom, and it came with a copy of the poem "Ithaka" by Constantine Cavafy. The poem is about journeys, inspired by *the Odyssey*—the epic Greek tale of Odysseus's 20-year journey home to Ithaka. In

the poem, Cavafy expresses hope that the reader has a long, unhurried journey. He says that when you reach your destination, *your* Ithaka, if it isn't as expected, that's okay, because of all you gained on the journey. When I was 22, I theoretically understood this poem, but I don't think I *really* understood it. Today, at a freshly minted 43, I think I have a better idea.

And it's this evolution, this journey of knowledge I'd like to share with you. And for me, my journey started off with an enormous failure.

In my spring semester, senior year, everyone was lining up their next steps—professional schools and jobs—and I had the stark realization that I was *not* sure what came next. I loved being a student and doing research but was that enough to commit to an academic path? I ended up hesitantly applying to a handful of graduate programs. I got one interview, and it was late in the semester that I got the letter that I didn't get into that program.

Over the years, details of memories have faded, but I remember that day with painful clarity. When I got that letter, I didn't tell anyone. I went back to my room, put it in my desk, made some lame excuse to my friends for skipping dinner with them, ignored a call from my mom, and took refuge in the library. I was the head tutor at the campus writing center that year, so I hid in there before we opened for the night. My solitude and misery were interrupted by Carol Peters, the head of the writing center and another remarkable mentor. She was just dropping by, but one look at me and she stopped to ask if I was okay. I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth, and I remember saying something flippant about contemplating my life, which she clearly did not buy. On her way out, she said that it's not always a bad thing not to know things. I wish I could say that this was a beautiful, motivational moment, like in a Disney movie. But it was not. I should have felt inspired, but I only felt awful. *Not knowing felt awful.*

Though I tried, I couldn't avoid my degree mentors. I mean, they had written my recommendation letters. The first unavoidable meeting was with Grace Fala, professor of communications, and one of best people on this planet. When the subject arose, I turned into a spluttering incoherent mess. Grace wisely suggested that maybe we should meet again soon to talk about next steps. She reminded me that it's our job, as lifelong learners, to plant ideas like seeds, to nurture and grow them. She said: everyone plants seeds that don't end up growing.

For the second meeting, I was on the couch in the office of my wonderful research advisor, Jill Keeney. The truth came stumbling out; I don't remember *what* I said, but I very much recall saying it to my shoes. Jill allowed some silence, and then she said quite casually: "Okay, so what's next?" And when I looked up in shock, she said: "Parisha. Okay. What's next?"

I couldn't appreciate any of these moments at the time as much as I do now. All I could see was a dead end, but my mentors saw a blocked path, a detour, or a new route. With their guidance, I applied to several research positions and was accepted in a competitive research program at the National Institutes

of Health. Even as people congratulated me and expressed excitement, I was full of doubt. I left Juniata wondering: what if I couldn't do this? If I failed again, then what?

This unexpected road—an entire unplanned year in Washington, DC—was one of the best things that ever happened to me. That year, I learned that I was as good as anyone else in that program—I came trained just as well or better. I could do high level research *and* thrive independently in a city where I knew nobody and had never lived before. That spring, I applied for grad school without hesitation, and I had options for where I wanted to interview and go. Me—the girl who didn't get into grad school before and came into her internship worried about failure. *That* girl was going to one of the most rigorous scientific training programs around.

At the end of my third year of grad school, my first scientific research article was accepted for publication. Someone ran off to get a bottle of champagne and snacks for a spontaneous party in the break room. I went into the lab to grab a coffee mug to use for champagne—very classy, I know!—and I remember having a Juniata moment. My “tutor emeritus” mug—a funny gift to the graduating Juniata writing center tutors from Carol Peters—was sitting in my drawer on top of book of laboratory protocols, a gift from Jill Keeney to her graduates. Jill's note to me inside: “Go, have fun!” On the cork board at my desk was a miniature set of gardening tools, a gift from communications professor Grace Fala. She gave these to her senior students to remind us to keep planting new seeds and cultivating ideas. And these were tacked to the copy of the poem “Ithaka” from Professor Donna Weimer.

I have played this memory over and over again in my mind the past few weeks. It was this time when my career trajectory genuinely took shape, and this moment stands out because it highlights the impact of my Juniata education—and not just in these keepsakes, but *in me*. This was when I realized that I was not just taught the importance of being rigorous: I *was* rigorous. I *was* capable and creative. I had what it took to keep following the road.

Coming full circle here, I still maintain that I don't have the perspective of someone who has reached the pinnacle of their career, but I *do* have perspective to share about my journey. And my perspective comes in the form of a biology lesson. I am a molecular biologist, after all. If you will kindly permit me a moment of nerdiness, I promise there is a point.

The human body is made up of trillions of cells all of which have the same DNA—think of it as the instruction book for your body. But these trillions of cells are not all the same: they are organized into different types so that different parts of this DNA instruction book are open in the different types. This process of going from a single cell to such a complex machine like the human body is a longstanding biological mystery.

What does this have to do with you? Well, it's easy to think that because the DNA instruction book is so important, the structure that houses it must be like the molecular version of Fort Knox. Rigid, impervious. But it's not. It's flexible and permeable. There are signals continuously coming into and out of this structure. There is continual adaptation of the DNA within.

And this brings us to a lesson in caution about rigidity, about being so focused and committed to a plan, a specific path, or ideology that it prevents you from engaging new ideas or adapting to change, restricting yourself from learning and growing in unexpected ways. It is *very easy* to live in an echo chamber, but I encourage you to take a lesson from your cells and be flexible. Your education here has primed you for lifelong learning and personal evolution. Embrace it.

The next lesson is about personal strength. The flip side of studying how it's possible to get so many types of cells is trying to understand how they stay in that state. And this is important because some terrible human diseases involve cells that have lost this stability. Essentially, cells must "remember" what they are. What's amazing is how much a cell can be stressed and pushed—it takes a huge molecular effort to truly change a cell's trajectory.

I think of people as the same. You will be stressed and pushed along the way; there will be lonely times when the unexpected occurs or you have failed or are full of doubt. It is *these* moments when I think you learn the most about who you are. And, if you're like me, you will realize much later how much personal strength comes from your education and the people who helped get you here. You may also realize that your gratitude for them has been insufficient.

So, in all my wisdom here, let me help you express your gratitude in advance.

Jill Keeney says that faculty members take a leap of faith on their students, sending them off into the world, believing they will succeed. If today is a celebration of your academic achievement, then it is also a celebration of their belief in you, in their success as the arbiters of knowledge, in their capacity as the soul of an academic institution, as people who have challenged you and instilled you with the skills necessary for your journey.

Members of the class of 2022, I hope you will join me in a round of applause in gratitude to your professors and mentors.

The second group is this lovely crowd I'm seeing. I would never have made it to graduation 21 years ago, if not for my family: my older sister, fellow Juniata, who always leads the way; my younger brother, whose own journey has so often overlapped mine; and our parents, especially the remarkable sacrifices they made as immigrants so that we could *have* our journeys. I would not be here at this graduation if not for them, and all the wonderful family I've acquired along the way. I will argue, the people who celebrate this day with you are a fundamental part of you, and I think it's only with time that you can really see how powerful that can be.

Class of 2022, I hope you will stand and turn as you are able to face your families and supporters, to applaud *them* in appreciation.

All right! We had some activity and excitement before the end!

My story today started with a poem. At the end, Cavafy writes:

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her you wouldn't have set out. . . .

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,

you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.¹

When I was 22, all I could think: What is my Ithaka? How could I not know where I was going?! Twenty-one years later, I can tell you with the utmost confidence: I have *no idea* what my Ithaka is. And I think I do understand: I'm perfectly fine not knowing. It's never *been* about the destination.

We are conditioned to have all the answers. But, if you remember nothing else from this address, I hope you will remember this final lesson: there is so much joy to be had in what you do not know. My road has led me to unexpectedly wonderful places, even in the face of failure and uncertainty, and my education has always been my compass. It is okay to not know, okay to fail, and okay to think you don't have what it takes to figure out what you don't know or how to get past failure. You made it here today, so *I* know and everyone here knows that you are equipped for the journey. And I hope that inspires you to embrace the moments when your path is unclear, so that *you* can journey to unexpectedly wonderful places.

Thank you for allowing me to experience *this* moment with you. I can think of no better way to close than by sharing Cavafy's words at the start of his poem:

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.²

Congratulations, Class of 2022!

NOTES

1. C. P. Cavafy, "The City," in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975). Accessed at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>.
2. Ibid.