Dear Berkeley Class of 2019,

Greetings and salutations to you, newest and most welcome Berkeleyites! I very much look forward to meeting each of you in August. Congratulations on your acceptance to Yale and on the good fortune that brought you to Berkeley!

As your dean and the chief academic officer of the college, I will advise you on all manner of things in the years to come, and we will grow to know each other quite well. At the moment I’d like to offer you a few thoughts over which to mull throughout the summer. I’m sure you have a million questions right now, and that is exactly as it should be. In both my own work and in advising the studies of my students, I have found that the secret to a successful endeavor – be it a paper, senior essay, research project, dissertation, article, book, whatever – is finding the right questions to ask.

This truth is known by many of the learned colleagues you will encounter at Yale: Socrates and Shakespeare, Frederick Douglass and John F. Kennedy, Hypatia of Alexandria and Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Dante Alighieri and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Zhàozhōu Cōngshēn and Rumi, Denise Scott Brown and Louis Kahn, Jorge Luis Borges and Julia Kristeva, Monty Python and Douglas Adams. In The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Adams tells the story of a people who “got so fed up with the constant bickering about the meaning of life…that they decided to sit down and solve their problems once and for all.” To this end, they built the supercomputer Deep Thought, and asked it to find the answer “to the great Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.” Seven and a half million years later, they receive their answer: 42. In response to complaints from the thunderstruck audience, Deep Thought suggests that if they are unhappy with the answer, it may be that they do not yet know the question: “once you do know what the question is, you’ll know what the answer means” (THGG, chapters 25-28).

In other words, none of us can know if we have found the right answer, if we are not yet sure that we have asked the right question. I often turn to Rainer Maria Rilke’s counsel in Letters to a Young Poet (#4): “Do not now look for the answers. … It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question.” To this end, I would like to suggest that this summer is a time to think about questions – to embark on the path to finding the right question for you. Below I offer you, as an entry point, a couple of questions that are likely on your mind. The original question is placed in italics, and is followed by suggestions of potential reframings to get you started.

What do I want to study?: What is it that I like about a particular subject or field? Is it the field itself or is it the mode of inquiry? What do I find fascinating, and why? How can I build on my strengths and also explore new avenues, so that I mindfully choose the right major for me?
How can I best pursue my extracurricular interests at Yale?: Which activities bring me joy and satisfaction? Are there other things I would like to do? Am I afraid to “quit” something – so afraid that I cannot see that “quitting” something might allow me to pursue something else? How can I make active choices, be it to continue with what I am doing, or to make a change?

Is it wrong that I haven’t figured everything out yet?: What will I miss if I make a plan and stick to it, without learning from experience? What do I hope to achieve at Yale? How do I want to grow? How can I make the most of my time, and be the best version of myself?

What will Yale be like?: How can I temper my expectations with an openness to experiencing new things, and to meeting new people? How can I be sure that my assumptions don’t get in the way of new discoveries? How can I learn from my past but also live in and react to the present?

Class of 2019, one of my mentors is fond of saying: “you learn by doing.” This is a great way to think about the four years that await you. The good news is that you have an amazing support network waiting to help you here at Berkeley. You can come to me with any and all questions – even when you have so many that you don’t know where to start, or when you are too confused even to begin to formulate the questions. I look forward to meeting you this August, and to helping you throughout your time at Yale. I also cannot stress strongly enough how fortunate you are to have the Freshman Counselors on your side. They work closely with me to help advise and support you in every way we can. This year’s team is truly fantastic – Katherine (Katie) Garris, Hannah Geressu, Adrian Kimmok, Maria Reynolds, Katie Stoops, Peter Suwondo, and Helder Toste represent the great spectrum of knowledge and interests that makes up Berkeley and Yale, and blend compassion and understanding with practical know-how and hard-won experience. They are wonderful resources, and are dedicated to helping you make your first year the best it can be. You will also come to rely on the warmth and knowledge of Damaris Cardona, senior administrative assistant to the dean; she is an invaluable resource for routine academic questions as well as a provider of good cheer (and chocolate) to help you in times of need. All of us can either answer your questions or will direct you to other resources that can help. Over the summer, the best place to start is by contacting your Freshman Counselor; I also highly recommend that you look at the Berkeley FAQ sheet (http://www.yale.edu/berkeley/images/FAQ_BK.pdf) and fill out our brief but helpful Freshman Survey (http://tinyurl.com/bkfreshmansurvey).

So, BK 2019, congratulations again. Master Chun and I eagerly await your arrival in August. See you soon!

Best,

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