

NEW STUDENT CONVOCATION

Welcome! Have you heard that word enough yet? Welcome!

You have chosen – and been chosen by – someplace extraordinary: a Jesuit University, in what I think is the greatest city in the world, and home to the most tight-knit and welcoming community I have ever seen. In other words, welcome to Loyola.

Let's unpack all of that.

First, you are at a Jesuit university, part of an enormous global network that has been changing lives for 500 years.

So who are the Jesuits?

You are about to hear more about that, but let me sum it up for you the way I grew up thinking about it. Jesuits are Jedi knights. They are Obi Wan. (And if you don't believe me, it turns out that George Lucas has hinted that he based the Jedi knights on the Jesuit order.)

Jesuits have an intense spirituality. They may not be able to move objects with their mind, but, well, frankly I wouldn't put it past them.

Like Jedis, they see *the Force* (or as we call it, God) in every aspect of creation. They feel the world intensely and dedicate their lives to making it better.

The Jesuits train for years, in discipline and self-sacrifice.

And they fight for justice, not by brute force but by out-thinking those who would do evil. Because it has never really been about the light

saber beating the blaster, right? It's about the strategy. It's about being smarter and about maintaining the core of yourself when the world tries to corrupt you.

And so this Jesuit university will teach you and forge your character. Loyola will instill in you discipline and hard work, and hone your skills into fine steel, so that you can go out to fight for justice and change the world. That's why you chose us and that is what we saw in you.

The second thing I want you to understand is that you are joining a remarkable community.

The wonderful thing about universities is that they recreate themselves every year with a new group of students. You join the Loyola family and you also help determine what it will be.

You are a remarkable group – representing 44 states and 12 countries, every race, religion, ethnicity, hair style, Fortnite character, way of learning and musical preference.

As I told many of you this summer, this is one of the only moments of your life when you will be thrown into a group of such different people, and have the opportunity to learn from each other.

That is also a little daunting, and you will have a very human desire to find your people, the ones who seem most like you. That's important, but I just want to make another pitch for the fact that you don't really know who your people are yet.

I learned this lesson the hard way once. It was my first year teaching, actually here at Loyola law school. I was 26 (which, by the way, is very young despite what you currently think) and I had a student who fell asleep in my class all the time. She was pretty and blonde and from

Maryland and I thought I had her pegged as entitled and lazy. But after the very last class, she came up and apologized to me. She said she was working two jobs to put her little brother and sister through college. It turns out that their parents were alcoholics and drug addicts, and as soon as she turned 18, she went to court for custody of her siblings. The case went all the way to the Maryland Supreme Court and she won, and she's been proudly raising them ever since. In other words, I blew it, I totally had her wrong.

You just never know what people have been through, good and bad. You don't know who they are by looking at them. You have to actually ask and listen.

So look around right now. You see hundreds of faces and wonder where you'll find your friends. Be curious. Ask questions. Keep reaching out. Learn from each other in your difference, and keep finding out what you have in common.

And – be kind to each other. *You* collectively determine the power of this community. In every interaction, no matter how small -- whether in the classroom or at a party at 2 in the morning -- *you* decide whether to treat each other with *respect*. This is your moment to become the man or woman you want to be in the world – act with integrity and you will never regret it. Act with selfishness and you may make a mistake that you can never forgive.

Now I want to let you in on a secret. Because this is *my* first week too and I'm a little nervous. I'm worried that I'll make mistakes. That I'll stumble.

And I can feel how excited you all are right now, but also how anxious. About getting a bad grade on a test, accidentally sleeping through a class, saying the wrong thing to a new friend. Am I right?

Here is what I have learned along the way. All of those people who tell you that absolutely everything will be fine are wrong. I can *guarantee* that *we* are going to make mistakes, that we will fail sometimes.

The measure of us is not *whether* we stumble, it's how we *react*. It's how we get up and brush ourselves off and move forward.

For some of you, it will be easier, because you have had parents and teachers and everyone around you whispering in your ear your whole life that you can do anything you set your mind to. When you fall, you pick yourself up and try harder. You won't let it derail you.

But many of us have not had that kind of constant reassurance from the world – and for you, stumbling may mean that you doubt yourself entirely, that you suddenly think you don't belong here. You think everyone is watching you and laughing.

I remember feeling that way. When I got a little bit older, I found a way to laugh at myself when I fell and try not to care that people were judging me. And when I got a lot older, I realized that most of the time when I stumble, people aren't laughing at me, they are actually rooting for me to get back up. Honestly. They like you more when you are human.

Here is what I most want you to know – *you all belong here*. You have what it takes to succeed. When you do badly on a quiz, it's usually because you need to study harder, or differently, or find a slightly different angle to help you learn the subject, not because you can't do it.

Because each and every one of you is smart enough – whether you think in numbers or in pictures, whether you learn visually or by

listening, you each have what it takes to be here and learn and stretch yourself.

And here's the thing -- even intelligence changes over time. What we know from neuroscience is that adult brains keep growing when they are faced with new challenges. When you read and ask questions and push yourself, you literally get smarter.

I had an English professor freshman year who gave me a C on my first paper. Molly Rothenberg. I still run into her once in a while, and love reminding her of how mad I was. But it was literally the most important grade I ever received. When I started to doubt whether I really belonged in the class at all, I figured out that there was a much simpler answer. I just needed to work harder. It made me realize there was no more skating through class as I had in high school. It made me want to see what I was capable of.

So do me a favor, send me emails to tell me when you've done something remarkable, but also tell me when you fail spectacularly. When you stumble and don't let it knock you off course. I will be even more proud of you at those moments. And I'll tell you some of my moments like that too.

Now, do you remember my final point? You are, in my humble opinion, in the best city in the entire world. I may be a *little* biased because I grew up here, but here's my argument:

It's not that New Orleans is the most efficient place, or the safest (please be careful!) and it definitely does not have the smoothest streets.

But New Orleans is creative, quirky and magical, just like many of you who grew up here or were drawn to come here.

And I think what New Orleans does absolutely best is joy. In the midst of real hardship, we manage to create moments of purest gratitude and celebration. (Last night, for example, the neighborhood of Treme immediately threw a second line parade for Aretha Franklin.)

Right after I finish talking, you're going to hear one example of that – the music we invented here — jazz.

For me, jazz represents what New Orleans, and Loyola, are all about. Joy and brilliance: heart and head.

When you listen to jazz, sometimes what you hear most is the joy – music that makes it impossible to stand still (unless something is really wrong with you).

But listen harder, and you will understand the unbelievable amount of work that went into having that level of technical skill. The thousands of hours of practice.

Listen harder still and you'll hear amazing creativity and complexity – because in jazz, musicians take turns improvising, literally composing on the spot. They take a single theme and weave it into patterns -- sometimes playing it backwards or upside down like a Bach fugue. The music sounds so simple but is actually ingenious. It is math fused with inspiration.

Like New Orleans, *Loyola* is both head and heart. Here you will glory in learning – you will find connections you never expected between fields. You will work harder than you ever have.

And you'll celebrate with us. This is a place that revels in music and food and all of the things that make life sweet.

You are here to find your own voice – by thinking differently – by being the best version of yourself.

You are at a place that will support you and pray for you and lift you. A place that cares about how much you learn AND also the person you become.

And together we will have so many moments of joy.

I want you to imagine the moment, in May of 2022, when you and I are going to get together at the Superdome for your graduation. I will have grown and flourished for four years as your president, and you will have knocked this out of the park.

You will have believed in yourself, relied on your own grit and resilience and done this thing.

You will have treated each other well and learned as much from each other as from the faculty.

You will have made this your forever home.

Today I tell you, welcome to the family you have chosen.

Welcome to Loyola.