



Excerpts from Commencement Speech

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December 14, 2019

Graduates, part of the fun for me of being your commencement speaker is that, in my academic life, I have been a communication professor. Specifically, I study speeches. And, I know that commencement speeches are almost always uninteresting.

In my career as a professor and university administrator, I have personally attended 62 commencement ceremonies and listened to 62 commencement speeches. Take it from me as an expert: With rare exceptions, the only commencement speeches that are remembered are those that are truly dreadful.

Occasionally, though, a commencement speaker can tell a story worth remembering, and I would like to tell a story about a relative of mine. It's a story that begins in Illinois. It's an American story. And it could be a story about your own family's future.

A long time ago, my fourth great grandfather, Isham Reavis, had a farm near Beardstown, Illinois, 60 miles east of Quincy. He also had a younger friend, a fellow member of the Whig political party, who was a lawyer in Springfield.

Grandpa Reavis died in 1843, at age 45, leaving behind seven children. One of those children was my third great grandmother. Another of Grandpa Reavis's children, a son also named Isham Reavis, didn't finish college because of financial difficulties. But young Isham, my great-great-great-great uncle, knew at age 20 that he wanted to be a lawyer. So he wrote his father's friend in 1855 and asked if he, Isham, could study the law with the friend, as was common at the time.

Grandpa's friend in Springfield was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln didn't have time to take on an apprentice, but he wrote back with some important advice for my Uncle Isham.

Before talking about Lincoln's advice, let's acknowledge first what happened to that younger Isham Reavis. Isham studied the law and became a lawyer, first in Illinois and, later, in Nebraska. He was elected to the state legislature in Nebraska, served by presidential appointment as an Associate Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court, and returned to Nebraska to practice law until he died, after a long and happy life. His son became a member of Congress, and many of Isham Reavis's descendants continued the family tradition and practiced law.

So, what was Lincoln's advice to Uncle Isham? In Lincoln's handwritten words of November 5, 1855, here's the most quoted line from that letter: "Your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing."

Lincoln's advice is just as important for you as it was for my Uncle Isham.

If you are not firmly resolved to accomplish what you set out to do, success will not follow. For anything that matters, success is not the product of luck, or an accident. Success, as we say at Quincy University, happens by design. Success is a product of hard work and determination.

Be resolute. Abraham Lincoln was resolved to succeed. Isham Reavis was resolved to succeed. It's time for you to be resolved to succeed.

You have studied, you have learned, you have achieved, you have been mentored. But the final, critical task remains. Now, graduates, you must be resolved to succeed.

Earning your degree is only the beginning, though it is a very good beginning. You must do the work that success requires.

In the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, you must boldly and humbly pursue those things that matter most in life, laboring and working as you have been taught. And, while there are no guarantees, success will come to you only if you are resolved to, committed to, the hard work that makes success possible.