



*Roanoke College Convocation
August 26, 2014*

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My name is Taylor Robertson, and I'm originally from Martinsville, Virginia. I'm a senior Honors student, a Bittle Scholar, and a 2014 Summer Scholar. I also love "The Breakfast Club," I'm deathly afraid of clowns, and when I grow up, I want to be a history professor. I'm starting off by saying all these things not because you're particularly interested (because you're probably not), but because I'm trying to prove a point. Some of you may have similar hopes, dreams, and fears to mine. Then again some of you may hate fantastic 80s movies and love creepy circus performers. The point is that we all have hopes, dreams, and fears. Today, I want to talk briefly about a fear that I think is fairly common.

Being afraid to be wrong is a dangerous thing. The fear of failure is real and affects many people, myself included. I'm definitely generalizing, but I would guess the majority of you have grown up in schools that emphasized that the right answer was the end all be all, and that knowledge was a series of multiple choice questions you answered correctly. And you bought into this notion because you wanted to be successful, to make the grade or the team, to create an image of yourself. This type of environment lends itself to a colossal phobia of mistakes. This phobia makes learning passive and maturing difficult, and simultaneously makes the creation of a community of learners impossible.

When I arrived at Roanoke College in the fall of 2011, fear of failure was basically a part of my personality. I was convinced that my college career could be perfect with the right grades, right friends, right experiences, right everything. So when right came into question, I panicked. I overreacted and made an enormous mistake. I decided in the midst of a late-night meltdown that cheating was better than being wrong, so I plagiarized the answers to my Latin homework. Yes a dead language can kill you. It was ethically wrong and out of character, and I paid for it. An "F" plus an "Academic Integrity Violation" stamped on my transcript were far from the perfection I intended for my time here. I thought that I had failed Roanoke's community of learners. They had been kind enough to offer me a home here, and I had betrayed their trust. My image as the perfect student was shattered.

Fear of failure, I have found in my life at least, masked a deeper fear of asking for help, a fear of being vulnerable, basically a fear of admitting that I was afraid. Looking back, I have often wondered what would have happened if I had simply utilized this community of learners by visiting my professor and asking for help. But I didn't, so here I stand. In the fall of 2011, I would have viewed narrating my biggest misstep as a punishment, not an opportunity. But that mistake is what has changed me as a person, and I want to share it with you. My mistake taught me the most important thing I could ever tell you about Roanoke's community of learners: it is a community. Not only did the members of this community assure me I hadn't betrayed them, they also forgave me, stood by me, and supported me on the bumpy road to forgiving myself and moving on.

So my advice to you, Class of 2018, is to not be afraid to ask for help. You're going to make some mistakes. Hopefully they're not as big as mine and don't cross into ethically repugnant, but nonetheless you will make them. The next four years are about stepping outside that box you've created, giving up the image you've fostered, and diving into the unknown. And once you're out there in deep water, you can call for the lifeguard when you need one. When you get your first college paper assignment and suddenly forget the rules of basic grammar, just visit the Writing Center. When you get that quiz back with an "F" on the top, please ask your professor for help. When your friends abandon you, and you're lost somewhere between here and The Zoo, it's okay to call your RA to come pick you up. Don't be so concerned with being perfect that you forget to grow and learn. Don't be afraid to face weakness and admit you need help. Life is not a punch ticket or a check list, and it's not as simple as a black and white scantron test. Roanoke College is a wonderful place to get into messes with an amazing community of learners to help you clean them up. Don't be afraid of wrong answers, freshman, because sometimes the wrong answer can put you right where you need to be.