

President Clayton Rose, 2021 Commencement Address

Good morning, Class of 2021. You did it!

I want to welcome our honorands, who are beaming in virtually, and our trustees. Welcome to our faculty, staff, and alumni, who are also beaming in. Welcome especially to our families and friends who are here in person and also virtually, from around the country and the world, all here to celebrate what is a joyous occasion.

Now, in what I am sure will make the short list of all-time understatements, this year has been historic. This is our 216th Commencement. Very few institutions have been as durable as Bowdoin, a place where we embrace both change and a steadfast commitment to our core values as essential elements in providing a great liberal arts education. Through thick and thin—wars, social upheaval, pandemics, financial and economic calamity—Bowdoin perseveres, changes, and thrives.

While today we celebrate, as we absolutely should, we must also remember that so many have died this past year and a half. The nearly 600,000 deaths in the United States from the pandemic exceeds the total US deaths in WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War, combined, and is approaching the 655,000 who died in the American Civil War. Globally, three and a half million people have perished, and that number is still climbing. We also need to remember those men and women of color—Black, brown, Indigenous, Asian—who have died by, or suffered from, racial violence.

I want to thank our four honorary degree recipients—Dr. Anthony Fauci, William Harbour, DeRay Mckesson, and Dr. Jessica Meir—for their amazing work and true service to the common good. We are delighted that each is joining the Bowdoin community today.

As you know, we're presenting Mr. Harbour's degree posthumously. He passed away last August, as our letter of invitation was on its way to him. We mourn his passing, but we could not be more delighted that his widow, Doris, son Marcus, and other members of the Harbour family are with us today to accept his degree on his behalf.

As we begin to move past this year and a half, I have for our students three thoughts for your consideration. The first, every year from this podium, I share with our graduates one of the important things that I have learned in my life—that genuine happiness is never found in material success. Rather, it is found in large measure in the bonds of family and friends. Happiness is about your heart—finding and nurturing those special relationships that make you whole. Finding that person who will love you completely and without question and you them. Should you have kids, loving them completely and making the time for them. Growing the friendships that draw out the best in you and in them.

If we have learned anything from this past year, it is how important this is, how essential it is to each of us.

Second, this moment—the pandemic, confronting the realities of race and racism, and profound political and social divisions—affirms more strongly than ever the importance and value of higher education, and of a liberal arts education, and what it is we do at colleges and universities around this country and around the world.

As Dr. Fauci pointed out in his “fireside chat” ten days ago, the “overnight success” of the COVID-19 vaccines was actually decades-long in the making, the result of basic scientific research in laboratories across the country and world, and then in research to translate that work into medicines, and at the moment of greatest need, pushing the effort across the finish line. Success in developing safe and effective vaccines came from many, many efforts over many, many years. For example, it depended upon the work to understand better the nature of RNA that earned 2018 Bowdoin honorary degree recipient Dr. Thomas Cech the Nobel Prize in 1989. Dr. Fauci's own work on AIDS and HIV that began well over thirty years ago provided critical insights and tools in this fight. These are just two of the examples of all that was done and all that required over so many years at so many colleges and universities and research institutes to create this “overnight success.”

The essential power of a liberal arts education—critical thinking, analysis, the ability to reason, to learn, to collaborate, to communicate—will be central to successfully navigating your way through the morass of social, political, cultural, ethical, and scientific issues that confront the world you will live in and lead in.

It will put us back on the moon and take us beyond, and it will help us to create the conditions for racial equity, for naming and ending racism, and for creating a shared sense of belonging.

As students, I would like to ask you now to stand and turn the faculty and staff who made this amazing Bowdoin education possible, and who prepared you to confront the challenges and to lead, and thank them with your applause. If you'd remain standing, please thank your parents, family, and friends—those who loved you and supported you through this journey.

And finally, thank one another. You are each an essential part of the Bowdoin education and experience, and you have it made it possible for us to come through this together. Give yourself a round of applause.

And lastly, four years ago, I stood right about here. You sat right about there. It was a beautiful August evening, and we all came together for the first time.

The disruption to your lives over the past fifteen months has been awful, and to have your college experience and your senior year, in particular, upended is simply not fair.

But this dreadful hand is the hand that you have been dealt. With that in mind, I want to leave you with some questions I hope you will consider in the months and years ahead.

How will you use this experience to better own your future? How will you build on this experience in ways that make you better and that will allow you to make an even greater difference in the world? What will you do to help tackle big problems? To bring people together? To call out injustice? To push the boundaries of what we know and who we are?

Our four honorary degree recipients—Dr. Fauci, Mr. Harbour, Mr. Mckesson, Dr. Meir—provide amazing examples of individuals who own it to their core—in their commitment, in their character, in their perseverance through the most difficult moments, their creativity, their courage, their selfishness.

I see this in each one of you. I know that you can change the world. Take the experiences, the heartbreak, the growth of the last year, learn from it, let it strengthen your resolve and self-confidence, and go out and make the change that is necessary.

Class of 2021, my congratulations on your remarkable accomplishments in a historic moment, and thank you for what's to come.

Following the presentation of honorary degrees, President Rose introduced “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” written by James Weldon Johnson and set to music by J. Rosamond Johnson, which was played in a recording made by the US Army Field Band:

“I want to turn your attention to our next piece of music, ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing.’ The words were written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson, originally as a poem to commemorate Lincoln’s birthday, and the music was created by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson. In the 1920s, the NAACP adopted it, and it became known as the Negro National Anthem; later, some came to naming it the Black National Anthem. I recommend reading the entirety of [the poem](#), understanding its impact and importance to Black Americans, and learning about the lives and great accomplishments of James and Rosamond Johnson. [Dwandalyn Reece](#), the curator of music and performing arts at the [Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), told an interviewer last year that ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ is ‘equal parts honoring the painful past and articulating optimism for the future,’ and that ‘its lyrics remain relevant to where we are as a country in any era.’”

President Rose closed the Commencement Exercises with a thank you:

“Let me end with a thank you to the Bowdoin faculty and staff, to our parents and families and with a final congratulations to our graduating students—you did it!”