



The University of Vermont

Congratulations, Catamounts of the Class of 2020, and welcome home! You have navigated a most unusual and challenging time in your last semester at UVM and since, and have every reason to be immensely proud of your achievements. Today, you've shown how important UVM and your faculty and classmates are to you by returning to Burlington for some "unfinished business" – your graduation! Well, UVM is here for you today and will be here for you always.

It's been a time through which we have lost loved ones and friends to the pandemic, families have faced financial hardship, social interaction has been severely curtailed in the interest of public health, and wave after wave of disturbing national events have tested our faith in humanity. It's an understatement to say this hasn't been easy on anyone.

During the spring semester of 2020, you sacrificed to keep one another safe, helping find a way to not only complete your programs at UVM and make it successfully through that year but to also pave the way for our return to a near-normal semester this fall. With your concern for those around you and your cooperation, you already paid it forward. And you set an example for us all and for Catamounts who have come after you.

So, yes, let us celebrate. It's an unusual and long-delayed time to hold an in-person commencement, but it is a good and right time to celebrate. Our graduates and their families have a lot to be proud of. There is a sense of relief and a sense of accomplishment against the odds. For this, I salute you.

There is another group I'd like to salute: all those people who encouraged and supported you during your years at UVM. I seek your indulgence as I pause and ask the families, loved ones and friends of our graduates – here and watching from afar – to rise and be recognized. Thank you!

But, as I said in May to your fellow Catamounts in the Class of 2021, let us now also offer up a prayer for those places in the US and abroad where the virus still rages and where incredible suffering and loss of life continue, the likes of which has not been seen in generations.

I ask for us, therefore, to celebrate today in a spirit of humility and compassion. Humility in the awareness that we cannot know everything, or be right all the time. And compassion in the understanding that behind every mask, there is a face, and behind every face, there is a story that deserves to be heard and understood if possible, but respected at least. Let's rededicate ourselves to doing our part in building a safer community, a healthier society, a healthy environment, and a more optimistic world.

The world needs you. On so many fronts – whether it be to recover from what the pandemic has wrought, social and racial justice that has been long in coming, climate change that is ever more imminent, or even the very idea and practice of democracy itself that is under threat – yes, the world needs every one of you. At the same time, working towards solutions has been rendered harder as we have increasingly retreated to our poles and into our own echo chambers, to the detriment of civil discourse and open exchange of ideas.

You can change the world, bit by bit, but only if you – we – listen to each other, truly listen, and do so in a healing spirit of compassion, and with humility.

And I am confident a University of Vermont education has prepared you to contribute richly. You have learnt much during your years – in your classrooms and laboratories, in your field experiences, in your internships, in your interactions with your friends, and most importantly, from your unique personal journeys. So, apply your inquisitive minds, your belief in scientific and technological advancements, your grounding in a well-rounded liberal education, and your innovative approaches to solving the increasingly complex problems the world is facing.

I couldn't be happier to share this special commencement day at UVM with you, the intrepid and resilient Class of 2020. I have no doubt of the meaningful contributions you will make in the world, making your *alma mater* proud. You have my respect, my confidence, and my very best wishes, today and always!