

# Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost

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**I**t is both an honor and a privilege to welcome you, the Class of 2015, to the Juniata family. Also welcome to new staff and new faculty.

And welcome to parents. Without you, none of this would be possible. I have supported three children through college myself, so I really do understand what it means, emotionally and financially. So welcome.

This afternoon, we offer you this ceremony to give you a chance to pause and reflect on the journey you are about to begin. Wherever you have come from, this is now your new home and your journey to begin thinking about and planning for.

Before we talk about journeys, let us think first about what we know about you as a class—the Class of 2015.

You are the 387 first year and transfer students of Juniata College. You come from twenty-one states and from at least twelve countries outside the United States. Many of you are the only ones with your first name, but we do have six Alexanders and six Emilys. One hundred and ninety-four of you have participated in community service. Fifty of you sang in a choral group or choir. Fifty-six of you served in student government. Two hundred and seven of you have reported you are sure you want to study abroad. One hundred and thirty-two of you reported you are still unsure about studying abroad.

These are just a few of the basic statistics that we have gathered on you—but who are you really? Speaking as a professor, I can tell you that the Juniata faculty are eager to find that out—as excited as I hope you are to find out what we are really like.

I know that the faculty are feeling a little sorry to see the summer come to an end, a little wistful for those long summer days. But they also have an excited feeling of anticipation about a new year—and a new class—about you! They want to see who you are, what makes you tick, how much you already know, and how much further you can go.

No doubt you have been busy the last few days arranging the furniture in your rooms, setting up computers and voice mail, finding your way around campus, enjoying Inbound (it is really impressive how many of you went to Inbound), coping with hot dorm rooms (I really hope you brought fans with you), and sharing in the excitement of meeting one another. You are going to go through the next four years alongside each other, and you are important for and to each other.

You are sitting here probably feeling many different emotions and asking yourself lots of questions. One of those questions might be, how long might this speech go on? (Not long—hang in there.) You might be asking yourself, did I make the right choice of college? (Without a doubt.) You might be feeling overwhelmed and wondering, is this normal? (Absolutely.) You might be asking yourself, is this worth all the sacrifices I and my family will have to make? (Yes, it is.) I hope you have also asked yourselves, how can I best spend my time here at Juniata? This is what I want to touch on today.

I titled this talk “Not all those who wander are lost.” Why, you might ask? I am sure you don’t think you came to Juniata to get lost, and I am quite sure your parents don’t think so. So what do I mean? The title of my talk comes from *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien. I suspect that only some of you will have read the books, but that most of you will have seen the films. In essence, the story is about a diverse group of individuals who choose to go on a journey together that forces them to move out of their comfort zone, because to succeed they need to take risks. What I want to suggest is that you use this story to remind yourselves of the two things that I believe are very important for you to do while you are at Juniata.

Firstly, make a diverse group of friends. You each bring a range of skills and experiences with you to Juniata. Each of you is talented, special, valuable, and has a vital role to play here. You should have fun together, support each other, challenge each other, learn from each other, and most importantly, listen to each other.

Secondly, take risks. Please note—I am not recommending that you injure yourselves in your determination to be the first class to successfully “Storm the Arch”—please don’t do that. Rather, make intellectual and personal choices while you are here that move you outside your comfort zone: choices that challenge you and lead you to wander in unexpected places.

So think of your four years here as if you are on a quest, and surround yourself with people who think differently from you, even if at times that makes you uncomfortable.

I have a few suggestions to begin you on your journey; you will find many other ways that work for you. Remember, wandering is exploring, pushing your boundaries, doing something that is unexpected for you. It does not mean that you are lost. So where to wander while you are here? I am just going to give you a few examples.

Choose classes not just because you know you are good at the subject, or because they are required. Also choose ones that excite your imagination and that challenge your comfort zone. If you dream of being a poet, take an accounting or business class; if you are pre-med, take a pottery class. Taking a language class can open up a whole new world for you.

One of my advisees bounced into my office a couple of days ago wanting to show me his photographs from his study abroad year in China. When he was sitting here in the same place as you are now, he had no idea that he would go to China. However, in his second semester he decided he wanted a challenge and to do something that he had never imagined he would do. This led him to study the Chinese language and culture and to spend a year in China, and it gave him an experience that has helped him grow intellectually and personally. As he explained to me, by studying in China he had “adventures in places that had previously been hidden to him”—adventures that have given him wonderful memories, and that have helped him to understand himself better and that will shape his future.

There is this very special place on campus called a library. It is a place that is full of those things called books! I urge you to tear yourself away from your computers and the ubiquitous Wikipedia, and wander the stacks to see what you can find. The library staff are wonderful and can help you in so many ways, so find them and introduce yourselves before you panic over a looming paper deadline.

If you need help, all you need to do is contact your professors. Our doors are open for you, although do check our office hours or make an appointment. It seems so obvious to tell you to meet with your professors outside of class time, and I am sure that you know to ask for help when you hit a snag in your studies. But I am suggesting something else. You need to forge intellectual connections with your teachers as soon as possible. During your time at Juniata, they will challenge you, support you, and think with you as you grow intellectually and personally.

Wander into student clubs that excite you, or create your own. Either way, do things that interest you, stretch you, and where you meet students you don't normally hang out with!

While Juniata is your new home, it can also be your passport to the wider world: internships, study abroad, and eventually jobs! So I am going to recommend you do something very important. If you remember nothing else that I say today, remember this! Get a passport. I will repeat that. If you do not have a passport—get one! Why is this important? Well, for two reasons.

Firstly, it will help you avoid a last minute panic in the passport office, as you cross your fingers that your passport will be ready in time for your flight. And yes, we have known students who have done this.

Secondly, and more importantly, when you hold your passport in your hand, it will help you to start dreaming of the places you can go and the things that you can do. This is especially important if you are unsure about study abroad or if you have not thought about it or feel it is not for you. Remember, we also offer many short trips. You can go to India, Africa, Australia, and many other places for between three and six weeks.

With a passport in your hand, you can begin to imagine how the world can change you and what kind of difference you can make. I am not talking about vacations here. I am talking about using your

skills, your knowledge, your imagination, and your passion to grow yourself and to make a difference in the world.

Last year, a student who has now graduated made a real difference for many students and faculty on this campus. She had chosen to study abroad in Rwanda. On her return, she wanted to educate this community about genocide. So with the help of other committed students, she organized a genocide awareness week that was so meaningful for the community that we hope to do it each year.

Remember in your wandering, as you try new and unexpected things, that while careful planning and organization are necessary skills for success, it is also important to be impulsive, to grab at unexpected opportunities. Who knows? A five-minute conversation in Baker while you're waiting in line for your cutlery may turn into a lasting friendship. Or a chance encounter with another student may lead you to a community project that reshapes your priorities and your future. Never be afraid of failure—reaching, and not quite making it, will make you stronger the next time you try.

I am a historian. Historians believe that the past is intimately connected to the present and also to the future. This means your past is already part of today and a part of your future. Your parents. Your friends. Your teachers. Your favorite book, favorite TV show, favorite movie. All of these experiences will shape your time at Juniata. If you have a strong positive past, it will serve you well as a foundation for the future. If your past was difficult, more of a struggle—in whatever way—it can help to motivate you to strive for a positive future. Either way, your future is in your control. We admitted you. But you're going to do the hard work. We're going to help you in any way we can to succeed, but you need to be willing to open yourselves up to challenges if you are to grow.

In closing, I want to say to you: Be courageous, be disciplined, be exuberant. Remember that no question is too simple or naïve to ask. Take risks, make a diverse group of friends, and move yourself outside your comfort zone.

Wander—you will not be lost. You will be on your own journey that will lay down the foundation for the rest of your life. I would really love to hear about the unexpected places that you wander into during your four years at Juniata. You can find me on the third floor of Founders Hall. Who knows, maybe the unexpected place you will wander into will be a history class—I recommend it!

Enjoy your journey.

Thank you for listening, and good luck.