

A Change of Heart

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3/9/16

Thank you for coming tonight. Roommates, linkmates, honorary roommates, honorary linkmates, Lowellians, and honorary Lowellians – thank you for coming, because this speech is about you. Specifically, my relationship with you.

As far back as I can remember I have been "the drill sergeant", "the captain", "the boss." One of my finest moments at home was when I sat in the car, before school one morning, furiously slamming on the horn as my babysitter got my siblings breakfast, because we were behind schedule. I got in the driver's seat and pressed that horn over and over. I was about 10 years old.

I liked it when everything worked like a well-oiled machine, and I was never comfortable letting anyone get in the way of that. If my football coach said we were taking the field in 2 minutes, you better bet that I would be standing at the locker room door with my helmet on in exactly 119 seconds, and positively berating everyone who wasn't doing the same. And there is the time when I called my mom at work to tell her "the "kids," my word for my siblings, are watching TV when they should be doing their homework and I don't think that's appropriate." I had an intense focus on "getting everything *right*," even at the expense of connecting with people. My teammates and siblings did not feel close to me when I spoke down to them. My intense, shielded persona garnered *respect* but not always friendship or affection.

I started college in the same rigid way. Yes, jokes about me being a robot were common, and in true robot fashion they didn't bother me at all. I had come to embrace playing that character. I prided myself in not being too open, never sharing too much, and rarely relaxing. These qualities had been good for me in the past, things that had earned me good grades, leadership positions, and respect.

I would have been just fine continuing this way. I would have been happy and continued to do well and would have been none the wiser. But my friends had a different agenda and made it their mission, some consciously and others subconsciously, to get me to make a change. They usually did it bluntly, by telling me that I was missing out on life, or that I wasn't as close to people as I could be. I can't think of a single time throughout all this criticism when I actually *agreed* with them. But somehow, despite my resistance, they changed me.

These days, when I spend time with my roommates, there is a lot less trying to act properly and a lot more unfiltered, stream-of-consciousness talk coming from me. I go out for late night ice cream or mid-afternoon coffees even when I have rapidly approaching deadlines. When I call home, I try to give a lot

more color than the usual “oh yeah, things are good.” Now it is a full account of my day, complete with all of the details of what cringe worthy, yet slightly funny, joke Dylan said at lunch, and how I got a little down after trivia night, not because of the junior common room’s catastrophic collapse, but because it was the last time our blocking group would participate in this tradition which we have enjoyed since the beginning. From roommates to classmates, from tutors to professors, to all of our different kinds of deans, being a little less calculated with what I think and what I say has helped me to laugh louder, love harder, relax easier, and has given me an ability to empathize that I never had before.

My armor is still strong, but I’m more willing to lower it and let people in. Sure this vulnerability is uncomfortable sometimes. At times last semester, when school pressures pushed the boundaries of my rigid grip on academics to my limits, I felt insecurity about my ability to get things done. With the loss of last years’ senior class, some of my best friends and some of the people who have changed me the most, I’ve learned what it means to genuinely miss people. That vulnerability is uncomfortable *right now*, sharing it with you. But I’m willing to accept the pains of discomfort for all of the positives that come with it.

I’m still not the most open person I know. I will always have that classic Alex stoicism that has served as inspiration for at least one joke from most of the people in this room. But I’m making strides. Many of you here have been a part of this journey. I appreciate it more than you know. Thank you.