

On Being There
Opening ASM Talk
9/2/25

Good morning. On behalf of the faculty and staff, welcome to the 33rd year of Boston University Academy.

I hope the summer has been a good one for you and your families. To our new ninth-grade and to you new students in the 10th and 11th grades, we are so glad you are with us. You will make us better, not just with your individual talents, but with the curiosity and kindness that binds you to all of us. Welcome. To the Class of 2026, welcome back. Seniors set the tone for the community. You all are a big reason why I am so confident that this will be a great year. In a few moments, I will have the pleasure of introducing Elise Despujols, your Student Council President.

Before that, though, I will offer some thoughts as I do at the start of each term. My topic today is something that we do quite well – being there for one another. I'll take it in three parts: showing up, being present, and listening.

Showing Up

First, showing up.

One of my favorite new traditions at the school is the performance by members of the school's Dance Club. The Dance Show is an impressive and energetic culmination of months of choreography and rehearsals. It also takes place at a peculiar time: the afternoon of the last day of BUA June exams – a time when students would be forgiven for going home early for a nap, heading out with friends for bubble tea, or strolling the shops on Newbury Street. But that afternoon, every seat – and some of the floor – of the Black Box Theater is filled with students and faculty audience members, including seniors who graduated more than two weeks earlier.

There is a culture here of showing up for one another. Some of you attended last year's commencement, when graduating senior Rose Cairo spoke powerfully about this phenomenon as part of her address. She described how much it meant to her to have friends on the sidelines of fall fest soccer games and at championship basketball games cheering for her and holding handmade signs. I was not the athlete that Rose was, but I can tell you exactly where my best friends were sitting during the musical I performed in in my senior year. I can tell you where my faculty advisor was sitting. Three decades later, I remember that they showed up.

Beyond its power for the individual, showing up is also how we build community. We don't just come to Fall Fest to cheer on our friends on the field, but to be together and share an experience. It rallies spirits and binds us together – as does Lock In, the Cabaret, Be Together, and the dozens of games, performances, and events you all work so hard to organize. Rose recognized that the way we show up for and with one another is a rare and beautiful thing – one that should be cherished.

Being Present

As I think about the second point in my talk this morning, being present, my mind turns to home. Several of you have warmly asked how my summer was. The truth is that we didn't do much – we mostly stayed around the house and neighborhood. We made the most out of trips with our three little kids to the park down the street and to the splash pad near the local high school. We read lots of books together, watched every episode of Bluey multiple times, and baked too much banana bread. I had some guilt about not doing anything more adventurous or memorable until our son put my mind at ease. Charlie, who is starting kindergarten today, told me last week that he really loved his summer vacation. When I asked him why, he said, "Because we got to spend so much special time together." I feel the same way.

It is getting harder to be present and devote our attention where it belongs. There is an entire economy, nascent when I was your age, that now conspires to distract us from the people and real-life activities that bring deep fulfillment. Some of the largest corporations in human history leverage technology, biology, and psychology to manipulate us and pull our attention into a small electronic box in our pockets. In his recent book, *The Sirens' Call*, Chris Hayes compares the attention economy to the mythological sirens whose song would have shipwrecked Odysseus's men had it not been for Circe's warning and Odysseus's decision to lash himself to the mast. I say this not with the judgment of a middle-aged purist, but as somebody who also struggles to ignore phone notifications and to stop scrolling to the next video.

There are so many places where we successfully buck this trend. Our classrooms are oases of attention. We get lost in one another's ideas, complex problems, and foundational literature. You 9th and 10th graders will head off to Camp Burgess tomorrow – a phone-free, relationship-rich hallmark of this community. There's a reason why our expectations when you enter this room before the start of an all-school meeting is that you put your phone away and talk to your neighbors. You are surrounded by interesting, empathetic, and talented people. We don't want you to miss out on a minute with them.

Listening

My last set of thoughts today is about listening.

There is a children's book we read often in our house called *The Rabbit Listened* by Cori Doerrfeld. At the start of the story, we find a curly-haired child, Taylor, wearing light blue and white striped one-piece pajamas, building a towering, intricate block castle. Taylor is so proud, but then heartbroken when a flock of birds knocks down the creation. A series of well meaning animals visits Taylor. The chicken offers to talk about what happened, but Taylor doesn't feel like talking, and the chicken leaves. A bear is next, offering to shout about what happened with Taylor, but Taylor is again uninterested, leading to the bear's departure. The pattern repeats with the elephant, who offers to rebuild the castle exactly how it was, the hyena who laughs it off, the ostrich who wants to pretend it didn't happen, the kangaroo who suggests throwing it all away, and the snake who whispers that Taylor should knock down someone else's creation. All are rebuffed and all leave.

Until the rabbit comes. I'll quote this next part. "In the quiet, Taylor didn't even notice the rabbit. But it moved closer, and closer. Until Taylor could feel its warm body. Together they sat in silence until Taylor

said, 'Please stay with me.' The rabbit listened." In the next few pages, the rabbit listens as Taylor talks, shouts, laughs, and considers plans mirroring the other animals' suggestions. It then continues: "Through it all, the rabbit never left. And when the time was right, the rabbit listened to Taylor's plan to build again. 'I can't wait,' Taylor said. 'It's going to be amazing.'"

As teenagers, I imagine many of you often find yourselves on the receiving end of advice when what you may most need or want is somebody to listen and simply be there. I also imagine you can each think of a friend or family member who, in your time of struggle, was there for you in a quiet way and with an open ear. I share this story not to urge you to be better listeners; I think that is an area where so many of you excel. I share it to remind you of the power of the simple gift of your attentive presence to others. You can – and do – make others' lives better simply by being there, listening, and being your kind and curious selves.

Thank you for showing up. Thank you for being present. Thank you for listening. I wish all of you a wonderful school year.