



## Commencement Speech

Dr. Brian McGee, President, Quincy University  
May 8, 2021

Friars, parents, family, friends, honored guests, in the 161<sup>th</sup> year of this great Catholic and Franciscan university, and on behalf of the Quincy University Board of Trustees and the faculty, staff, and administration of the University, I welcome you again to these Spring Commencement exercises honoring the Class of 2021.

To our students, faculty, and staff, I know you already have heard from me all too often, in speeches, in meetings, and in 88 separate COVID-19 email updates. If you are tired of hearing from me, I am sorry about that, but being the president means I get yet another opportunity to speak. For the graduates, at least, this is my last chance to address you as students, as opposed to alumni. I hope you will be a little patient with me.

We are assembled today in QU's Pepsi Arena, called Quincy College Memorial Gymnasium when it was built over 70 years ago. For generations, our Hawks have come together in this building to compete with the best athletes of other universities, but also to gather for academic programs and to enjoy one another's company. QU wouldn't be the same place without this historic old gymnasium, and this is a fitting place to celebrate your accomplishments.

In case there is any doubt, today it is your accomplishments that we celebrate. At a commencement ceremony, the focus rightly is on the graduates themselves. As much as we might say about your parents, your families, your priests or religious advisors, your friends, and your professors, we focus on your work and on what you learned, along with our hopes for your future.

Today, we recognize you as Quincy University's Class of 2021, the pandemic class, the campus leaders who showed less experienced students the way to overcome adversity, to persevere, and to prevail in the face of obstacles. Seeking a degree at any university is a test of commitment, an endurance trial, an evaluation of just how hard you are willing to work and to sacrifice in order to get to this moment. Every generation of Quincy University graduates has passed these tests, but your test was different. Your test was harder. And, nevertheless, you persisted, through masks and social distance and the fear of disease. We will always admire you for what you have done.

At this commencement, you, your family, and your friends are celebrating the degree you earned through a combination of opportunity, talent, and years of hard work. We knew from the

beginning that you had the talent to get here, or you wouldn't have been admitted to QU, where you have had this opportunity.

But opportunity isn't enough. Talent isn't enough. The hard work had to happen.

Fewer than a third of adults in the United States over the age of 25 have earned a bachelor's degree. Even fewer have earned a master's degree. As Quincy University's newest alumni, you are now in elite company, all made possible by opportunity, talent, and, especially, hard work.

For the very few minutes of today's commencement speech, I'd like to focus on your hard work, both past and future. If we are being honest, we know that much more hard work awaits you in life. The work of earning your degree is, in many ways, only the beginning.

It has recently become fashionable to talk about grit in both business and academic settings. Now, grit is a funny word, and a humble word. Some of us know the term from *True Grit*, the 1969 movie starring John Wayne, or the 2010 movie remake starring Jeff Bridges.

In its origins, the word *grit* comes from the Old English and means *gravel* or *sand*. Anyone who has been to a beach or worked outside in a dusty environment knows what it is like to have grit in one's eyes or mouth or shoes.

It's hard to get rid of grit. Even a hot shower and a tooth brush might not do the trick. The grit stays with you, sometimes for days.

And that's the point of using the word grit to describe a person. Today, when we refer to grit as a personal quality, we mean that a person is tough and committed, that a person doesn't give up or go away. To have grit is to be passionate about achieving a goal and willing to put in the hard work required to accomplish that goal. The person with grit also is likely to be resilient, in the sense that she or he will bounce back and learn from failure.

Another old way to describe grit is found when people talk about *will power*. As George Clason, a native of nearby Louisiana, Missouri, wrote almost a century ago in his famous book, *The Richest Man in Babylon*, "will power is but the unflinching purpose to carry a task you set for yourself to fulfillment. If I set for myself a task, ... I shall see it through."<sup>1</sup> Hawks, I submit to you that the will to do hard things, to carry out difficult tasks, is impossible without the gritty qualities of passion and perseverance.

In recent years, it's been popular to worry that new university graduates have been too coddled by their parents and teachers, too isolated from real-world problems, to make the transition to the responsible world of adulthood. From this perspective, universities are full of, in the words of the satirist P.J. O'Rourke, "idle, dreamy, feckless young people" who have plenty of talent, but don't have any grit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George S. Clason, *The Richest Man in Babylon*, 1926, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/09/12/pj-orourke-this-is-why-millennials-adore-socialism/>

Not surprisingly, I think O'Rourke is wrong and, especially, he is wrong where the graduates of Quincy University are concerned. Because, while all of you look clean and presentable in your caps and gowns, every one of you has had a long, hard lesson in the value of grit. Thanks to a once-in-a-century global pandemic, you have spent over a year doing everything the hard way, both in and out of the classroom.

You are not idle and dreamy. You are tough and gritty.

Life in the SLC, in Padua Hall, or in Willer Hall was never luxurious, but you undergraduates never dreamed in high school that you'd spend an academic year constantly eating takeout food from Styrofoam boxes and worrying about the next Webex or Zoom class meeting.

No one held your hand to help you get through this past year. You were told you couldn't get within six feet of anyone's hand, let alone hold one.

In struggling through a full pandemic year, you have learned about your weaknesses. Not a few of you experienced anger, frustration, loneliness and tears in this year.

And, yet, you are here today. You have overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic, in addition to all the usual mistakes made by university students. Hopefully, where those mistakes are concerned, you learned from them. In the Catholic tradition, we have the idea of "firm purpose of amendment," as Bishop Thomas John Paprocki explains in his new book, so that people amend their behavior so as not to make the same mistakes again.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, Hawks, your university career, but, especially, this last pandemic year, has been a long, hard lesson in grit. And you have learned that lesson, and by your passion and perseverance you have prevailed.

Even in learning about our weaknesses, and in acknowledging weakness, we have grown stronger. As Chapter 5 in the Book of Romans tells us, we might "even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint."

We end this year, and you earn your degree, in a time of hope. Even earlier, in this year's darkest moments, you did not give up. Instead, you showed grit. Today, in this hopeful spring, we celebrate your extraordinary achievement, knowing that nothing that happens in your life will be too much for the gritty and determined Quincy University Class of 2021.

May God bless you in your lifelong journey, Hawks. Go do great things, in the humble examples of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare of Assisi. May you always and forever rely on the grit you have learned, the grit you have shown while at Quincy University.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas John Paprocki, *Running for a Higher Purpose* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press), p. 34.