

# "The Element of Surprise"

Grace Elizabeth Phillips '21 - Class of 2021 Senior Address  
Hanover College 188th Commencement – May 29, 2021

When I was little, my father told me a story. In this story, there's a group of cattle and a group of buffalo, and coming over the horizon is a huge storm. Dark clouds, lightning, thunder, the whole nine yards. Now, the group of cattle run away from the storm when they see it approaching. They run for as long and as far and as fast as they can, and for awhile they're able to outrun the storm, but it eventually catches up and overtakes them. The buffalo on the other hand, they run towards the storm. They barrel into the danger headfirst, and come out the other side.

Class of 2021, we are no strangers to storms. We have survived a campus-wide blackout. We have faced a global pandemic for not just the end of our junior year, but the entirety of our senior year and onward. We have stood up to the injustice and inequality that is waiting right in our own backyard. There were moments during my time at Hanover – during this past year especially – that



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I did not think I would reach this point, and I am confident that feeling is shared by my peers. This was not an easy year, nor was our time at Hanover as a whole a walk in the park. We come to college with certain expectations. We don't expect to be surprised, or perhaps a more accurate term is completely blindsided by these moments during our Hanover career that turned everything we knew, everything that was familiar to us, on its head.

I think back to the power blackout during our sophomore year. As the power went out across campus, students were displaced and sent home as temperatures dropped below freezing and campus buildings were left without light or heat. I remember all of us packed into the Campus Center like sardines during dinner hour, the only place that had power and heat return quickly. It was the most students I had ever seen crammed into the CC at once. I remember thinking to myself, "How are all of us going to get through this?" I expected to see people elbowing their way to the front of the line, getting the things they needed to meet their needs first. What I didn't expect to see was a group of football players from my class standing at the front of the herd, grabbing drinks and food and passing them back, making sure everyone who couldn't get to the front was able to get what they needed. That's the first time I remember the Class of 2021 surprising me.

We have too often viewed ourselves as units, separate entities that survive only as ourselves, not as parts of a whole. Hanover is unique in the sense that it is such a small institution, we have the ability to get to know one another more intimately than our peers at bigger schools with massive lecture halls, but we all too often don't take that opportunity. I sat next to the same boy in almost every class for my Communication major, and it took me until the end of my junior year to realize he lived two blocks away from me. I found myself missing him, as a remote student, and wondered who sat by him in class these days, or if he's even there in person. How surprising is it to find out

that the people we see as just classmates can be closer to us, can occupy more of our minds, than we ever could have imagined?

In 2020, campus stood still. In the spring, we lost the end of our junior year to the global pandemic. What we thought was just going to be an extended summer vacation turned into a beast, a lurking, looming threat that hung over us and hangs over us still. In the summer, campus was silent, but our voices were not. I remember seeing classmates who in the past just sat quietly in the back suddenly shouting at the top of their lungs, going to rallies, and demanding justice for black lives. Classmates who I never gave a second thought to suddenly standing up for what they believed in. We possess the element of surprise, holding others and ourselves accountable, and taking lessons learned at Hanover to grow and adapt in a brave new world, one where we don't leave our peers behind, and we stand up and fight when we must. In the face of injustice, we have risen to face it. We formed peaceful counter-protests against the KKK when they came to Madison, we formed and joined rallies with the rest of campus for black lives, for Asian lives, for human lives lost to senseless violence. Our Unity Fest each year celebrates our differences, and brings the entirety of campus together to celebrate what each of us brings to our collective table.

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In the fall, the start to what should have been our best year at Hanover, we faced another storm. The pandemic stole many things from us. It stole our precious final moments at Hanover, the small interactions with our classmates and professors. It robbed us of the smiles in passing and the simple act of standing near someone, the feeling of closeness. We lost loved ones. Friends. Acquaintances that used to be in the seat beside us, but suddenly March 2020 was the last time we ever saw their face. We have become more separated than ever before in this past year, but Class of 2021, it has also reminded us that we are part of a greater whole.

We wore masks to protect ourselves, yes, but also to protect those around us. We thought we were sacrificing our sense of community, but in reality we gained something beyond our sense of self. We gained unity. We found ways to host virtual study groups, virtual bingo nights, loving and supporting one another as we found joy in the time we had. We came together in new, creative ways to engage one another, to see ourselves beyond a pandemic. We remained the daydreamers, ever the optimists, turning words like "Goodbye" into "See you later."

We're tired, Class of 2021. I know we are. In a lot of ways, we are still young, far too young to be facing the storms we face, but young enough to want better for ourselves and for the world. We continue to surprise those who have come before us with our resilience, with our desire to change the status quo, and with our spirit. Our generation has faced incredible storms, storms that herald change and conflict, but also bring growth in the aftermath. We surprise those who have come before us by refusing to submit to the familiar, and instead charge headfirst into the unknown.



Class of 2021, keep surprising people. Keep pressing on. Keep enduring. Keep looking into the eyes of your great expectations and instead, forge your own path. We have weathered every storm that was supposed to take us out. Every challenge, every expectation, every battle we have had to face, we emerge the other side stronger than ever before. Class of 2021, I challenge you to look not over your shoulder, afraid to face the next incoming storm, but instead, turn around and face it head on. Look towards the next greatest thing and understand that sometimes to reach it, we must first pass through

a storm. I have seen us come out the other side, time and time again. I have seen us surprise our parents, surprise our professors, and surprise ourselves. We made it to the finish line, despite everything working against us. Be thankful for your parents, for your professors, for the peers who lifted you up, for the friends who said "you got this" and brought you coffee before a final, for the friends who didn't get any sleep with you the night before comps, for the friends you only see through a screen these days. Hold on tight, because if we have learned anything this past year, it's that nothing is permanent. Nothing ever goes according to plan. Look around you. Look at how far we've come.

Whatever the future holds for us, Class of 2021, I invite us to remember the lessons we learned here. Remember every battle we faced, remember how it felt to run headfirst into the rain, into the thunder and lightning, and remember that we survived it together. Commencement, by definition, means the beginning. This is not the end, this is not us holding our breaths, trying to keep everything together for just a few minutes more until we're finished. This is the beginning, this is the starting line. This is the long-drawn heavy breath we take just before we start to run. This, class of 2021, is your moment.

There is a storm on the horizon, and we are ready for it. Onward.

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