

Good evening Lowell House. The speech I am about to give was inspired by the man whose speech you all just heard, my friend, Joshua Wortzel. I'm going to reveal some details about Josh and about myself; but my purpose tonight is to speak about something broader that matters to every person in this room: friendship.

To help you understand why Josh has been so influential, I need to bring you back to my third grade playground.

Once during recess when I illegally jumped off a high point of the jungle gym, although none of the teachers saw me do it, I put myself on the timeout wall. I was a "confessionist." My resolution not to hide anything from anyone was part of my solution to my early realization that relationships could be "phony." The sometimes painful dramas I saw play out among friends and within their families made me wish for a world in which everyone's thoughts are written on our foreheads.

And so I put a lot of calculated effort into my friendships, hoping that maybe we could cut the small talk and get to what we were really thinking—to get to the point where I felt like I could say anything to them and they could say anything to me..

Unfortunately, my awkward attempts to find open confidants were sometimes met with silence—not everyone wanted to give all their secrets away. And I thought their reluctance to entrust themselves signaled a "flawed" friendship; I believed I was weeding out inauthentic relationships. Ironically, underlying my desire for trust was a mistrust of the sincerity of others—and perhaps even of myself.

Two summers ago here at Harvard, a challenge to this cynicism arrived, when I wasn't even looking, in the guise of Viking helmet. That summer, I met Josh as he was organizing a "Viking" race for our undergraduate research program. However, it wasn't until the subsequent January, while we were both here researching, that we began hanging out. It started with workouts at the gym and hit a turning point when we found ourselves sitting on the Science Center floor one night contrasting our religious upbringings. So yes, we had common ground in our activities and conversation, but there was more. It wasn't a checklist of preconceived attributes, and if you've ever heard Josh's jokes, you probably wouldn't think it was his sense of humor either.

It took risks—Josh transferred in from PhfoHo so that we could room together the next fall. It took time—two years and counting. Most importantly, through common experiences rather than explicit confessions, we found real trust. We'd shout the Gettysburg Address together for motivation at the MAC and recap classes while folding laundry at night. We'd stay up late junior year swapping stories of failed attempts to court ladies here in this very dining hall—Lowell women are tricky! But fortunately, our friendship was not complicated by the ideals that so often riddle romantic courtships. The absence of expectations and calculations made room for all important spontaneity. These exquisite moments weren't always glamorous, like nights when we couldn't stop laughing as we both realized the prodigious quantity of beans we had both consumed earlier that evening. Many things can be shared without words.

Throughout our lives, friends like Josh help us to balance our priorities and discover new things about ourselves: Josh quickly pointed out my “confessionist” tendencies. Friends also remind us of our potential, and the value of our other relationships. Josh has often reminded me of how smart my father’s advice really is—and now I talk to Dad a lot more about—well—everything.

Fortunately, one does not need to be devoid of fears or anxieties when entering friendships—uncovering them is part of the process. And other people will surprise you—they can understand more than you realize and you can give more than you imagine. With help from friends like Josh, I learned how to be deliberate without calculating every word to exhaustion. I learned to trust that others could be honest and open without careful construction or police vigilance. I learned, in the words of Reverend Paul Tillich, “to accept that I’m accepted.”

So, to conclude, I’d say please take a moment tonight to give thanks for the friends and family who have been influential in your life. Take a moment to reflect on the strengths of your existing friendships and how you are going to carve out the time this semester to bolster on those connections. And in forming those new friendships, just be patient. Trust is not mine or yours to give, but rather ours to build.

Thank you.