

When I originally drafted my remarks for tonight, I wanted to tell my Berea Story with a sense of humor, what it's like to be a student in this "complicated" time, and make you laugh a little. This is college, after all. But none of that felt right. It still doesn't. So I asked my mentor, Professor Adanna Barton. She looked at me and said, "You need to do two things: The first is, to tell the truth."

And here is the truth: I can't joke. I can't look you in the face and make light of everything. Last week, I received notice that my aunt and grandmother back home in Northern California were evacuated from their homes because of raging wildfires due to the hottest temperatures EVER being recorded on planet earth. I can't joke about that. Within a month, we'll surpass 200,000 deaths from a dangerous virus, and at this moment, we're standing at a death toll sixty times that experienced on September 11th, 2001. I can't joke about that. This summer, millions of us took to the streets in protest of a racist system that has stolen from its own people the right to control their destiny. I can't joke about that. I go to the local Walmart, and I see some former classmates of mine who graduated with a degree a few months ago riding their bikes to work and stocking shelves because we're "just in a gully" right now. And I cannot joke about that. I tell you, any college student who is really paying attention is not laughing. We are terrified. There's no way around that.

But Professor Barton continued on with a second task: "Provide hope." I thought about it. And I wondered: How? Because I feel more like a fighter than college student right now. But in a school that has weathered a civil war and a battle in the Supreme Court battle, there must be some hope around these hills.

And I will tell you: I found it on March 10th of this year, one-hundred-sixty-nine days ago. I found it in the Jelkyll Drama Center, or rather, with the people inside it. When we all received that fateful email about campus closing, I instinctively walked straight to the theatre, because in times of concern, you gravitate towards where you need to be. As we stood there in the lobby, we were like many of you: unsure and terrified. But after we were done being terrified, like true Bereans, we assembled. Someone grabbed their laptop and put on a movie, another cooked popcorn, I grabbed my stash of Ale-8 and blankets. And we sat on the floor in the dark, silent. I sat close, on the floor, to other students, in the dark, thinking about the future. And when a theatre "goes dark," it usually means no shows, no creativity flowing, or change being promoted. It usually means the absence of hope. But at that moment I realized: That building was full of hope. And it still is. Yes, it was full of fear. But we were together. And I believe hope is the product of the fear in our hearts being canceled out.

Now I know hope. And it's in these people. By clinging together as tightly as we can, we ensure we'll live to see another day. In that same theatre that was built for human interaction, which stands empty (for now), encapsulated in a single ghost light in the middle of the stage is my hope. And I anticipate the day I can walk up to that ghost light, unplug it with my friends, and we create and perform our stories of hope. It'll be in our walk that we will take our graduation day when we will go forth and tackle what lays ahead of us. Because maybe we are fighters. And once our fight has been won, we can perhaps look back, a little bit more satisfied that we not only survived, but made a change, and laugh.