Welcome to New College! I've been asked to give you a brief introduction to scholarly life and a few words of advice. In my view, good scholarship generally starts with something that matters to you personally.

Though I now teach at this very urban university, the best parts of my life have in fact been spent in the backcountry, travelling by canoe or foot, occasionally by dogsled or snowshoe, and camping out on the edges of lakes and sides of mountains. After my 1st and 2nd years of university, I spent my summers leading canoe trips in Algonquin Park. After third year, I found my way to a remote research station up north in the Klune mountains. Later I worked at a backcountry lodge in the BC Rockies and finally settled into my first career as a wilderness teacher in the Boreal Forest. I’ve always been drawn to these less peopled places—where we can’t escape the sun and the wind and the rain, where beauty is both overwhelming and minute, and where life feels both simple and pronounced. In truth, I’ve been in love with the outdoors—wilderness, nature, or what have you—for as long as I can remember.

Sometime in the late 90s, William Cronon’s essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” completely changed my relationship with the outdoors. In it, he argues that wilderness isn’t at all natural; it’s just a cultural story we tell about geographical space. Through Cronon, I began to see how the separation of people from land inherent in the very idea of wilderness has historically and currently had disastrous effects for Indigenous peoples. Indeed, most investigations into the history of some of Canada’s early parks—Algonquin, Banff, or Quetico, for example—reveal an uncomfortable connection between nature tourism and colonial injustice. I’d always recognized that I was canoeing or hiking on Indigenous land, but Cronon was the first to show me that the (Euro-western) idea of wilderness, the one I grew up believing in, was itself a problem. I now think about land entirely differently—in my writing, in being, in travelling and teaching. More importantly, I’m trying to learn from Indigenous knowledges and to be more mindful in my everyday as a British-Canadian person living on colonial land.

I can’t really explain what it’s like to be fundamentally changed by a book, except to say that it’s both exhilarating and disorienting. When I started graduate school, I immediately felt like I’d lost the capacity to read. The course texts were incomprehensible to me and I found the dominant theoretical framework at the time completely mystifying. Bronwyn Davies' *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales* immediately altered my relationship to academic work, like an earthquake that shifted what I knew and how I saw the world. Davies taught me that academic writing, even highly theoretical work, could be beautiful. Her book became window through which I finally understood poststructuralism, and in it, Davies tries to understand the surprising contradiction that young girls who read feminist fairy tales hate the heroines of the stories, admonish them for being dirty or silly. She advances a way of thinking about gender and becoming gendered that is incisive, fluid, useful and hopeful and talks meaningfully about how we might rewrite ourselves and the world in more just ways. Davies isn’t argumentative when she writes: she’s curious. And in that way, she also taught me how to be a good scholar.

Later in grad school, Shoshana Felman’s essay “Psychoanalysis and education” caused me to thoroughly rethink the field I’d spent more than a decade practicing. She challenged everything I knew about knowledge, learning, and ignorance in a way that has been infinitely useful for my thinking about anti-racist and anti-homophobic education. Teaching, I realized, requires a curiosity about how and why we both embrace and resist ideas.

Years later, I still read the world completely differently because of poststructuralism; I experience land and my relationship to colonial Canada more humbly because of Cronon; and I teach more thoughtfully because of Felman and psychoanalysis. Books can change how we think and thus how we act. And in this way, books have the power to change the world.

As advice, I feel I ought to say something serious or academic. But really, I just want to tell you to explore. There is a world of possibility in front of you: so don’t study *all* of the time.
Stay up all night having conversations with your friends. Get involved in campus clubs. Discover the Toronto art scene. Volunteer doing something meaningful to you. Take up a new sport. (Quidditch anyone?) Learn to meditate. Spend a weekend at the Hart House farm. Become part of a community organization. Get involved in Toronto politics. Go out of your way to meet people who are different from you.

Each student's experience during university is wonderfully unique. Course work enlivens some students, and that becomes their main focus. Others connect most with work outside of school or with family. Most of the really important things I learned during my undergrad, I learned from and with my friends. We hung out at pubs and concerts, became embroiled in various shenanigans, and spent too many evenings engaged in the highly dangerous winter sport of traybogganing (think cafeteria trays and a steep tree-studded hill). But we would also often find ourselves at 2:00 am, talking about ideas and the world, our knowledge informed by school, but made real in how we thought about and reacted to the deeply troubling concerns of the day: the Montreal massacre, the Oka crisis, the Exxon Valdez disaster, the vast global inequality that has only deepened since.

I don’t remember calculus or even pharmacology (though the phrase LD50 still rings a bell). Things I do remember: occupying the council chambers to protest our university’s financial investment in Apartheid; setting up a “peace camp”; coordinating a campus wide environmental film night at a time when the university didn’t offer a single environmental studies course; and, of all things, creating and performing a musical about the implementation of the GST (yes, I am talking about the tax). Still, 20 years later, the people I am closest to, whom I fly across the country to visit, are those same friends. The work we each do now bears little resemblance to our undergraduate studies back in the day. But how we live and play today—how we engage with our communities and try to be thoughtful in the world—has everything to do with those four years. We are who we are today because of our time then and what we did with it.

Of course, I hope that you study and do well in your courses. But let the course work bleed into your life, learn in between the lines of the official curriculum, hang out drinking coffee with people who inspire and challenge you, be curious, talk about ideas. And read books.

Best of luck in this new adventure,

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