

RaiNesha L. Miller

“Rising from Fear: The Unyielding Power of Self-Belief”

President Mills, Members of the College, and Guests:

When I was a little girl, my mother would always tell my younger brother and me that someday we were both going to be somebody. She would say, “My babies are going to be well respected members of the community and renowned in each of their chosen professions. You have what it takes and you don’t need anybody else to tell you that you’re great.” My brother and I always joked about my mother’s confidence in our abilities; we viewed her words as nothing more than a mother’s unconditional love and support. As a first-year student at Bowdoin, the courage, confidence, and resilience my mother instilled in me began to wane; fear took over: the fear of letting my family down, of not belonging at such a prestigious college, of not being as intelligent as my peers. The prospect of failure began to consume me. Even though my grades were good and my activities were solid, I spent two and a half years weighed down by the belief that I was not living up to my full potential. Something was holding me back.

One Sunday evening while I was surfing the internet and doing everything but working on the paper due the following day, I came across a quote by Audre Lorde, a Caribbean-American writer and activist. And here is that quote: “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

At that moment, something inside me came alive. I realized the truth in my mother’s words. Our time at Bowdoin and all the lessons we’ve learned throughout our young lives have provided us with the tools necessary to conquer our fear of failure, to overcome our feeling of inadequacy. My fellow classmates, let me ask you two essential questions: What are you afraid

of? Will you succumb to this fear or use it as an impetus to believe in yourself, whatever the challenge, whatever the risk?

How did we get the tools I refer to? Since our first day on campus, we have been encouraged to participate and get involved or, as the Offer of the College states, “lose yourself in generous enthusiasms.” Volunteer through the McKeen center; give your all to a sports team or a musical group; run for a student office; lead class discussions. Each and every day, we have faced up to our fears by being leaders, speaking out in class, forging relationships, and striving to better ourselves as students and individuals. With each of these examples came seemingly insurmountable challenges and the risk of failure. However, by remaining faithful to our pursuits and passionate in our purpose, we have put fear on the sidelines. We’re now ready to take on the world.

If you’re like me, you have faced fears both small and big while at Bowdoin. Should I check the menus at both dining halls before deciding where to grab a meal instead of taking a risk and randomly selecting where to eat? What will I do next summer, next year? Should I study abroad? Where will I be in five, ten or twenty years? Sometimes we have played it safe and acted in ways that guaranteed a fairly certain outcome. At other times, we have been more willing to reach high and risk failure.

Despite its impairing effects, fear forces us to reevaluate who we really are. Being surrounded by a number of intelligent and capable students I have often doubted myself. I remember a time when fear forced self-reflection. As a psychology major, I looked forward to taking my psychology seminars. I thought, what an exciting forum for me to talk about my love for understanding the individual and engage with my peers at the same time. The first day of my seminar, I was eager to discuss the readings. I even took it upon myself to start off the

discussion. Before I had fully articulated what I thought to be psychology's next best prophetic exegesis, my professor kindly interjected to tell me that I had misunderstood the readings. In that instance, I wished my childhood dreams of being the invisible water princess would come true. Since that wasn't an option, I decided to remain quiet for the rest of the class period and refused to speak in any of the following class meetings.

So when my professor announced that the author of the book we'd been reading would come to visit and that each of us in the seminar had to prepare three questions to ask the author, I experienced a moment of sheer terror. I strongly considered telling my professor that hours of watching horrible reality TV shows on VH1 and Bravo had completely diminished my ability to form any coherent thought, let alone craft three intelligent questions. No matter how legitimate I thought my excuse, I knew my professor would not believe me. Encumbered by the humiliation of that first day of class and the fear of reliving the humiliation, I came to class with my three questions.

Right before my turn to speak I began to wage an internal battle. Who are you fooling Rai? Maybe you aren't cut out to be a famous psychologist. Clearly, you don't understand the material and others are better prepared for the field. You should just stop trying.

But I didn't succumb to my fears. When it was my time to speak, I asked my first question. To my surprise, the author seemed both intrigued and excited by my question; he proceeded to strike up a conversation with me. After everyone had left the class, I asked the author to sign my copy of his book. Before he took out his pen to write he looked at me intently and said, "I was very impressed with your questions today. You were able to grapple with the concepts of my book in a way no one else has done before. The way you articulate your thoughts is very melodic. It commands the attention of others. You should be proud. Keep it up." Hearing

those words from a renowned figure in the world of psychology made me realize that although I may be afraid, doubt myself, and even get things wrong at times, it doesn't matter. I have what it takes to push through the fear and meet the challenges.

As future graduates we frequently fear what lies ahead, beyond the Bowdoin bubble. Uncertainties about career choices, summer internships, living arrangements or graduate school consume us. We become engulfed in fear, self-doubt, even dread. In my case, I'll always be fortified by the confidence of my mother, and I'll always remember the experience of my psychology seminar. Whatever our individual challenges, we can all heed the sage words of Audre Lord, which are, again: "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

You have to believe in yourself if you are to conquer your fears and ease your doubts. Hold on to the belief that you have what it takes to do and be whatever you choose in life. If you do, you will look up one day and realize you can't even remember what you were afraid of in the first place.