

2020

## 2020 Outstanding Graduate Student Commencement Speech

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## 2020 Commencement Speech

Joshua Hodney, Western Oregon University

Commencement speech. Outstanding Graduate Student Award.

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To my fellow Class of 2020 Graduates, friends and family, and the rest of the WOU Community, I am honored to share today with you, even if it is not in-person on a beautiful June day in Monmouth.

This has not been a traditional year, and certainly not a traditional graduation. The past few months have been understandably focused on the COVID-19 pandemic: the lives lost, and lives changed. People have lost their jobs, and the wisdom of social distancing for public health has also led to stress in how we as people interact and connect with those we care about. It affected today's celebration, as we are unable to participate in a traditional commencement. That might also be lucky for you, because giving this speech in-person might have led me to pass out from stage fright.

2020 might have changed things. But change does not always have to be an obstacle or continued fear that limits us. Previous generations have been looked up to by those who followed, not because of what they did when things were easy, but when terrible events tested their resolve.

I have never publicly shared the following part of my life, but it seems like 2020 has put us in situations where sharing more of ourselves can help shed light on others. When I was 17, I had a severe injury to my neck and back which caused continued neurological damage and a depleted immune system that led me to slowly withdraw from people over the years. It changed me, but not for the better. It took my amazing family and doctors to help me eventually stabilize my condition, and while I will never regain my former strength and energy, I am able to have a life again with the people I love. Life did not "return to normal", and I am thankful for that. Going through years of pain and eventual recovery led me to value things and people more. Learning how to say "no" means that when I say "yes" it is because I am invested, it

matters. Not being able to rely on my body has meant that I must work harder for everything I do. But this has also meant that everything I accomplish means more to me, because it was hard. Ellen DeGeneres once said "It was so important for me to lose everything because I found what the most important thing is. The most important thing is to be true to yourself." There are times that I wonder what would have happened if some of my dreams had not ended because of my body betraying me. Those old dreams died, but losing them helped me to become a better me, and to dream new dreams.

Confucius said, "Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." I got back up again, over and over, and I pushed myself to become better. I met Kelley, my amazing best friend, and married her two years ago, and we had our son Luke at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. I went back to school. Earned my associates, my bachelor's, and now my master's degree. Each one was a battle, and each one meant more to me because of what I went through to get here. Somehow, I was selected to speak with all of you today. You have all gone through battles and overcome them. COVID-19 has changed us, and yet you are still here. You are a better "you" for going through all of this. We have lost people and dreams during this darkness, but the darkness is when your best comes out. It is not when things are easy that we have the chance to see you at your most compassionate, creative, your best self. It is when things are difficult that we need you to be your best. To the Class of 2020, and all those celebrating with us, you are resilient. I am honored to celebrate today with you as we become better versions of ourselves.