

BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

President Rose

You are almost there!

Let me begin by acknowledging what we all know: the past two plus years have been historic in the challenges they have presented to the world, our country, Bowdoin, and to each of you and your families. And for each of you—our students—it was not the college education and experience that you expected when you arrived to move into the Bricks on that summer day.

As hard as it has been, you have more than risen to the challenge. You have taken care of one another, you have taken care of yourselves, you have adapted and adjusted, and you have crafted your Bowdoin education and experience. And here you are. You should take great pride in what you have done to get here. We do.

As far as I know, Admiral Stockdale never visited Bowdoin and had no connection to our college. But all roads lead to Bowdoin, or at least close by. Bath Iron Works, just up the road, built a destroyer named in his honor, christened in 2008 and still in service.

Those of us of a certain age will remember that he was Ross Perot's running mate in 1992 in their third-party run for the White House. More importantly, he was a long serving prisoner of war, and the most senior POW, in Viet Nam. He was held captive for over seven years and was awarded the Medal of Honor.

When asked how he survived all that time and without losing hope, he said,

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

This idea was termed the “Stockdale Paradox” by James Collins in his book, *Good to Great*.

So, why do I share this with you?

The world is a heavy place right now—war, global political tensions, economic challenges, domestic political/social division, the reemergence of nativism, murder

and violence targeting those of marginalized identities, climate change and the environmental emergency. Heavy, for sure.

It is easy to give-up, to feel as if there is nothing that you can do to make change.

This is simply not so. I know you, and the hundreds of thousands of students graduating this spring that you represent, and you are magnificent in your smarts, skills, integrity, and passion. You can each create change.

But it is not enough to be smart and skilled and passionate. To make a difference, to make that change on the biggest problems, will also require you to pay attention to the Stockdale Paradox.

You need to have an iron grasp on the reality of the problem that you are attacking.

Let me give you two simplified examples:

The path to racial equity is work that requires an understanding of the structures that are in place throughout our society that block equity of opportunity and belonging—the. The data are clear about the reality of these structures across the justice system, health care, education, economy, —every aspect of our society. To attack this problem requires dismantling these structure—no easy feat and one that takes concerted effort over a long period of time. They are strong, and they are buttressed and protected by self-interest, and they are denied as existing by some. But it can be done, and some of it has been done, with much more to do.

The significant reduction of carbon from our energy sources will require decades of transition. Our complex, integrated global economy is powered by carbon, in developing and developed countries. Even if the alternatives currently existed at the scale required with the infrastructure needed, which is not yet the case, it would take years to make this change without profound economic consequences. And this is further complicated by the necessity of coordinated action on a global basis, which runs into the challenges of sovereign self-interest. Solving this problem will also take a long time, there are no easy answers, but it must be solved, we have a true climate emergency, and it can be within your lifetimes.

But without a keen grasp of the realities of the big problems, you not only risk applying the wrong solutions, but you will also risk losing hope.

The harsh reality is that the most important problems we face share common characteristics:

- The work is hard. The path is long. There will be failure.
- Symbolic or vanity projects are always offered—they are less hard, short-term, and victory can be declared more easily. They only problem is that they have almost no substantial impact on the actual problem. Do not get distracted by that shiny new object, stay. Stay firmly focused on the prize, solving the problem in a real way.
- Institutions of every stripe need to be engaged—government, NGO, business, educational, civic, and so forth. The tired, counterproductive battle lines need to be thrown out and there needs to be a fresh take on who must be engaged and in what ways.
- Compromise will be essential. Sadly, compromise has become a dirty word in today's world and as a result, we have different sides dug in with little happening. Many are not really interested in change, only in scoring points.
- And, you will be criticized—for being wrong, for not being righteous enough, for being too slow, for being too fast, and so forth. Learn to deal with it.

And remember, the work is hard, the path is long, there will be failure.

But be undaunted.

As Admiral Stockdale said, you must also have faith. The faith that you will prevail.

Why should you have faith? These problems are really hard. Really hard.

Because change does happen. In my lifetime I have seen change for the better regarding many of our biggest problems. It is possible. Some days it seems like two steps forward and one step back, or maybe three steps back, and some days it is, but. But change can happen, and it does. And it is driven by those who understand the realities that I described. Let the reality of these challenges steel you and motivate you for what's ahead.

And I have faith because of you. What you are capable of has been on full display over the last four years, and each of you is nothing short of amazing and inspiring.

With a steely-eyed grasp of the reality of what's required, with your smarts, skills, passion, and determination, with one another, you will find ways to make your world more just, more safe, more hopeful...less heavy.

I have unwavering faith in you, and I can't wait to see what you will do.

Thank you.