

**REMARKS TO OPEN BOWDOIN COLLEGE
219th CONVOCATION
SEPTEMBER 1, 2020
CLAYTON ROSE**

DENIAL

I want to begin by thanking my faculty and staff colleagues for all of your amazing work over the past six months, work that has brought us to today – the opening of the College. I want to welcome our new students, first-year and transfer students – we are so pleased that you have joined our community. And I want to welcome back our returning students, most of whom are not on campus.

While this ceremony has changed over time, and has been shaped by the moment, there is little question that this year’s Convocation is unlike any other in our history, as is almost everything else that we will do this year. That said, while a great deal will be different, our commitments to a great liberal arts education, to a community dedicated to serving the common good, and to the care and kindness we show to one another remain steadfast.

I’ve entitled my remarks for this afternoon, “Denial.”

How many of us know where the “Spanish Flu” most likely originated (this was the last great pandemic, a century ago)? How many know what R-naught is and why it’s important? Or why safety and efficacy are both critical to the successful development and deployment of a vaccine? Or what the implications are of aerosolization of a virus on safety practices?

How many know the gap in the infant mortality rate between white Americans and Black Americans? The origins and motivations of the “Lost Cause” movement? The implications of the idea of the “Model Minority?” The theory of eugenics and the policies that it fostered? The facts of redlining, residential segregation, and “racial profiling?”

And just to bring it all together, how many of us are aware of that Black and Brown Americans are at higher risks to serious outcomes for COVID-19? Or the utter devastation that the virus has wrought on the Navajo Nation.

What is the point of all of these questions? Why am I talking about aspects of the coronavirus and racism in the same breath?

As you have heard me discuss since the late spring, we are in the midst of two pandemics. One of COVID-19, and one of racism. They both have profound implications for health, death, jobs, and opportunity, and they reveal much that is flawed about how government works, leadership that is lacking, and the challenges facing our democracy—although to be sure, there have been some amazing examples of what can work and of what true leadership looks like. I bring together the virus and racism, not because they both represent grave threats, which they do,

but because at the root of our inability to successfully deal with them, or to get on a solid path to dealing with them, is denial. It is the deliberate willingness to dismiss and ignore data, facts, and truth. Instead, driven by a desire to buttress a chosen ideology at all costs, misinformation and lies are substituted in place of facts, data, and truth. And the costs are public safety, justice, and equality.

False narratives, some of which have been in play for a very long time, include racial differences in intelligence and work ethic, immigrants are here to take “our” jobs, patients of color don’t follow medical advice as well as whites, that Asian-Americans are responsible for the coronavirus.

They include the idea that the virus will simply disappear, that masks are unnecessary, that asymptomatic individuals don’t need to be tested, that young people can’t get the virus, or if they do, they won’t get too sick.

These tropes are driven by a willful desire to ignore facts, and by a disdain for the “intellectuals” and “elites” that traffic in them, because they challenge an ideology.

Sadly, the problem of denial is not new, or an issue only in this country. But today’s hyper-partisan political environment seems to have made it even worse, and with the profound issues we face, the stakes are higher than ever. Opportunity, the quality of life, health and survival, and the cohesion of our society and system of government are at risk.

So, what does that have to do with us, with Bowdoin College? I would suggest that there are two things, at least.

The first is that as citizens, we have a duty to engage this fight. To battle and put down COVID-19, to battle and overcome racism and to become an anti-racist society, and to perpetuate our democracy. This requires active engagement, a desire for the facts, and a willingness to fight for truth as a central guidepost. We need to know what is true, be able to distinguish between facts and falsehoods, and to actively embrace the power and importance of new knowledge and new facts, and the search for what is true. And we need to call out stale information, misleading data, and lies.

Increasingly our society has become one of “denial,” where facts and truth are swept aside by a predetermined view or political position. So, decisions, policy, and even elections are driven by flawed insights, wishful thinking, and deceptions. As Adrian Bardon writes in *Scientific American*, “Americans increasingly exist in highly polarized, informationally insulated ideological communities occupying their own information universes.”

Pushing hard against this is an obligation that we each share as citizens.

Then there is the mission of our College. Many of you have heard me say, or read something I’ve written, where I’ve discussed the three essential goals of a great liberal arts education: to

help each of us live a meaningful life, to help us each find success and satisfaction in work, and to be able to participate meaningfully in civic life. The idea of the *liberal arts* has its origins in Antiquity and is an education intended to prepare one to participate in civic life and to be productive and engaged citizens in the debates and decisions of the day.

For generation after generation, a Bowdoin education has provided our students with the ability to think critically, to reason, to learn, to be nimble intellectually, and to communicate thoughtfully and persuasively. We develop the ability to ask hard questions, and the skill and disposition to avoid assuming that just because it's on the internet or said by someone on TV that it is true. This is what we have done at the College for a very long time. And it's this liberal arts education that is exactly what is required to have the skills and disposition to understand and overcome the ugly and dangerous manifestations of denial.

The stakes have never been higher. We have never needed *liberally* educated people more than we do now. And I would suggest that we have never needed Bowdoin, and the many other schools like Bowdoin, more than we do now.

To our new students, I would ask that you think about this as you make your way through your time here. The education that you are privileged to receive has great instrumental power, and it can help you to change the world.

To my faculty and staff colleagues, thank you. Thank you for continuing a long history of creating and delivering a Bowdoin education, one that makes a difference.

By the way, the best evidence indicates that the "Spanish Flu" had its origins in Kansas.

With that, I declare the College open.

Thank you.