THE YEARS OF OUR LIVES

First year Blue Jays, welcome to the best years of your life. Wait a minute. The best years of your life? That’s what a lot of people say: “College?—the best years of my life!” But, as my friend Father Dave Danneker, advisor to the College’s Newman Club, likes to say, do you really want the best years of your life to be 18 to 22 when you’re still trying break free from your parents, you can’t support yourself, you have to figure out what you want to do with your life, and you have to share a bathroom with three other people? Let’s hope things get better than that! No, it’s not “welcome to the best years of your life.” It’s welcome to some of the best experiences of your life and some of the toughest experiences of your life.

Welcome to some of the best experiences of your life, some that you never expected, or at least, some that you can’t now imagine yet how
good they will feel. You had great friends in high school, I’m certain.

And, I hope you can stay in touch with them as you both develop along your individual paths. But, it’s striking for me to look back and see how few friends from high school or my earlier years growing up that I stayed in touch with once I went to college. By contrast, some of the best friendships of my life were formed with people I got to know in college, and they’ve stayed friends with me for decades. I’m not unusual. Some of what I enjoy the most about going around the country visiting Elizabethtown College alumni is meeting people who have, as some of their best friends, the people they got know living in Brinser or Schlosser, or working on a service project in Lancaster County schools, or playing on our soccer fields or shooting baskets in Thompson Gym, or sitting out one night looking up at the stars from the Dell.

Why are friendships in college often so special? One reason is that you and the people around you are going through the same, once in a
lifetime experiences. You’re both working out a new relationship with your parents, deciding what you want to major in, and what you really think about the big issues of life—how do you want to live? What or whom do you want to live for? What’s more important, a good job or your personal satisfaction? Can you have both? What does it mean to trust someone? What is the basis of right and wrong—your own feelings? Or something deeper, that’s beyond our changeable moods?

To answer these questions with someone who is going through many of the same experiences as you can be life-changing. You never forget doing that project together, playing on the same team, or that long conversation sitting in the Dell looking up at the stars. Yes, in that sense, these are some of the best experiences of your life.

And, right alongside them, can be some of the toughest experiences of your life. Learning things that challenge what you believe can be tough. We would all love for the world to be easy to understand. It’s not. It’s a messy, complicated, frustratingly fascinating world. You can
understand big portions of the world—but it takes hard mental effort, lots of practice, and a continual openness to learning new things. That’s tough.

Realizing that your parents or brother or sister, or your best friend from high school just don’t seem to understand you any more, can be tough. Failing, making mistakes, or finding out that you are, in fact, not very good at what you thought would be your dream major—that can be tough. Learning that someone who you thought was just like you has in fact been dealing with depression, an eating disorder, alcohol abuse, or a disability can be tough. Some of these tough experiences can lead to good ones. In that sense, it is how you deal with the tough experiences that makes the difference. An important part of your education here is facing the tough experiences full in the face and learning to deal with them in ways that build you as a better person and build up others just as much. Making the effort to create a much different relationship with your
family—perhaps not as close, but more respectful and deeper—is not easy, but it is worth it. You can teach your parents a lot. I know my son in college reminds me often that I have deal with him as an adult. I’m learning. I’m not there yet, but, as tough as it’s been, it’s better for us both. He even promised me that if I treat him consistently as an adult, he might stop calling me “dude”. Facing the fact that you’re not as good as you thought you were at something can be tough. Realizing that you are among the 65 percent—get that—65 percent of college students who change their major at least once can be liberating. What am I really good at? What do I really want to do for the rest of my life? These are tough questions, but they can lead to answers that shape you forever. Facing depression, alcohol abuse, disability among your friends or yourself can be very tough. But, remember, college is not a competition among us. We are all here at Elizabethtown College, every single one of us, to do our best, not to beat out the other person out or look away when our friends around us need help. Learning to help someone and doing it in a way that respects their dignity is a powerful
lesson. Don’t turn away. Ask your friend if you can talk. Be ready to help someone get the help they need.

There is no escaping some of these tough experiences. I hope and pray you will not know some of the toughest ones that you could face, but learning, growing, changing, encountering new things, leaving that which we have outgrown behind, admitting that you have to change your mind, failing at something, seeing someone you care about get hurt ---all of you will face some of these tough experiences, without a doubt. Equip yourselves now for what lies ahead—make good friendships with other students, admit it when you don’t know something, be ready to ask for help, make certain that your deepest beliefs are ones support life and truth, and be honest with that person in the mirror. Over the next four years, you can make the tough experiences you face be some of the best experiences you have.

Remember that many of the best experiences you will have are ones that you know very little about right now. There are subjects that you’ll
take a course in that you’re certain do not interest you that will turn out to be fascinating—if you are open to them. Also, remember that a large part of your education here happens outside of class. The Music at Gretna concert series brings wonderful musicians to Leffler Chapel. Check it out. There are speakers from all over the country and the world who we bring here. Go hear them. Internships are invaluable. If your major doesn’t require one, go to your advisors or the Career Center and find an internship that fits your talents and interests. And, study abroad, if you are at all able. Every student who I ever took on study abroad programs to Europe said it was an almost life changing experience. Check out the office of International Programs on the first floor of Nicarry Hall and check out BCA, the study abroad consortium on the first floor of Myer, and look at their websites. Either here on campus or wherever you go to work or to study over the next four years, be open to the people who have different backgrounds than you or have different opinions and beliefs. They may teach you a lot.
Some of the best experiences you may have over these four years are ones you would never predict now.

And, remember, these experiences—the best and the toughest—are only a beginning, but they’re an absolutely crucial one. What you are doing is now working on having the best college experience you can have. But you are also doing much more that. You are shaping your life. Over and over again, I have met people who chose their life partner, decided on a 40 year career, or made the most important decisions that they could make about what they believe—here, on this campus. In the classrooms in Masters, Hoover, Wenger or Steinman, talking to a professor in her office, studying in High Library, in the clubs, teams, and organizations that you get involved with, in long debates in the residence halls, and, yes, looking up at the stars at night from the Dell—you will shape your life. You will equip yourself both intellectually and morally to have a life made up of the best years and the tough experiences that you will make into the best that you can.
Welcome to some of the best experiences you will ever have. Thank you.

NOW, you have to say something:

Please stand up.

Let’s practice. I want you to say, “Blue Jays! Always! Twenty-sixteen!”

Again: “Blue Jays! Always! Twenty-sixteen!”

Now, for real, three times, as loud as you can:

“Blue Jays! Always! Twenty-sixteen!”

“Blue Jays! Always! Twenty-sixteen!”

“Blue Jays! Always! Twenty-sixteen!”