

Commencement Remarks  
Will McCormack, Class of 1996

President Berger-Sweeney, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, devoted parents and friends, and other distinguished guests. Greetings and congratulations to the Class of 2020, as we celebrate your Commencement at the 2022 Reunion. Finally! It's about damn time! You guys, we are doing this! Sort of ... two years later! At a Reunion? It's totally legitimate! Kind of?

It is genuinely humbling to share this day with you. This is a unique ceremony, and I'm truly honored to be a part of it. Last year, I was thrilled to have been invited to breakfast with President Berger-Sweeney. Breakfast with JBS? That's a *hell* yes! But when she suddenly asked me to be the Commencement speaker, I said, "Me? You want me?" Then, a paltry ... "Okay." I was touched. But more than that, I was totally surprised. As probably anyone from the Class of '96 might be. "Man, they got McCormack? A lotttta people were unavailable, huh?" A confession. Originally, I thought I was the Commencement speaker for the Class of 2022. Then I realized it was the Commencement address to the Class of 2020 ... at the 2022 Reunion? Is that slightly ... less distinguished? As Larry David might say, "It's a little different. You asked me to give a Commencement address, but at a Reunion. It's not quite the same thing." But the more I thought about it, the more I felt right for the job. This is even better than a Commencement address at a Commencement ceremony, which is so ... predictable. Basic. In fact, screw the Class of 2022. 2020, this is your day. No one deserves it more than you. Let's keep it real ... you never thought you would have a Commencement ceremony at a Reunion, and I never dreamt I would be a Commencement speaker at a Reunion or otherwise.

I unabashedly love Trinity. I am the youngest of three children, and we all graduated from this great college. My sister Mary, Class of '91, is a famous actress; my sister Bridget, Class of '89, is the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Michigan. In fact, Bridget gave the Commencement address here to the Class of 2013. When I told Bridget that I was giving the address, she said, "Oof. Good luck. Commencement speech. Tough genre. What can you say that hasn't already been said?" (Nothin' like a big-sister pep talk.) For the record, I watched her address on YouTube. When you find yourself totally disappointed with mine, I recommend it. Bridget's speech was about sacrifice, mainly. Whatever. Um, no. It was brilliant. But ... what can I tell you here that hasn't already been said? What do I know that you don't? Not a ton, to be honest. I want to avoid a theme. That feels trite and played, and 2020 keeps it real. I do know this, and it's important to me and may be useful to you. It's a simple doctrine by which I live. First, above all, family comes first. (Unless the Knicks are in the playoffs, in which case family comes a very close second. Like super close.) Seriously, though, family is sacred. For me, the next most important thing after family is my work. And my work is storytelling. Which is also sacred. And as I thought more about storytelling and life, one thing kept popping up. One element essential to both. And if you can surrender to it, and embrace it, your stories will be better and your life will be richer. And that is the element of surprise. American researcher, author, and heroine of mine and millions Brené Brown defines "surprise" as this:

*An interruption caused by information that doesn't fit with our current understanding or expectations. It causes us to reevaluate. We can think of surprise as a bridge between cognition and emotion. A bridge between thinking and feeling, but it's a short bridge. Surprise is the shortest duration emotion, rarely lasting more than a few seconds. Surprise amplifies subsequent emotion.*

As a little boy growing up in New Jersey, I devoured stories. All kinds. I wrote them, too. When I was 6, I wrote a poem that won a poetry contest in the local paper. In it, a dragon killed my mother, and then I killed the dragon. Oedipal, murderous, vengeful. I was destined for Hollywood. But I didn't think storytelling was an actual career. We didn't know anyone in show business. But I knew this: man, I loved movies. I rode my BMX bike to Video Den every day after school to rent VHS tapes. Ask your parents what those are. The world of movies was a world I wanted to escape into. It was easier for me to be in the world of stories than it was for me to be in this world. At a very young age, I felt an enormous pressure to one day be successful. To be "somebody." To make it. I don't know why really. But I knew that I had to. Maybe you feel that way today. How can I make a difference? What do I have to say? Who will I fall in love with? How does this thing turn out? Which "dragon" will I have to kill?

A plot twist when I was 12: I broke into an older kid's party and stole a six-pack of Bartles and Jaymes wine coolers. (When you're asking your parents about VHS, ask them about wine coolers, too.) I snuck off into the woods alone and drank all of them. I blacked out and threw up. When I woke up, I was surprised by my reaction. I couldn't wait to do it again. And I did. At age 12, I became an alcoholic. That's right. I was an alcoholic tween.

12 years old. A cinephile and an alcoholic. It was dire. Thank God for my older sisters. I idolized them. They were superheroes to me. And because they went to Trinity, I went to Trinity. And when I got here, I nearly failed out. Too many wine coolers. One day, playing Frisbee on the quad, again, my friend told me he was going to the arts center to audition for a play. He asked if I wanted to come and then hurled the Frisbee toward the arts center. I found myself auditioning for Florizel in Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, holding that Frisbee. I got the part. Walking offstage after the first performance, I couldn't remember a single moment from the play, except the feeling afterwards. Pure joy and connection. I don't know if I was any good or not, but the feeling was beyond good or bad. It was invaluable. I felt like *me*. And there is no better feeling in the world than that. To hear your own voice and believe the sound. I don't know if this is or was hard for you. But it was hard for me. In a moment, I knew, at age 19, that I would devote my life to storytelling. I didn't know how, but I knew why. I believed stories mattered. For the philosophy majors, it was Eudaimonic, I felt I could live a good life in accordance with character and virtue. Trinity College nurtured and championed this passion for story. I did every single play I could. I worked at Cinestudio and saw every single film.

I moved to N.Y.C. to be an actor, and I was surprised to find it's not easy. But I had some success. On TV, I played Dr. Melfi's son on *The Sopranos*. On film, I played a cowboy in a western with Colin Farrell. They asked me at the audition if I knew how to ride a horse. Having grown up in New Jersey and worked at Foot Locker, I had never seen a horse, so I said ... ya know ... "Sure." When I got to set in Texas, I begged them to give me the oldest, slowest horse on the range. Up walked an old beauty named Beavis. I prayed I wouldn't fall off. I never did. I loved that horse. On stage in N.Y.C., I even did a play where I received anal sex from a puppet. Ya know, like you do. Of all the people in the audience I think my parents were the most surprised. (Brené Brown would've been proud.)

There also happens to be thousands of bars in New York City. And, as I felt the mounting pressure to be successful, I tried to get drunk in all of them, to make that feeling go away.

I lived in Chelsea with a French girlfriend. We had a crystal clear, unobstructed view south of the Twin Towers. We'd drink Pernod on the roof every night and talk about who we wanted to be. Mainly, we'd stare and just marvel at the World Trade Center and laugh. It was so beautiful, so preposterously big, so majestic. On September 10, 2001, I was working at a bar and stayed late with a few other drunks. I stumbled home as the sun came up. My girlfriend woke me up and said, "You should go up to the roof." I did, and then they fell, and the whole world changed.

Our friend, Scott Johnson, Trinity College Class of '97, worked in 2 World Trade Center. He died that morning. Try to find someone as kind as Scott. I dare you. Everyone loved him. Everyone. There I was, still drunk on a rooftop, alive, and he was at work ... and then he was gone. Life is not and never will be fair. I was surprised to know in an instant how cruel life could be. And moved to see how big-hearted N.Y.C. was in the aftermath. Ordinary people showing extraordinary courage and tenderness and strength in the face of incomprehensible tragedy.

I moved to Hollywood, and my drinking got worse. And worse. Initially, I drank because it was fun. And then it stopped being fun. And then I couldn't stop. I was scared. My life was out of control. I walked into an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and I heard, "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable." I sobbed. For me, it was really admitting that I had a problem; the admission dispelled the shame. I was surprised and overjoyed to receive grace and compassion and understanding from a group of strangers, all because they shared that feeling of despair and hopelessness. When I got sober, I decided to start writing and stop *talking* about writing. I was going to write like I drank. With reckless abandon. And I wasn't going to stop until I sold something. And I did. I sold several TV shows and films; I got hired to write *Toy Story 4* at Pixar, where I learned rules for storytelling that became profound lessons for life.

You admire a character more for trying than for their successes.

Why must you tell this story?

If you don't care about your story, your audience won't either. It has to burn inside of you.

At Pixar, we were taught that you admire a character for his strengths, but you fall in love with them for their weaknesses. When I met my wife, this story maxim was helpful. Because we were able to share our vulnerabilities with each other. The not-so-shiny bits. I hope you fall in love. When you do, you'll know. Because they will love you for your weaknesses, too.

I've studied how stories work and tried to dissect them to understand them. But the best moments of your story are when you don't know what will happen next. The part you didn't plan. The moment you find yourself *lost*. Have the courage to step into that moment. That's the moment of the story and life, when we get to be brave and human.

My whole life I was dying to be successful, but when my son was born, I realized, that's not what I actually wanted. I wanted to be a father. When I saw him for the very first time, I was stunned. I knew we had known each other forever, we had just never met in person, in this lifetime. I actually said out loud, "Oh ... it's you?!" My whole life I had been a pretty devout agnostic. In an instant, I believed in God and reincarnation. And then the nurse handed him to me. My whole life I thought I

knew what my arms were for. I didn't. I was surprised and overjoyed to learn that my arms were—actually—for holding him.

Ever since, I don't go to story to escape from the world, I go to story to try to *understand* the world. I've always been obsessed with grief and loss and how people endure and survive it. As a father, I can't fathom losing a child, and it happens so frequently in America, most commonly, maddeningly, with gun violence as the culprit. I wanted to try to make art about ... that, because, that's my job. My friend Michael and I wrote a script about parents grieving the death of their daughter who dies in a school shooting. We pasted a proverb to our office wall that read, "When a parent dies, you bury them in the ground. When a child dies, you bury them in your heart." We spent one year on a 12-page script. We titled the film "If anything happens I love you," which is an all-too common message that children text their parents during active school shootings. We talked to several parents who had lost kids, including Trinity graduate Nicole Hockley, whose son Dylan was murdered in the shooting at Sandy Hook. I was so moved by her courage and the battle she wages daily to end this infuriating, senseless, recursive tragedy. She is the embodiment of action as the antidote to despair.

We made a powerful film. And exactly *no one* wanted it. Everyone said it was too sad, that no one wanted that type of animation. Every single studio passed. Suddenly, with a stroke of luck, Netflix picked up the film. It became the number one film in the world in 16 countries. It was a viral TikTok challenge with over 70 million views. Not surprisingly, the people who rejected it were middle-aged. It was young people who showed up for the movie, unafraid to feel the feelings. Kids keep getting shot in schools, and no one does anything. The movie struck a chord, it became an international sensation, and I thought maybe we made some type of difference.

The film won the Academy Award. Oh, one bit of advice: if you get a chance to win the Academy Award, you *should*. It's super cool. But not for the reasons I thought it would be. After the ceremony, I looked at my phone, and I had hundreds and hundreds of texts and videos of people congratulating me and watching us win. Teachers and old classmates and teammates, so many people along the way had supported me and loved me. I felt so connected, so grateful, so rich in spirit.

And then Uvalde. Just a few weeks ago. Again. 21 people dead, 19 children. Unbearable pain and anger. Do stories matter? Does anything matter? Yes. Stories matter more, everything matters more. Kids cannot and will not die in vain.

As much as I am saddened by how cruel and senseless the world can be, I'm still more surprised and buoyed by how human and courageous it can be in the response. Unfairly, we have thrust this grave responsibility on your generation, but you are built for it.

Remember, follow the Frisbee. When you hear the sound of your own voice and believe it, pay attention to that. People will admire you more for trying than for your successes. And this is going to be hard to believe; I wouldn't have when I was your age. I swear to God it's true: 98 percent of people don't know what they're doing; they just ... figure it out. So, if they ask if you know how to ride a horse, say yes. If they tell you to have sex with puppets in front of hundreds of people including your parents, ask them *where* and *when*. (Just make sure it's consensual and protected.) And when you need help, ask for it. Be open to the kindness of strangers. *Be* that kind stranger. Oh, and if I can give the Commencement address here, I guarantee you can, too.

I said there would be no theme. Sorry, there is, it's *surprise*.

Who am I, though, to tell you about surprise? You're the Class of 2020, for God's sake. Even before COVID-19, you came of age at a time of unpredictability. You were in day care and pre-K on 9/11. Your childhoods have been marred by school shootings and catastrophic climate change. Your freshman year at college began with the election of Donald Trump, and your senior year ended with a global health crisis. You've been through a lot. A whole hell of a lot. I admire you. By all means, work hard, take risks, change the world. There is a catastrophic climate crisis. Women are being stripped of their fundamental right to choose, racism is rampant, American gun violence is quotidian, the list goes on ... But I would also encourage you, when you meet the unexpected, when *an interruption caused by information that doesn't fit with our current understanding or expectations*, that you rise to the moment, *surprise amplifies subsequent emotion*, how will you respond? When tragedy strikes, will you show courage and compassion and resilience? When joy meets you, will you seize it and amplify it? These are the moments in life that make one successful. Not what you do, but who you are. You're inheriting a world that needs you, one that cannot afford or survive cynicism. You're the Class of 2020. You have an asterisk, but your asterisk makes you beautiful. You're original. You're unexpected. You're strong. You know what it's like to get knocked down and get up again. We'll graduate at a goddamn Reunion, whatever it takes. To paraphrase St. Francis, *when you encounter hatred, surprise them with love. Injury, surprise them with pardon, when there is despair, surprise them with hope, where there is darkness, surprise them with light, and where there is sadness, surprise them joy.*

Congratulations to the Class of 2020 at the 2022 Reunion. You are—right this moment, today, tomorrow, and every day after that—walking into your life, the biggest surprise party of all. An unexpected, brutal, astonishing, and beautiful thing.

We love you. We believe in you. Good luck.