

An Oak Among Pines

President Mills, Members of the College, Guests, and William Tucker,

I'd like to start off by telling you all a story that my mother told me a few months ago that I didn't think mattered at all, but now has taken root deep inside the recesses of my mind. My mother, who is in the audience right now, and is fantastic, who had recently plumbed the depths of the Bowdoin Webpage had joined me for a meal in town. As we waited for food to arrive, she asked me with some excitement, "Oh! Sweetie! Have you seen that Bowdoin Tree?!"
...That Bowdoin Tree?

I stopped for a second and stared, as, to my knowledge of Cumberland County's flora and fauna, Bowdoin has quite a few trees in and around its grounds. "The Thorndike Oak!" she clarified. Now, my mother is a lovely, excitable woman. But at this point, I was convinced she was making things up. In four years, I had never heard of a Thorndike...or an Oak.

But as we put our heads together and googled away on my phone, I learned that there does, indeed, exist an oak tree on our campus. A Thorndike Oak, in fact. And its story is one I would like to resurrect today, for us all.

George Thorndike, the namesake of the aforementioned tree, was no Joshua Chamberlain. He was no Nathaniel Hawthorne. He was no Barry Mills (shout out). George Thorndike was simply a man. A man who one day, whilst ambling about amidst classes stumbled upon an acorn outside President Joseph McKeen's residence. He picked up this acorn, wheeled about in great fanfare (I imagine) and to his classmates, the students in the first class at Bowdoin College in 1802, stated, quote,

"I have not the genius or ambition to attain distinction in law, medicine, or the ministry as some of you may do, but I purpose to do what will perpetuate my memory when you and your fame are forgotten."

Bold words from a bold young man who then proceeded to trespass onto the president's property, snatch up a toy drumstick from President McKeen's four-year-old son, James (who apparently dabbled in drumming) and dig a hole deep in the Massachusetts soil, as Maine was once called, to place this acorn. Nowadays, I feel like most of us would probably avoid messing around on the president's property. But students were more daring back in the early 1800's.

Well what may have seemed to be an absurd little spectacle turned into a prophecy of what was to come. Decades after George and his classmates had passed on, Thorndike's young oak continued to grow, slowly but surely, thriving on for over a century. Though the Maine winter claimed the first oak after an astounding 180 years of growth, and shortly thereafter its successor, a third "Thorndike Oak" was planted on our quad. This modern oak tree now rests amidst a hexagonal bench directly in between the flamboyantly colored Searles Science Building and Winthrop Hall. It's name *still* lives, and Thorndike's legacy lives on with it, 200 years after his brief speech. Indeed, this third oak is something I have sat under, studied near, and appreciated throughout my time on campus without knowing even a fraction of its legacy.

Few know that for decades, the oak served as a place for Bowdoin graduates to gather underneath the shade of its leaves after commencement for a reception. It was a place in which prizes were awarded, speeches were given, and meetings were held. It acted as a unifier, a monument to a changing Bowdoin, an emblem of the place roughly as old as the college itself. This tree and its legacy had, for more than two centuries, touched the lives of every graduating class for generations. Stretching back again to the nineteenth century, Edwin Page Mitchell of the Class of 1871, writes of a scene near the Oak of, quote

"...five gentlemen of patriarchal aspect but hilarious demeanor in the act of dancing around the tree like children in a game of 'round-the-ring-rosy'".

These jovial fellows were, in fact, were the five surviving members of the Class of 1817. The tree had some mystical relevance long after it was planted, connecting class years together long after the Thorndike's class passed through Bowdoin's halls.

So why do I bring this lovely little history lesson up? Why on a day like today in which appreciating the excitement of what is to come is so precariously balanced by acknowledging our achievements of what has passed? In my mind, George had it right. George *did* it right. With an emphatic and enthusiastic statement, he simply planted a tree. And that was all it took. George Thorndike was someone we have remembered for 200 years, and will continue to remember, all because of a tiny, thoughtful choice he made in the rush between third and fourth period.

Now, amidst the entirety of our Bowdoin careers, and the struggle to figure out what we can best take from and contribute to this campus, what will we remember most in 30 or 40 years? Our grades? Maybe. The courses we took? Perhaps. Rather, I would like to believe it is the small, thoughtful actions that will go on and immortalize us in each others' memory, and that will weave our stories into the fabric of this school. These friends we make, the professors who inspire us, the role-models who drive us to be more. These little things we do for each other that helped nurture and push us forward. Maybe it was the proctor who walked a lonely, confused first year to the counseling center. Maybe it was the writing assistant who helped a student recognize that she had a gift for writing. For me, it was my roommate, Joe, who routinely inspired me to go further, work harder, and carry on conversations outside the classroom. For others, it was the team, the lab-group, or the music ensemble, whose members form something larger than any of us could make on our own. These are the connections and experiences that will craft our legacy and keep our memory alive for generations. In 1907, John Clair Minot, author of Under the Bowdoin Pines wrote, in reference to Thorndike's bold act of horticulture:

“ How important a lesson learned from this little incident of the college! It is the little deeds, done almost unconsciously, for which, if at all, we shall be longest remembered.”

But I stand before you all concerned that amidst the mad dash to shake President Mills’ hand, we may have forgotten this lesson. Amidst the grad school applications, honors projects, and job searches, we forget just how far our day-to-day interactions travel into the future. This tree on our quad truly serves as a reminder of just how quickly these little deeds can grow into something beautiful, and yet so few of us have grasped its presence. As a cohort, we have been raised to not see the forest for the trees. We move forward and let every step be for the next. Ours is a generation that, yes, has learned to step back and admire that huge forest for all its promise, but I worry that we may very well have lost the ability to appreciate those trees within that forest.

This class’s greatest gift to the college and ourselves is simply *being* ourselves in this time and place. The power of the Thorndike oak, for me, is that it acts as a comfort that our stories will continue to affect change and bring others together long after we leave the campus; it is a testament to never underestimate the power the small acts in our lives really hold. One of the hardest things to truly accept as we move forward is that Bowdoin will certainly go on in the years to come, and that we will leave this place soon. But what we can appreciate is that Bowdoin’s memory is vast. If we can learn anything from George Thorndike, it is *not* to move forward into the future with blinders on, full force into whatever may come next. George Thorndike was a Bowdoin student who stopped one day, and simply looked down, and touched the lives of generations to come. Thank you mom, for opening my eyes to this. The class of 2014 will go on to do many great things, but I am here to remind us all of the thousands of beautiful things we have all *already* done. This is a day to celebrate those little triumphs. To recognize

those small things. The many acorns, now planted, slowly growing, waiting to provide shade for the generations of Bowdoin students to come.