



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Geoffrey S. Mearns, President

Fall Address to the Class of 2021

Emens Auditorium

August 20, 2017

2:00 p.m.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a privilege to serve as the president of Ball State University. And it is an honor to join my colleagues in welcoming you today—you, the Class of 2021.

This day is an important one for you. It is also an important day for us.

That's one of the reasons why we have dressed up in traditional academic regalia. This ceremonial ritual is designed to impress upon you that today is a serious occasion. You are about to embark on a journey—on the quest for knowledge and for a greater understanding of the human condition. It is a quest for truth.

Another reason that we take the time to put on these robes and these unusual hats is to remind us of our obligation to educate and to inspire you. We take this responsibility seriously.

I suspect that the next time you will see us dressed up in academic regalia will be at your commencement—when we hand you the diploma that you will have earned through your hard work and determination. And that goal—that overarching objective—is what I will talk about for just a few minutes this afternoon.

I want to make three points.

First, you have been admitted to Ball State because we are confident that you have the ability to succeed here. You have the intelligence and drive to graduate in four years.

Second, all of the faculty and staff at our University are committed to helping you achieve this goal. That's why we're here.

Third, on your path from orientation to commencement, you will have opportunities to help other students succeed. You should embrace this opportunity. It's not a burden. It's a blessing.

I want to illustrate these points by referring to two books that I read some time ago.

The first book is "The Paper Chase." It was written in the 1970's. It's a novel about first-year law students at Harvard University. It was made into a movie. When I went to law school in the 1980's, every law student that I knew had either read the book or seen the movie—or both.

There were a couple very memorable scenes. For example, the movie begins with a scene from the first day of class. The gruff, sarcastic professor, Professor Kingsfield, interrogates an unprepared student so harshly that, after the class is over, the student runs into the bathroom and gets sick to his stomach.

A few weeks later, in another scene in the same class, the student—Mr. Hart—says something inappropriate—something snarky—to Professor Kingsfield. So, the professor summons him to the front of the class and gives him a dime and says, "Mr. Hart, take this dime. Call your mother. Tell her that you are not going to become a lawyer."

Although this book and this novel were just fiction, the culture and environment that they depict are grounded in reality.

At the orientation at Harvard Law School, at a program like this one, the dean would routinely tell the new students, "Look to your left. Look to your right. One of you three will not be here next year." The message was that the program was so rigorous—perhaps unnecessarily so—that one out of every three students would flunk out after the first year. And the dean was proud of that fact.

Well, that is not the reputation that we cherish at Ball State University.

To the contrary, we are committed to the success of all of our students—to all of you. Our academic programs are rigorous and demanding. We will challenge you to exceed even your own expectations.

But you would not be here today if we were not completely confident that you can succeed. And there are hundreds of faculty and staff who are dedicated to your success. We measure our success by your success.

The second book is "Into Thin Air." This non-fiction book is about a group of men who attempted to climb Mt. Everest in the 1990's. As they approached the summit of the tallest mountain on Earth, they were overwhelmed by a tremendous snow storm. The book recounts their extraordinary efforts to survive. Some lived. Eight died.

Failure—and even death—are not uncommon on Mt. Everest. In fact, every year several hundred people try to climb to the summit. But only 30% succeed. That means that, for every 100 people who set out for the summit each year, only 30 make it to the top.

And many people who attempt to reach the top of Mt. Everest don't even survive. Here's a sobering statistic: for every year 100 people who attempt to climb Mt. Everest, two or three

people die trying. Some years are worse than others. For example, in 2015, 18 people died climbing Mt. Everest.

The last few thousand feet of the climb is called “The Dead Zone.” The air is so thin and the oxygen is so scarce, that it’s extremely difficult to survive at that altitude for very long. So, climbers must ascend to the top and then descend very quickly. If you don’t get up and down through that treacherous stretch quickly enough, you’ll die.

Here’s a more sobering point. The climb is so dangerous that some climbers will pass by other people who are struggling to survive. Rather than help the people who are on the brink of death, these climbers will keep going in order to achieve their own dream—even though their actions prevent them from saving the life of another human being.

But not everyone who attempts to climb this tall mountain is so consumed by their own ambition. For example, in 2001 an expedition led by Eric Simonson abandoned their goal in order to save the lives of a group of stranded climbers. Although Simonson’s team failed to reach their ultimate objective, they received international acclaim for their heroic efforts.

So, by now, you’re probably asking yourself, “Why is he telling us this?”

Here’s why.

During the next four years, some of the students in this auditorium will need help—they will need your help. And you will be faced with a choice: Do I ignore their needs, so that I can focus on my own personal goal? Or do I provide them with support—with some assistance and with some encouragement?

On the way to your personal goals, here at Ball State and during the rest of your lives, what choice will you make? What choice will you make?

And here’s where I will offer some advice.

The decision to help another student will not compromise your ability to succeed—to graduate. To the contrary, it will increase your chances of success.

As I said, helping others in life is not a burden. It’s a blessing—it’s a blessing—to you.

So, if I were to ask you today to look to your left and look to your right, I would urge you to say to your neighbor, “Let’s travel this journey together. Together.”

One final thought. As you pursue your professional aspirations after you graduate, you will come to realize that serving other people ensures that you will have both a successful career and that you will lead a meaningful life. Please share your good fortune with others who need you.

Good luck.