

Commencement Address
May 29, 2022
Tiffany M. Graves '97

Thank you _____ for that very kind introduction.

This is a special weekend for several reasons.

First, I am standing here before all of you—the class of 2020. Let me join the chorus of others who have said to you that you are a very special class. I know some of you are joining on the livestream. You may not be here with us in person, but we are all thinking of you and celebrating with you today.

Second, it is my 25th reunion weekend. I cannot believe I sat where you are 25 years ago. There are days when I feel like I just left Hollins and other days when my own commencement feels like it was 25 years ago. I suspect that you will have those feelings, too, as time goes by.

Third, I am very pleased to have my mother, Paulette, sister, Tona, and best friend, James, here with me. They are my people, and I can assure you that I would not be standing here today without the three of them. If you take nothing else from what I share today, please find your people. Life is far too difficult to try navigate it on your own.

I relish any opportunity to return to Hollins, but being here this weekend with my classmates, my people, and all of you today, have made this particular visit pretty extraordinary. I want thank you for allowing me to share this moment with you. I am deeply honored that, after two years, you still asked me to be your commencement speaker. What a wild two years it has been.

I want to focus my remarks today on three Rs—no, not reading, writing, and arithmetic—but **resilience, reflection, and rest.**

Resilience

There is a lot of talk about resilience these days—and we no doubt have Covid to thank you for that. Without question, the pandemic has tested our resilience in ways we could have never imagined. And, as challenging as it has been, the upside of it has been that the pandemic has helped many of us to see just how strong we are.

Resilience is defined as the capacity to recover from difficult life events. It is not a trampoline, where you're down one moment and up the next. It's more like climbing a mountain without a map. Sounds fun, huh? Climbing a mountain takes time, strength, and help from people around you, and you will likely experience setbacks along the way. But eventually you reach the top and you look back with pride at how far you have come.

Being resilient does not mean that you don't experience stress, emotional upheaval, and suffering. Rather, demonstrating resilience includes working through emotional pain and suffering.

Resilient people experience frustrations, setbacks, and difficult emotions, but they tap into their strengths and seek help from their support systems to overcome challenges and work through problems. Resilience empowers them to accept and adapt to a situation and move forward.

We all know resilient people. I am looking at a crowd full of them now. I started my remarks by saying that this class is special – and part of that is because all of you are resilient. I cannot imagine the stress of attending college virtually. And, while we have all gotten used to Zoom life, I do not believe anyone will say it is an ideal way to learn or do most any thing, for that matter.

Talk about stress, setbacks, and difficult emotions! You had to have had all of them leading up to your *original* graduation. I bet some of you even contemplated whether you should defer your academic year (or years) until you could return to in-person learning. I feel sure I would have at least consider doing that if it were me.

But the fact that you are here today tells me that if even you *did* consider deferring or even leaving Hollins altogether, you did not. You persevered, you overcame, and you summoned your inner strength using the tools and people around you to keep pressing forward.

I commend you for your resilience. I admire you for it. And I encourage you to continue to tap into it as often as you need to – and you will need to. While I certainly hope there will never be another global pandemic during our lifetimes, life will continue to bring challenges – and many of them will seem insurmountable in the moment. But you have all proven you are overcomers. You have demonstrated tremendous strength and stick-to-it-tive-ness. So, in those challenging moments, never forget just how resilient you are.

I am reminded of a passage that I read recently in an article written by our own Dr. Hinton, titled, *In the Whisper of a Dangerous Memory*, where she said: **My hope is that we can actually make this world, this hostile, rough environment better. My resilience is that if I can just take one more step, I, we, can change the world.**

Resilience is powerful. And it has the power to help us do things we never thought we could – like changing the world. And, let's be honest, our world needs changing. And, every one of you is more than capable of doing it.

Reflection

The pandemic has also given us time to reflect. Some would say we have had TOO much time to reflect, but I do not believe we can ever over-reflect.

Many use the end of the year to reflect and resolve to approach the new year differently. While that can be important, I would urge you to engage in self-reflection throughout the year – as you are knee-deep in a challenge and as soon as you emerge from it.

Self-reflection is the process of bringing your attention to what's happening in your life in a mindful and open-minded way.

It's all about creating self-awareness. So many of us focus on getting ahead that we don't necessarily take time to reflect on what's going on within us.

We hear a lot about being present – and I want you to know how crucial that is.

We have so many distractions around us – and often in the palms of our hands. When was the last time you really listened to a conversation and did not get distracted by an incoming email, text, or other notification, or things that were going on around you at the time?

Being present and aware are essential for examining how you're doing, what's making you happy, what's making you sad or angry, and for helping you decide how to address the cause of each of those emotions.

Self-reflection helps us make sense of things – uncover breakthroughs – challenge our thinking – recognize change and track our progress – increase our self-awareness and self-acceptance – and live with more and greater intention.

Iyanla Vanzant once said, "The journey into self-love and self-acceptance must begin with self-examination... until you take the journey of self-reflection, it is almost impossible to grow or learn in life."

You may be two years out of Hollins, but trust me, you have a lot more learning to do. We all do. To continue to learn and grow, you have to take significant steps toward loving and accepting yourself – YOU – in all your beauty – and it starts with making self-reflection an everyday practice.

Rest

With all this resilience and reflection, you are going to get tired – and I want to encourage you to REST.

Ask a doctor and they will tell you that rest is essential physical health. When the body doesn't sleep, it isn't able to rebuild and recharge itself. **Our bodies require rest.**

Ask a athlete and they will tell you rest is essential for physical training. Rest helps muscles repair themselves and prevent injury. That's true whether you run marathons, play tennis, or climb rocks. **Our muscles require rest.**

Philosophers from yester-year also spoke about how rest is essential for the mind. Leonardo da Vinci said, “Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer.” And Ovid, the Roman poet, said, “Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop.” **Our minds requires rest.** Finally, most religious leaders will tell you rest is essential for the soul. Among others, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity all teach the importance of setting aside a period of time for rest. **Our souls requires rest.**

We are always *doing*. And when we aren’t doing, we feel like we should be. We greatly undervalue rest. There are just too many things to get done, too many demands, too many responsibilities, and way too much urgency. Nobody can afford to waste time resting in today’s results-oriented world.

The problem is, this hectic pace is causing severe damage to our quality of life. We are destroying every sense of our being – our bodies, our minds, our souls.

Our lives have become too full and too out of balance. Somewhere along the way, we lost the essential practice of concentrated rest.

Studies have shown that in addition to improving our health, rest can makes us **less stressed**, it can **deepen our relationships**, it can present opportunities for – wait for it – **reflection**, it can make us more balanced, increase our productivity, and it can allow us to build up a reserve for when unexpected emergencies happen and rest is not an option.

In her commencement speech to the University of Southern California’s class of 2018, Oprah Winfrey rattle off a list of thoughts with which she wanted to leave the graduates.

My favorite of Oprah’s thoughts? Invest in a good mattress. Listen, if you haven’t gone mattress shopping, prepare yourself for sticker shock. They are expensive – but a good one is worth every penny. Treat yourself to a good mattress and use it to get the rest that you body, mind, and soul crave.

You have honored in more ways than you could ever imagine by inviting me to speak to you today. Continue to be your resilient selves – but please make time to reflect and rest.

This world needs you – to quote a familiar pandemic refrain – **NOW MORE THAN EVER** – so please take care of yourselves. You always have a friend in me. Better yet – you always have a Hollins SISTER in me – so please don’t ever be strangers.

I will leave you with a few wishes from one of my favorite children’s books, “I Wish You More” by By Amy Krouse Rosenthal & Tom Lichtenheld:

I wish you more ups than downs.

I wish you more give than take.

I wish you more tippy-toes than deep.

I wish you more we than me.

I wish you more hugs than ughs.

I wish you more woohoo than woah.

I wish you more will than hill.

I wish you more can than knot.

I wish you more snowflakes than tongue.

I wish you more pause than fast-forward.

I wish you more umbrella than rain.

I wish you more bubbles than bath.

I wish you more treasures than pockets.

I wish you more stories than stars.

I wish all of this for you, because you are everything I could wish for and more.

Congratulations, Hollins Class of 2020.

Thank you.