

“We are an intimate part of what we live through.” These words were shared with the Bowdoin community by longtime English professor Herbert Ross Brown in his 1972 Baccalaureate address on the eve of his retirement.

Professor Brown, who taught American Literature at Bowdoin for forty-seven years, spent time in his remarks reflecting on all that he had witnessed during his time at Bowdoin—wars, racial strife, political divisiveness, and the pain and sorrow that impact a college community when the world feels so, as he expressed it, “frustrating fruitless.”

For many of us, today can very much feel like one of those periods.

In preparing for my remarks for today, I spent time looking over the voices from some of the troubled times in Bowdoin’s past—seeking out periods when the world felt broken and so full of despair—to try to learn how the people back then made it through. What struck me most about this exercise were the parallels between 1968 and today.

Stories in the *Orient* that year are reflections on race; student activism; the strife of war, protests, and assassinations; a divisive presidential election with a law and order focus, and an overall call to action in what appeared to be a society in decline. Today, our challenges are different yet stunningly familiar as we confront a pandemic, continued racial injustice, political tension, economic inequality and distress, student activism, and calls for action across many fronts.

In his Baccalaureate address in May 1968, then-acting president Athern Daggett quoted an unnamed colleague—someone he valued highly—who, as Daggett put it “...seem[ed] to me to be a perceptive and intelligent observer of the times in which we live.” Daggett recounted that this colleague was “worried...because not since 1860 [had] the country seemed to [be] so imminently in danger of splitting apart.”

In regards to life in America in 1968, Daggett said, “Passing beyond the possibility of reconciliation and accommodation, debate and dialogue, today’s events often times [yield] to assertion and accusation.”

In 2020, we can imagine these same words being spoken. Just like in 1968, we are in a place of fear, frustration, sadness, and at times, despair, as we witness many of the same issues and injustices that were being faced when Daggett spoke, accompanied this time by a worldwide pandemic that has infected millions and more than 850,000 people—more than 180,000 in our country alone. With all of this, it can feel impossible to consider next steps. And yet, we will.

Herbert Ross Brown’s observations nearly fifty years ago remind us that the world faces challenges over and over and yet, we rise and find a way through. We won’t kid ourselves. We don’t solve every problem, but we find our way individually and collectively by learning from the mistakes we have made and by imagining something better, something more humane, something gentler, and something stronger—something that gives us a new level of connection and commitment to the world and to our relationships with one another.

“We are an intimate part of what we live through,” said Brown. Our job today is not merely to survive these times but to make real progress, using our knowledge of the past, our dreams for the future, and our commitment to the common good. We will all always remember where we were in 2020. But it’s “what we *did*” that will matter most.

Thank you.