Speaker 1:

Well, hello. Welcome. We did not compare notes. And so you will find... I know I'm not going to say the thing about looking to the right and the left, but you're going to find that what I'm going to tell you might be a little bit of a reprise of some of the themes and I choose to believe that that means that those themes are important. By show of hands, how many of you have heard or are hoping to find your passion here at Swarthmore? Okay. Well, not to be that guy, but research shows that the idea that personal interests are fixed, pre-formed things waiting to be discovered rather than malleable, flexible things to develop, leads people to have less interest in new things and to have unrealistic expectations and beliefs about the challenges that will arise if you do find your areas of passion.

In one of a series of five studies, researchers Paul O'Keefe, Carol Dweck and Greg Walton taught college students either that personal interests are fixed and preformed or that they're malleable and able to be developed. They then showed the college students very engaging and fairly easily accessible videos about black holes that were intended to get people interested. And in fact, it worked, most of the students found them fascinating. But afterward, when the students had to fight through a difficult technical scientific article about black holes, many of the students found that very difficult. And those who did were less likely to continue to express interest in studying black holes if they had been taught that interests are fixed. To quote the authors, "Urging people to find their passion may lead them to put all their eggs in one basket, but then to drop that basket when it becomes difficult to carry."

So your passion is probably not some innate immutable trait, and you can explore new things and see what grabs you. I was sitting at breakfast my first day as a freshmen during undergrad and a senior psych major at the table named Rena, looked at me and said, "Why are you here?" I chose not to take that as an existential challenge. And I said, "What?" And she said, "[Salovey's 00:02:46] teaching intro psych right now and he doesn't always teach it." And I said, "I'm not interested in psychology," confusing psychology with mentalism the way some people confuse astronomy and astrology. As a side note, that seems to be a common misconception about psychology, considering how many times people joke, "Are you reading my mind?" And if you're wondering that the answer is, yes, I am, and you should be ashamed of yourself.

Well, Rena prevailed and here I am 24 years later. And by the way, I love psychology, but I did not discover my passion. I found something that I thought was cool. I cultivated and developed an interest that was engaging to me, but it wasn't always inspiring. It wasn't always motivating. And it wasn't always easy. And I love my job, but it's still a job and on weekends, I'd usually prefer to be playing ball or hanging out with my friends and family and that's okay. And so my first takeaway message for you is to explore new things and different interests, but don't wait for academic or extracurricular love at first sight. And if you do happen upon it, expect bumps in the proverbial road.

So here I am a clinical psychologist, and I'd like to offer you a couple more reflections about your place, my place, our places in this really exciting community. And by way of introduction, I want to invite you to reflect for a moment on how you might complete the following sentence, thinking of yourself, not me. I am blank. You may have defined yourself in terms of your interests and activities, an athlete, a cellist. You may have defined yourself in terms of your valued characteristics, helpful, kind, or your feelings are stayed at this moment, nervous, excited, alive. You may have defined yourself by the boundaries or the appearance of your physical self, tall. You may have defined yourself by smaller physical units, a group of molecules. And you may have defined yourself as part of a group, human, Jewish.

Sometimes those identities are framed in connection with others, a Swattie, right here, right now in this room. And other times they may be formed in contradistinction to others, a man when I'm the only man in a room of women. So the boundary between self and not self is not always as clear as we might pretend. Sometimes it's defined as part of a community. And sometimes it's defined in contrast to a community or a different identity. But here you all are joining a new community in a new setting with new people at a time in life when I suspect many of you are actively wrestling with who you are. And so you may be wondering about belonging. Am I good enough? Do I belong? Can I belong? Do I add value to the community?

You may be wondering how you can be part of a community of people so different from you. Do I have to become someone different? Can I stay true to my own values and beliefs and identity and still be a Swattie? I've struggled with the same kinds of questions myself and I sometimes still do. My own background is complicated and I spend time in two very different worlds. And some of the time I feel like I belong very easily in both, but there are also times where I wonder if I belong in either. And I've learned a couple of things that helped me that I'm going to share with you.

Number one is allow yourself to experience discomfort without having to make it go away. And while we're on the subject of discomfort and belonging, let me tell you about my reaction when President Smith invited me to talk to you today. I was honored, humbled, and one of my first thoughts was, what excuse can I come up with to decline? Me representing the faculty, welcoming this great group of students, President Smith, I regret to inform you I think it's too late to change your mind. But I've had more than a fleeting wish for a Kanye Taylor moment over here if anybody wants to storm the stage and grab the mic.

I know as well as any of you the urge to run from discomfort, especially when trying to fit in with a community. But I study and treat anxiety, and the best way to overcome anxiety is to face it, allow it, invite it. You may learn it's not so scary, or you may learn that it is so scary but that you can handle scary things. And either way, you can't do much to change your internal experiences like your feelings. So you can choose to live a life in service of your goals and values instead of a life in service of anxiety reduction. And similarly struggle with ideas that make you uncomfortable. Don't suppress them. Don't avoid them. Your own ideas will be better for it.

Number two, different is good. Different is not a threat. Try new things, but not just exposure to new ideas, new classes, or new potential interests. Expose yourself to different kinds of people, to people who think or behave differently from you. Community members don't have to be the same or think the same. You don't have to look like your friends. You don't have to think like your friends. In at least some ways the community will be richer if you don't. Community members share a common humanity, many common values, perhaps even many common goals, but it's okay to disagree with others on how to achieve those goals.

Respect and be friends with people who you think are dead wrong about important things. Pursue justice passionately without devaluing the humanity of those who disagree about some of the specifics. Accept that good people can act in good faith and disagree, and that disagreeing about solutions doesn't necessarily mean disagreeing about the problems. People can make different decisions about competing priorities and values. Your own decisions will be better if you can hear what they have to say. This will enhance your life so much. It was not easy for me, but I've come to learn that there are Red Sox fans who are good people underneath it all too.

How can you succeed at all this? You've heard some of this already before today. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Practice tolerating uncertainty. Recognize emotional and intellectual discomfort and welcome it. Do something brave every day, whatever brave means for you. Nurture in yourself openness and curiosity. Be charitable with others. Give people, especially your fellow community members the benefit of the doubt. Resist the temptation to interpret ambiguous things in the least charitable way possible, even if outrage is the currency of social media. Wonder how another good person might come to see something so differently.

Cultivate intellectual humility. I might be wrong. Cultivate humility about your values and judgements. The good old days weren't all so good and change isn't always progress. And certainly we have not reached the apex of moral development. You may have had your mind blown hearing from your parents or grandparents about things that were considered moral, just, acceptable in society just a few decades ago. But your kids and grandkids will think the same about things that are considered moral and just and acceptable in 2021. And sometimes just take a break, play, have fun. John Mulaney said, "College was like a four year game show called Do My Friends Hate Me, or Do I Just Need to go to Bed?" Sometimes, just go to sleep. Thank you.