

Good morning to family, friends, faculty, staff, honorary degree recipients, alumni, supporters and, of course, graduates of 2018.

This speech is written

- For first generation students
- For students with vouchers
- I write this for the students of color with no scholarship cohort, sports teams, or support programs
- For students whose high school curriculums failed to prepare them for intro level college courses
- For the students who dropped Pre-med, Cosci, and financial accounting
- For the students who had tutors
- For the students who feel disconnected from their peers
- The student with multiple intersecting identities for whom there were no affinity groups
- The students for whom English was a second, third, or fourth language
- For students whose non-English home language failed to exempt them from foreign language

requirements

- The students who borrowed books on reserve
- The students whose textbooks were stapled packets of photocopied excerpts
- The students who ran out of pass fails
- The students that needed the curve
- The students who never made Deans list
- The students on academic probation
- The students who petitioned the committee on academic standing
- Students who never got first choice of courses because financial holds on sage halted registration
- The students who endured ghostly grounds, closed dining halls, and empty dorms because going home over break was too expensive
- The students for whom “home” didn’t exist
- The students left at the airport before orientation
- whose documentation status meant they couldn’t study abroad
- whose shifts conflicted with office hours, recitations, and once-in-a-lifetime lectures from

honorable guests

- The students for whom work-study wasn’t enough
- who met ends by illicit means
- who sent money home
- who relied on guest meals
- who had break downs
- who took time away
- The students who have no professional network
- No friends
- No love
- The students who experienced loss
- the students who beat odds no one knew of.
- For the students who struggled.

One thing that all these students have in common – aside from struggle – is negotiation. For these students – for me – every day decisions contain within them consequences. I hold these students up not only because their stories deserve telling, but because from them I have learned a great lesson, and I wish to impart that with you all today.

Though it needs no reminding, we live in an increasingly polarized political era where lines are constantly drawn between opposing factions. The lines help mark that which we oppose from that which we support, and weigh what we view as beneficial, against what we perceive to be harmful. Through our maturation into adults, our lines took shape from our immediate areas of influence – our home, school districts, spiritual institutions, and local communities. As our minds and curiosities grew, so too did our lines, becoming more complex and nuanced, more personal. Often, we acquire our lines from association. Take Brandeis for example. From the moment our deposits were collected, we became members of the Brandeis community, which means that before we even set foot on campus our lines were drawn. As we would later come to discover over the years through our relationship with the ambiguous, amalgamated entity known as “the administration”, upon our commitment to Brandeis we gained both friend and foe. You see, that title is dependent upon the decisions made by said administration, and their perceived effect on the student body. Some examples: Meatless Monday in the dining halls - foe; Online streaming of live and on demand shows complimentary with campus residency - friend; 3.9% tuition increase - foe; T-Pain, Metroboomin, & The Internet for Spring Fest - friend; and so, on and so forth. The lines drawn between friend and foe is really the line drawn between what we will accept, and what we will not. When discontent, some take their opinions to Facebook and Twitter. Others mobilize their voices on the pages of Opinion Editorials in the following week’s issue of The Hoot or the Justice – Brandeis’ student run publications. For others, the outlet for change presents itself in the form of electoral representation. When egregious enough, the administrative undertakings can even inspire the kind of action that gets black and brown students to put their education and bodies on the line in protest.

To be clear - as stakeholders belonging to our own smaller communities - we don’t always agree.

Whether it’s over honorary degrees, on campus Black Lives Matter demonstrations, or freedom of speech debates, Brandeis students are not afraid to engage controversy, even amongst ourselves. Though we come from different walks of life, and our presence here today marks the first step of our new journeys, what has connected us for the last several years - what has made us Brandeisian - has been our commitment to defending our own notions of fairness. Even when conflicting, the frameworks, language, and ideologies that we’ve encountered while here have helped guide our notions of Justice.

Yet outside of this campus, where that which links us to our neighbors is far less obvious, those lines begin to shift. What happens when we leave this environment then? When we enter territories where the lines are constantly advancing and retrenching, intersecting and tangential, visible and ambiguous? How does one maintain their convictions against supporting fossil fuel investment, when a lack of public transportation and long work commute necessitate owning a car? How do we uphold our stance against gentrification and displacement within predominantly black and brown neighborhoods, when an offer from the firm of our dreams demands relocating to an expensive new city? After all, Brooklyn is where it’s at, right? Do we live lavish and buy our produce from our local farmers market, or shop sales at the chain retail corporation notorious for underpaying its staff?

Many of us leaving here will travel vast distances to new environments, while others return to scenes more familiar. Regardless of how our immediate plans vary, all receiving their degrees today will be met with change. Much like our entrance into college, orienting to our post-graduate life will take time. Old

conclusions are sure to be challenged, reformed, or replaced as new relationships and perspectives emerge. Like the changeover from high school to college, several of the core facets that make up our identity may be lost in transition. The journey to self-rediscovery is long and hard, and if senior year has been any indication, it will be a journey rife with confusion.

What's important is that we not permit temporary disorientation stir us into indefinite complacency; that **as** we struggle to make sense of the ever-shifting world around us our position within it is asserted, not appointed; that our progressive potential not be determined by our access to – or lack thereof – resources, but rather the innovative employment of those at our disposal. *As we become the catalysts we have been trained to be, we must remember that love is a practice and practice entails performance and performance demands action.* That loving thy neighbor requires proximity and engagement. That loving thy neighbor ain't **enough** because neighbor denotes residency and the housing market is stratified so original occupants who would-be-neighbors are now the displaced. **Marginal.** We must remember that Gitler prize winner Kimberlé Crenshaw taught us that for liberation to be effective it must be intersectional - that is it must account for, address, and include those vulnerable to multiple, overlapping systems of inequity and oppression. That those most vulnerable are disproportionately poor-and-queer-and-women-of-color. We must remember the teachings of Treva Lindsay, who during Brandeis's 2017 BLM Symposium reminded us that despite how our society renders those who neither have, nor can produce capital; those who harm; and those who have been harmed disposable; they too **must be held**. Lastly, we must remember that equity requires resource reallocation and reallocation requires sacrifice and the best offering in our possession is **privilege**.

And they be asking, "what do love got to do with the point?"

It's the soothe in your water, it's the truth in your joint

All that gold is overrated

What do you do with your coin?

We gon' try to spread some love with it

Spread some love

We gon' try to spread some love, ain't nobody got to know

Buyin' water by the jug, I'm the plug

What you want, what you need? (Buyin' water...by the jug, I'm the plug, baby,

Buyin' water...by the jug, I'm the plug)

Not the hate, if you hatin' people don't now

Spread love, spread love, spread love

-Mick Jenkins, *Spread Love* (2016).

The word “commencement’s” first known usage was during the 14th century. According to Miriam Webster, the word can be tracked **from** Middle English, **to** Anglo-French, **up** through Vulgar Latin, and **down and out** of *initiare*, which is late Latin for “to initiate”. Conventional definitions include “to have or make beginning”, and “to enter upon”. However cliché, I believe our graduation ceremony could not have a more appropriate name, for this moment marks the beginning of negotiations. From where we live and how we shop, to the leaders we elect and the acts we pass, attached to every choice is a consequence. Some negligible, others life altering, what we must negotiate is our ability to live with the consequences of the decisions we make. Choice is power, and with it comes great responsibility.

To skip a shift for office hours, or make rent and fail; to buy textbooks, or groceries; to be frugal, drenched, and late, or penniless, dry, and on time; to send money home or go out with friends; to buy clothes appropriate for the interview or buy a cap and gown – the students whose experiences I named at the start of this speech have already had to negotiate the terms of their survival. **Daily.** These students have made choices and reckoned with consequences many of us have yet to imagine, yet they stand here, beside us. **Appreciate them.** Appreciating their struggle teaches us that the consequence of tough decisions can yield high rewards. Through their perseverance, they demonstrate how the set back of one action can serve as the stepping stone for another. They instruct us that mindfulness can overpower negative consequence, that the power of our work lies in our intention.

Thank you for the honor of selecting me as your commencement speaker. **Wil Jones.**