It is such an honor to be speaking with you today at Babson’s 2nd Annual Lavender Graduation ceremony. My name is Tom Bourdon, and I am a fellow Babson alum, having graduated with my Bachelors degree back in 1998. I am the President of an non-profit called Greater Boston PFLAG, which is an organization that offers support, education, and advocacy in order to better the lives of LGBTQ people, as well as their friends and family. One of the most common methods used by PFLAG in order to have an impact on people is telling personal stories. Since my job is more focused on the governance and strategic direction of the organization, I don’t often have the chance to tell a story of my own, so I thought I’d take the opportunity to do so on this occasion.

It’s a bit surreal for me to be back here at Babson, speaking to you all today, as a proud, out gay man, who has an incredible husband, a supportive family, the two most gorgeous children in the world who seem to think it’s perfectly wonderful that they have two dads—and having spent the majority of my professional life serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual people. I say that it’s surreal because when I graduated from this school 16 years ago, I didn’t even know what most of those words meant, and I was personally questioning whether or not I’d ever have the courage to come out as someone who “wasn’t
completely straight” myself, because that was the level of understanding I had gotten to at that point in time. I was questioning whether or not I would ever be loved by a person, or if I would continue to be loved by my own family and friends, if I let my true, authentic-self be known to the world. Around the time that I was graduating, all of my Babson friends seemed to be hyper-focused on starting their careers---excited about the big companies they were about to go work for, or the world-renown enterprises they imagined they were about to start up (sidenote, one of my classmates went on to start up Zumba!). Much to my parents’ chagrin, when I was completing my $32,000/year education at Babson (did you all just gasp at that number?), I seemed to be less focused on putting my top-notch business degree to good use (meaning making enough money so that I could help my parents retire early). While finding a job was important to me, finding myself was even more important at that moment.

For me, Babson had many ups and downs, and sadly, those downs were really hard to get through. When I entered, 20 years ago this fall, I had dated girls my whole life, because that’s what I was supposed to do, and even though I knew there was something “different” about me, I kept doing the same, because that’s what everyone was doing. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be liked. I hadn’t yet gained the skills to really look inside myself and say “who am I? what do I really want?” I was concerned about pleasing others, and doing everything possible to make people like me. As my four years went on, I felt a nagging inside. I wasn’t being true to myself. I was having feelings that I couldn’t exactly explain, and that I assumed
wouldn’t be well received by others, but I was terrified to open up and share these things with others, even those closest to me. By the end of my sophomore year, I did what every New Englander wants to do when they’ve just had enough—-I took off for California. I decided to find a summer internship as far away as possible, in a place where I assumed there would be more acceptance for difference and self-exploration. By the end of that summer, I had a conversation with a friend whom I had grown very close to—a straight, male friend, who was uber-surfer-dude cool—and after about 2 hours of me sobbing without him having a clue what was up, I got out these words: “I think I’m bisexual.” And he said, “that’s cool.” And a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. I’m talking a boulder. But unfortunately, I started carrying that heavy weight around with me again very shortly thereafter. I returned to Babson a few weeks later and sadly struggled internally for the next two years, not saying another word to anyone, and doubting that I could ever be me. There was no one who was “out” at Babson, that I knew of anyways, during my four years. I’m guessing some of the administrators who were here back then might hear that and think “you’re wrong, Tom, there was this professor and that administrator…,” but honestly, none of them were out to the students then, at least not that I had ever heard of—and trust me, I kept my ear close to the ground for those rumors.

There were two things that got me through during that really challenging and somewhat dark period of my life. One was the loving people I had around me. I guess because of the fact that “gay” issues weren’t really discussed back then the way they are more publically discussed today made it so that I didn’t know how these
people felt about that one particular issue. Even though I generally surrounded myself with wonderful, loving, and liberal-minded people, I still questioned if they would accept me if they found out I had an attraction for men. So I kept that part of myself hidden, but I knew that they loved the other aspects of me that they could see, and that gave me a great deal of comfort. The three Babson administrators and professors who were most influential to me are still working on this campus today—Carol Hacker, Professor Bob Turner, and Dr. Julie Levinson.

The other thing that got me through was finding creative outlets. The specific outlet that I think really saved me was my involvement in Babson Dance Ensemble—good ol’ BDE. BDE allowed me to express myself in different ways, and escape from being “Tom” and try out different personalities…and try on many different bad and flashy outfits, as well. BDE even offered me a chance to do something that pushed gender expectations, because while a lot of the other dudes on campus were getting drunk and breaking things on the weekends, I would often instead be practicing a two-step or a salsa move---and it was kind of shocking to me that I was actually respected for this by my peers, including many of those hyper-masculine dudes. (I'm guessing you still have some of those guys around campus today?)

So I eventually graduated from Babson, still closeted, and moved out to California permanently a month later, and came out to the new people I met on the West Coast, 3000 miles away from Babson and my family. I told myself at the time that the experience of living with my secret on campus was so hard, that I would never
come back to Babson. I met my first boyfriend a month later (side note: that guy is my husband Jimmy whom I’ve now been with for 16 years), I came out to my family a year after that—and they took it better than I had anticipated, and soon enough I even came back to Babson to visit some friends. Today I can tell you I’ve been back multiple times over the years. Funny enough, in my 10th reunion, I attended and brought my husband and we were like celebrities for those same hyper-masculine dudes who were once again getting wasted in the parking lot on alumni homecoming weekend---it was almost comical how much they wanted to prove to me that they were totally cool with gay people. I have sometimes wondered if I would have gotten that same reaction from them if I had been brave enough to come out while I was a student here.

Honestly, when I look back at my time at Babson, I sometimes wish I could do it over. I wish I could have been more honest with myself, and with others, much earlier. I would have been the only “out” student on campus at the time if I had done so, but I wasn’t courageous enough to do it. You too might be looking back at your years here and thinking about things you wish you had done differently, or you might be the type of person who can say that you live your life with no regrets. But while I cannot change the past, I can tell you that I am a strong believer that everything in life---and I mean EVERYTHING, happens for a reason.

After 6 years of working in the entertainment industry, and feeling very unfulfilled, I ended up heading down a new career path---helping people. I fell back into the world of higher education, specifically in student affairs, and ended up working at UCLA’s LGBT
Center…and I hadn’t even known such Centers existed on college campuses before I got this job. I got to help students who were struggling in the very same ways I had---it was the most fulfilling work I have ever done in my life, and over a 10 year period, I did this work at three different schools. Today I’ve branched out even further in terms of LGBT services, now running Greater Boston PFLAG. I get to run an organization that does work in middle schools, high schools, colleges, churches, workplaces, we hold parent support groups, extended family member support groups…and the list goes on. You see, my Babson experience, as hard as it sometimes was, got me to exactly where I am today, in terms of my work, my pride, my passion, and even having met my husband on the west coast because I just had to get to as far away from Babson as possible at that very moment in time. I don’t think I realized how grateful I should be to Babson for all of this, until I was actually writing this keynote address.

So that is the end of my personal story, and now I’d like to offer you some closing pieces of advice:

As you leave this campus, I cannot encourage you enough to live your life with honesty and integrity. Be your true, authentic-self, and be damn proud of who you are. As you leave the classroom and enter the workplace, keep in mind that money is not the most important thing in life. Relationships are. Go out there and be a good person, and an honest person. Show people that you care. Learn to listen. Even if you are convinced that you know everything now that you’ve got this degree, and I’m sure you do, learn to listen more than you speak.
Recognize your privilege, and use it for good. We all hold different forms of privilege, whether it’s based on our gender, race, the families we came from, the amount of money in our bank accounts...recognize where you have privilege—own it, understand it, and understand where others don’t have it, and use your privilege to help others so that we might see more equity in this world.

Treat everyone with respect. Treat the person cleaning the place where you work with as much patience and kindness and dignity as your boss, for they are equally responsible for your own success.

Do not burn bridges. Do NOT burn bridges. You just never know when a person will come back into your life, or how they might be of potential help to you in the future. Experience has showed me this lesson over and over again.

Give your life meaning and purpose. One great way to do this is by finding a way to help change the world for the better. You might be as lucky as me, and I consider myself one of the luckiest people in the world, and find a full-time job that allows you to do this. Or you might do this by finding a volunteer opportunity, or even by writing out a check once a month to your favorite organization (Greater Boston PFLAG! Just kidding)—just find a way to change the world in your very own small or big way. It all counts.

To conclude, I want to say that I hope you feel an immense sense of pride for also being such an important part of this community. You only have a short amount of time left as students at Babson—so enjoy yourselves, always remember the great memories, and if you have any not-so-great memories, I encourage you to use
them to make this world a better place. You are amazing people with beautiful spirits, so go make us proud.