Baccalaureate Welcome, Land Acknowledgement, and Closing

Welcome
Friends, please be seated.
Good afternoon and welcome to the baccalaureate ceremony in honor of the Class of 2022. And happy senior week, also! Hope you all are excited!
It is wonderful to see you here; it’ll be even better to see you on Monday at your graduation ceremony. We have a wonderful program ahead, so I will get out of the way and turn it over to Daniel Fragoso, who will lead us in our land acknowledgement. Thanks for being here, everybody.

President’s Baccalaureate Remarks

To our parents, families, friends, and, of course, to our amazing Class of 2022 graduates: Welcome to Penn’s Baccalaureate Ceremony.

Next week, on Franklin Field, we will celebrate the achievements of this Class with a blaze of colorful regalia, joyous music, and all the pomp and circumstance for which Penn’s Commencement is so famous.

Today’s event is a little bit quieter. It is more reflective. And the roots of the Baccalaureate ceremony are ancient, connecting us with centuries of fellow academics stretching all the way back to the Medieval era.

Legend has it that, back then, every graduate was required to complete a final exam of sorts. They had to stand and deliver an entire sermon…in Latin.

Now, today’s graduates know all about hard work. They are no strangers to performing with grace under pressure. And I’d be willing to wager that more than a few Penn graduates actually can hold forth in Latin.

But of course, our traditions have evolved. I’m happy to say we have cultivated here; meditating on our bonds of family and love, community and faith; and cherishing fond Penn memories while contemplating a future of good works.

To these ends, I am absolutely delighted that my friend and Penn Carey Law colleague Dorothy Roberts is our honored speaker today. She is the George A. Weiss University Professor of Law and Sociology, as well as the Raymond Pace and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander Professor of Civil Rights.

A renowned interdisciplinary scholar of race, gender, and the law, Professor Roberts works on some of the most urgent social justice issues of our time. We are grateful to have her with us today.

I am grateful as well to our student performers and leaders for making this event even more special and meaningful. I’m thankful to the Reverend Charles Howard and his team. Most of all, looking out at all of you, I am so very proud to see embodied by this Class the highest aims and ideals of our University.

You have come quite far since that warm August evening, four years ago, when we first welcomed you at Convocation. As the sun set to the west and the lights came up on College Hall, we could not have known then what was ahead, the challenges and trials you and all of us would face. Nonetheless, you have persevered. You have triumphed. Be very, very proud of all you’ve achieved, just as Penn will always be so very proud of you.

Congratulations and enjoy.
Reverend Howard, President Pritchett, Deans, fellow speakers and performers, Class of 2022, families and friends. I’m absolutely thrilled to join in this special service honoring all the undergraduates who have completed their academic studies at Penn.

Every year I’m sure a baccalaureate speaker reminds you of the challenging times you are entering. But this year surely takes the cake. Our lives are still constrained by a pandemic that persists despite each year’s prediction of its approaching end. Legal precedents advancing freedom that we have relied on for decades and even a century are at risk of evisceration. A war is raging in Europe, along with wars all over the world that the media no longer reports. Economists issue dire warnings of an economic recession whose toll will be felt most terribly by those already suffering from poverty, other structural inequities, and violence. Yes, Class of 2022, you hit the jackpot!

When I learned that the baccalaureate ceremony is rooted in religious tradition and is now an interfaith service, I became extra excited. Because despite being a professor and scholar in disciplines that rely on scientific explanations and evidence-based solutions, I have just described a time that requires vision, faith, and hope. Some challenges call for spiritual guidance.

I want to speak to you today about what I believe is the burning question for our time, for me, and for you. How do we envision a society that is more equitable, peaceful, and humane while focusing on the problems of today? Or to put it in reverse, how do we deal with the world as it is now while also working toward the world as we want it to be?

I suspect it cuts across many spiritual traditions. Jesus taught us that our hope in an afterlife in Heaven had to shape how we loved people on Earth. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus identifies those who will be blessed in Heaven:

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” But the righteous people are confused about when they did all those things. And Jesus replies that it’s whatever they did for the least among us on Earth that counts.

When we arrive in Heaven—whatever that means to you—we will be asked, not about our faith in a heavenly future that awaited us, but what we did for others while we were right here on Earth.

I know she wasn’t exactly singing about the kind of love Jesus was talking about, but the words of Belinda Carlisle come to mind:

Ooh, baby do you know what that’s worth?
Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth
They say in Heaven, love comes to
t’ll make Heaven a place on Earth

Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth

More seriously, I see this very same idea in the spirituals that my enslaved ancestors sang. One famous one starts with “I am a poor pilgrim of Earth. Enslaved people were able to survive the brutal inhumanity of their current bondage by envisioning their freedom in God’s kingdom.

But that didn’t mean they waited to die to see that promise fulfilled. No, enslaved people had to imagine a future where slavery didn’t exist to keep moving toward it, and hope that eventually we—or your generation—will be able to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all in the time.”

That’s the secret: You must envision the world you want and then act, along with others who share your vision and commitment, as if it were possible to build it.

I know that it’s possible because it’s happening now all around us. Look at the Class of 2022 recipients of the President’s Engagement, Innovation, and Sustainability Prizes, who are competitively awarded annually to Penn seniors to design and undertake post-graduation projects that make a substantial, lasting impact in the world. I don’t have time to name all the recipients and describe their projects, but they range from providing equitable opportunities for free, accessible creative writing education to K-12 students across the United States, regardless of socioeconomic background, to increasing resilience across the healthcare supply chain, and to EcoSPIN, an innovative device to capture microplastics at their laundry point source and protect our oceans and waterways.

So, I leave you with this call: believe in your boldest vision of a better world and then, whatever path you take after you leave this campus, act as if it’s possible to achieve it. Class of 2022, you inspire me to act as if the world I envision can actually become a reality.

Congratulations—and go change the world!
Invocation

Beloved members of the Class of 2022 and all who are gathered here to celebrate them, please join me in a spirit of prayer for our invocation:

Two years ago, because of the pandemic, Commencement was held virtually with all of us watching from our homes.

And last year, though we invited graduates onto Franklin Field, guests were not allowed and were forced to celebrate via the internet.

To see all of us here in this historic stadium with smiles on our faces, teary-eyed loved ones in the stands…well, it feels like we are witnessing a miracle.

Miracles. Those moments or occurrences that inspire awe, that take our breath away, that call forth a deep gratitude after being surprised by joy.

In so many ways, the journeys of each of our graduates has indeed been miraculous. Overcoming personal or systemic challenges to make it here to our university.

And then to obtain these degrees, that were in part completed online, or through masks and social distancing…well these degrees seem different.

To compete and succeed in our wonderful athletics program and to win championships (three just last week!), or to put on plays or concerts or recitals, or to lead in student government, or perpetuate our hundreds of clubs, to advocate and protest, serve in medical, dental, or veterinary clinics, to offer free consulting or pro bono counsel, or to make it off campus to mentor and tutor…with a devastating pandemic, economic turmoil, deep political divides, and war in the background…to accomplish all that this group has, well it indeed seems like a miracle—and for this we give thanks.

Gracious One, this class has been through a lot, but they have done a lot…they will do a lot.

And this morning we give thanks not only for the miracles in their lives, but for the miracles that they are.

We pray your blessing on all of them and your blessing on these commencement exercises.

Amen.

Dismissal

After all that has taken place these last few years, we are painfully aware of how quickly things can change.

How a long-planned event can suddenly be postponed. Or no matter how much we hoped to be present somewhere or with someone, plans can be cancelled.

Thus, when plans do come to fruition—we should be fully present, all in, living these moments to the fullest.

So, Class of 2022,

When the Glee Club leads us in the singing of “The Red and the Blue,” sing your heart out.

And then when you throw your cap into the sky, hurl it as high as you can.

When you hug your loved ones after recessing out, hold them a little longer.

And wherever your path after Penn leads you, take nothing for granted.

And know that we will never take for granted the gift you have been to us. Congratulations.

Invocation and Dismissal given on Monday, May 16, 2022, by Charles Howard, Vice President for Social Equity and Community and University Chaplain.

Commit to Educate, Serve, and Elevate the Social and Public Good

Good morning, Interim President Pritchett, Interim Provost Winkelstein, Chair Scott Bok, University Trustees, Honorary Degree Recipients, Faculty Colleagues, Families, and Friends. Most importantly, congratulations to you, the graduating Class of 2022!

I am delighted to see you, and I am honored to represent the Faculty Senate as chair. Our Commencement speaker, the premier storyteller of our times, eloquently speaks to the embodiment of Benjamin Franklin’s perseverance, evolution, intellect, and, yes, human struggles and growth.

We meet here today because of Franklin’s indefatigable commitment to educate, lead, and work in the service of civic enlightenment. I urge you to learn from the highlights of his life and, in your lives, aim to educate and to build and learn from diverse communities. I implore you to protect our planet to ensure a high quality of life for yourselves and others. I ask you to dedicate yourselves to define, serve, and elevate the social and public good.

As I look over the sea of talent, I can only imagine the excitement and bewilderment that you are experiencing. As once a young person your age and with parents and family committed to civil rights and justice, I was in a country still coming to terms with how it would respond to the demands for equality and access for people like myself, a member of an historically underrepresented racial group and a woman. Here you are in 2022, having weathered the Covid storms, the social protests for justice, and a shifting socio and geopolitical world.

So, for the next few minutes, I will share with you a little of what it has meant for us, the faculty, to get to know you, particularly over the past two years. We have witnessed your incredible strength and tenacity in an historical moment of enormous uncertainty. We have watched you embrace big hopes and guard your aspirations. You have given us the opportunity to experience your intellectual gifts and personal growth. You have allowed us to observe the many ways you have sought knowledge and understanding, and you have applied both, with increasing fortitude. You learned from and with us virtually. You were way ahead of most faculty in your knowledge and use of BlueJeans and Zoom, and we came to know these electronic media as more than technological connectors; they were the interlopers into our lives, the saviors and bane of our existence. They dictated how we would know each other and how you lived at home and at Penn, and we felt like family as you attended virtual classes with your bedrooms as your background (Thank you for sharing!). Once we returned to campus, who knew what a joyful moment it would be for us to see each other in person?

When you hug your loved ones after recessing out, hold them a little longer, and wherever your path after Penn leads you, take nothing for granted.

And know that we will never take for granted the gift you have been to us. Congratulations.

Remarks given on Monday, May 16, 2022, by Vivian Gadsden, William T. Carter Professor of Child Development and Education in the Graduate School of Education, and 2022-2023 chair of the Faculty Senate.

Vivian Gadsden
Hello Class of 2022! Now, I know you can do better than that. Let’s really hear it for the great Class of 2022!
That’s more like it.
We gather today to celebrate your many achievements. We also mark the remarkable years—unprecedented, even—that you have spent at Penn. These historic times have required much of you all. You have experienced more and endured more than many Classes who came before. Yet, to our everlasting pride, you more than met the challenge. You evolved. You thrived.
You could even say you’ve developed certain special adaptations that now set you apart.
Superpowers, if you will.
Among them, your Class exhibits heightened resilience and responsiveness. Exceptional optimism tempered by pragmatism. Courageous compassion and selflessness.
Also super strength, Spidey senses, and amazing web-slinging abilities.
Wait. Okay, maybe you haven’t evolved those superpowers…. Though that would be pretty awesome….
I argue as well that you now possess even stronger skills for navigating the unfamiliar, the unexpected, and the uncertain. You see the world—with near-superhuman keenness. Where others see a roadblock, you discern a path forward.
Now, because this is Penn, I will not simply claim all of these fantastic things as true without evidence. Like the scholars and scientists we are, we will put my claims to the test—one last test before you officially graduate. And we're going to do it right here and now, though I promise it will be quick.
Listen up as I share some instructions. Here’s how your test will go. I will show you a picture of a landmark at Penn, something iconic, and I want you to guess what it is. But there’s a catch.
The iconic image will be presented in some way that is unfamiliar. It may be an extreme closeup, or an unusual angle. I want you to think about it, then shout out your answer. Once I hear some sort of crowd consensus, I’ll reveal the correct answer. Got it? Ready? Ok, let your last test begin.
Can I have the first image, please?
[On screen appears: The Button close-up] The Button is correct! Now that we’re all warmed up, let’s really get this party started. Next image, please.
[On screen appears: Love Statue close-up] Alright, let’s hear some guesses! Say it loud!
Okay, let’s have the reveal.
[On screen appears: Ben On the Bench close-up] Alright graduates, let’s have the answer! Yell it out.
Alright, let’s see the image.
[On screen appears: Ben On the Bench] It’s no surprise you are rocking this test. Here’s our final image.
[On screen appears: The Quaker close-up] I think I hear the right answer but yell it out again to be sure.
I believe you nailed this one. Final image, please.
[On screen appears: The Quaker] As President, I officially declare that you all passed—with flying colors. You also proved my hypothesis beautifully.
Your shared experience as a Class has been forged in the crucible of global change, enormous and at times quite scary.
This experience has granted your Class certain gifts. Among them, your advanced ability to roll with the challenges, and to navigate extreme uncertainty with resilient creativity.
That gift will continue serving you well all your lives. Which is a very good thing because the world needs your unique abilities more urgently than ever. Fundamental threats to democratic norms and values; pandemics and climate change; the rip currents of war: You don’t need me to tell you that life—and the world—won’t be getting any simpler or more certain anytime soon.
Thirty years ago, the late and forever great Maya Angelou penned an essay about this very thing. She observed that, for all our assumptions, we actually know nothing certain about how our day will go. We cannot know for sure what each day may bring.
Who, after all, could have possibly predicted the twists and turns of the past two years?
(continued on page V)
Interim Provost Beth Winkelstein introduced the Commencement speaker, Ken Burns, and presented the academic honors during the ceremony.

A Commencement address was delivered on Monday, May 16, 2022, by Ken Burns at Franklin Field. Mr. Burns is an award-winning documentary filmmaker. Since creating the Academy Award-nominated Brooklyn Bridge in 1981, Mr. Burns has gone on to direct and produce many documentaries, primarily focused on American history, culture, politics, and luminaries, including Penn’s founder Benjamin Franklin. The address can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb4KDd4YH1l.

ALMANAC SUPPLEMENT May 24, 2022