One Way Ticket to Opportunity, Failure and Growth

Good Afternoon. I am honored to be here today and I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to many people: First, I would like to thank the members of the Faculty Personnel Committee for honoring me with the Thompson Distinguished Teaching Award and I would like to expressly thank George Edwin Thompson for making the award possible in the first place. I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleagues, Professors Bruce Larson, Caroline Hartzell, Rob Bohrer, Patrick James and Charlotte Armster whose mentorship and support has sustained me these past years as I began my professional life here. My family, and especially my husband I thank you from my heart. And I would like to thank my students who daily inspire me and honor me as they include me in their learning process.

Of course, I have been thinking about how to address the College’s honors award recipients and it is these students I wish to address most personally today. After much thought, I decided to share with you three personal lessons that I’ve learned over the years about professional growth.

The first lesson that I’d like to share with you is my take on getting out of my comfort zone. Very likely, you have heard this before. Here at Gettysburg College, in and out of the classroom, on and off campus, we challenge you to step outside of your comfort zone. Some of you are here, receiving an award perhaps because you did just that! To me, it is not just jumping something unknown. It is not just taking risks. Getting out of your comfort zone requires considerable self-awareness, something we need to work on at different stages of our lives. Let me explain with two examples. When I was three years old, I thought I could fly. I really thought I could. I remember very vividly letting myself go from the outdoor deck of our neighbor’s house. I thought I'd land like a butterfly. Well, as you can imagine, things did not go as I planned. I learned a lot about gravity and myself that day. I had made a decision based on very limited information about my capabilities. I did not know what I was made of. I did not seek advice or ask questions. Well, I think it is clear by now. This is not getting out of your comfort zone.

20 years later, when I was 23, I decided to fly, again, this time with a one way ticket to the United States to attend graduate school. I am originally from Turkey. I had a good and comfortable life in Turkey. I have amazing family, great friends… I was graduating from one of the top universities in the country. Finding a decent job was not an issue. Despite this, I felt compelled to take this flight. I was not done with learning. I had majored in International Relations and I knew I could not understand world politics if I refused to leave where I was born. This was going to be my first trip to the United States. I did not know what to expect, yet at the same time I felt certain I had to do it. I have to admit, it was not easy. There was more than couple of bumps on the road. There were moments that I thought I was starting life all over again. There were moments that I thought my experiences in the last 23 years did not matter. Struggles I went through revealed who I am and also required me to think about the world we live in from a perspective that I could not gain by staying in Turkey.
Lesson number 2. When I was a kid, one of the things I heard from my parents was: “Don’t be just successful!” They would continue by saying: “be compassionate and successful, be caring and successful. Remember who you are and your values.” I have to admit that initially I did not understand what they meant. It sounded like “finish your vegetables.” I did not get that one either. Over the years, I came to realize that I will be tested in different ways. Being successful might require me to give up things that are precious to me and if I did give up those things, I would not be who I am. In the beginning of my address, I said you, my students, inspire me every day. You inspire me in many ways, and one way is because many of you are not just successful! You are compassionate, and you are caring. You remind me every day that I also need to remember who I am and what is important for me in life. Being successful means more than one thing.

The final lesson that I’d like to share with you is: If you are struggling to learn something, it does not mean that you’re not good at it. So, don’t give up just because you do not excel in a task immediately. I started learning English when I was 11 years old. For a year, eight hours a day, I sat in English classes. This was not my choice. The school I attended required all students to take a year off just to learn English. This was called the “prep class.” Only after students passed this class, could they continue their education. After a year full of struggle and difficult and challenging written and oral exams, I passed the prep class. This story is much more complicated than that. The first weeks in the prep class were the hardest. I was convinced that learning English was not my thing. The exams were tough. There was almost no partial credit. For instance in a short paragraph question, if I misspelled one word, I would not get any credit. I was scoring low in the exams. I had been a good student, even excellent student, and here I was thinking if I am not doing well, this is not my thing. But I could not quit. That was not my thing either. So for the first couple of months I had to learn to deal with low grades and being ok with not being a great student. Then things got better! I passed my prep class with a decent score.

Many years later, when I was taking the TOEFL (The Test of English as a Foreign Language), I answered questions without hesitation. I think the score I got from that exam was critical for my acceptance to the University of Missouri-Columbia graduate program with a tuition waiver. Something that I initially thought I was not good at was now opening new doors for me, giving me new opportunities. From this I learned that you don’t need to succeed in everything immediately. Please remember this. Don’t give up just because you do not do well. There are things that you might need to quit; there are things that are not for you. But when it comes to learning, you need to be patient with yourself. Learning to fail and handle the tough emotions that come with that might be the biggest step towards your personal and professional growth.

We’re here to celebrate your success. It feels good, doesn’t it? Congratulations to all of you. However, my advice to you is do not make your decisions based on the thrill of being successful. Long term success might not be sum of short term achievements. Have a larger picture, a vision for yourself. A low grade, a failed application, a feedback that was hard to read are all parts of a
larger picture, but only parts of it. Love your passion strongly enough to endure the feeling of not being so successful once in a while.

I am standing here, because I am the recipient of the Thompson Distinguished Teaching Award. I am not going to lie. I feel great about it and I am proud of it. But you know what is even better than that? Having young, smart people in your class who are willing to give their time to learn, who are ready to be challenged by the ideas you will bring up. I am very thankful to my students for that!

And, lastly I want to thank you for making it worthwhile to take that one way flight. Each time I enter the classroom, or listen to one of you talking about your learning struggles, or receive one of those beautiful emails that inform me about your achievements, the little voice inside of me says: “Yasemin, you’re in the right place. You had to leave behind so many people you loved and cared for, but you’re in the right place.” I wish professional growth opportunities to all of you that will inspire you every day. From the bottom of my heart, I know you deserve it.