

Dearest First Year,

Welcome, welcome, to the best four years of your life! Or, so everyone has likely told you in your pursuit of and arrival at this esteemed institution of higher education. I, as a wise old fourth-year, would like this letter to serve to you as a reminder of your humanity, especially during a time where I'm sure one of the first defining factors you would state about yourself in conversation with a stranger has something to do with the fact that you are a college student.

This opening is not written to be cautionary; honestly, I can say with full certainty that times of my college experience have been ones I will remember fondly for the rest of my life. I mourn them even now, and I haven't even graduated yet!

What I do mean is that, with these incredible and unforgettably *good* times, you will experience some of the hardest growth moments you will face in your entire existence as this person on this planet in this brief blip of our existence within the grand scheme of time. I know that probably is scary to read; I myself feel as though I am looking at my life from the perspective of a small soul standing in the middle of a large, unpredictable river. I know the temperature of the water, because by now I have stood in it long enough to adjust to its fluctuations; You may know the general types of hardships you will face, because by now you have likely weathered storms before. I have watched the banks change, and yet, I still peer upstream, hoping to predict future weather and patterns of the wind. I think, to best embrace your next years here, you too will eventually have to come to the realization that I have: life will send things down the river towards you that you could never imagine, in intensities that you will have never thought you could be strong enough to stand through. If you choose to stay, which you must in order to fulfill the task of experiencing what it is to be alive, they will all eventually pass, and you will remain standing.

In my time here, I have shifted and molded myself into many different groups, ended relationships with significant others and dear friends, and made new ones. I started out as a Bio pre-med major, wanting to be an eye doctor; now, I study global sustainability, and hope to live in a van for a good amount of time before I ever see the inside of a doctor's office for reasons other than the mundane and routine check-ups essential to maintenance of my body. I attended therapy at CAPS, and walked more people than I could count to CAPS to attend therapy themselves. I spent a week in a psych ward because I was so sad I thought I might hurt myself. I got STD tested at UVA gyno, and I twice woke up in the ER from alcohol poisoning after particularly bad nights out. I was diagnosed with ADHD, manic depressive disorder, and anxiety (all of which, I promise, are more common than you think!), and I have received SDAC accommodations so that I can pursue my degree while pursuing myself. I watched the sunrise from culbreth garage, hammocked in the sunlight near Ohill, made new friends walking home from bars (rip), hooked up with really random people and laughed about it the next day, drove around grounds with my radio volume cranked to max, smelled and named all the flowers of the pavilion gardens, painted the rotunda, drank out of a lawn room in a floor-length pink dress and heels, and stole a brick from the corner (oops). I was an RA, I was on student council, I lived in a sorority house, I had to medically withdraw for a semester, I only took two classes for another one, I barely got out of bed for two months of yet another, and I'm still graduating on time! I'm not telling you all of this because you will have the exact same experience, but more to highlight the importance of recognizing how deeply complex the people you interact with (even virtually, through this letter) will be. You can never assume you know what is going

on behind someone's appearance, and therefore, you would do well to treat everyone with kindness and compassion. It will serve you well.

I have streaked the lawn, and hiked Humpback totally naked (hahaha). I have found (extremely unexpected) love, met while pursuing an activity that is very dear to my heart, when I knew barely anyone who felt the same way I did about it. I have figured out the qualities in people that are important to me, and then made a conscious effort to cultivate relationships with people who possess those qualities. I have let people go. I have let visions of my future, and visions of what I thought I wanted for myself go. I have embraced my imperfections, my D in Intro Calculus first year, and the countless times I feel as though I did not give it my all. You will too.

UVA students are special because we are smart. We are driven. We are witty, and eager to pursue knowledge, and engage with difference, because these things make us better people. *People*. We are also people. We drop the ball sometimes, a lot of times. A friend of mine (who just started the Batten masters program and is therefore drowning in work) and I were discussing these things earlier this week. She said, "there will always be a time where you will need to drop the ball." Don't judge yourself too harshly when that happens, because, TRUST me, it happens to everyone. "What is important," she said, "is to know which balls are rubber, and which are made of glass."

You are a UVA student, but you are a person first. The *best* thing that you can remember, during your fleeting years here, is that if you cannot be okay for yourself, you will never be fulfilled in school. The ultimate glass ball isn't a ball at all: it is the strength of your arms, your mental, emotional, and physical health. Never let school get in the way of that. Know when you can no longer carry all of your burdens alone, and know who and how you can share the burden of their weight with. School is so aggressively packaged as this four year, action-packed chunk of joy and discovery and learning; by now, considering that you are joining our community during COVID, I'm sure you've realized that nothing is as it seems. Accept this as truth even in normal life, even after COVID ends, and do your best. Do your best to take care of yourself, do your best to foster healthy relationships and let unhealthy ones go, and do your best to celebrate the little victories. Yes, you have the capacity to achieve greatness. Some days, the best representation of your capacity for greatness will be merely the fact that you got out of bed. You are not a failure if/when that happens. You are still the incredible, smart, caring person that UVA saw you as when they chose you to come to this school, and you can and will still become the person you envisioned when you chose to go here.

So, in conclusion, take this time to get to know yourself as you, without parents, with your rules, able to pursue your own passions. Join that weird club. Talk to that cute person, or compliment that girl on her pink hair. Learn that skill you've always thought was cool (banjo and skateboarding for me!). Laugh so hard your abs hurt, and cry so much you think you might be out of tears. It will all be okay. Even if you need to take a break from school, school will always be here. You are much more than your education. Let this chance to pursue education be not only a chance to #geteducated, but also to know yourself more deeply. Try to get rid of the "good/bad" way of thinking, and think of your actions and accomplishments in terms of effectiveness: what are your goals for your time here? Are those goals realistic, knowing that you are an imperfect person, as we all are? If so, are your actions effective in reaching your goals? If they aren't can they be changed, or does the goal need to change? These are all questions to keep in mind as

you do this journey. You got this! I know it may not always feel like it, and I know you've probably heard this, but you are so, so, *so* not alone - you just need to learn where the support is, because I PROMISE you it will always be there if you look hard and long enough. Keep the faith. Hold onto your hope. I believe in you. If you're reading this, and if you've made it this far to college, you believe in you too.

You got this.

Wahoowa, baby.

All my love,
Catie