

## GAIL MILLER

### SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

April 30, and May 1, 2021



President Wyatt, trustees, faculty, staff and most especially, Graduates, it's an honor to be invited to speak with you today and I'm happy to celebrate with you!

Graduating from college, especially following the 2020 Pandemic shutdown, is worthy of a grand celebration.

You have climbed a lot of mountains to arrive at this particular mountain top. So, in your honor, I've chosen to talk about mountains.

I grew up in a Salt Lake City neighborhood a few blocks north of temple square. My world as a child was very small, it covered about 6 square blocks and contained everything I needed: my schools, my church, the neighborhood grocery store and all of my friends.

The capitol building was to the east, the city center was to the south, the railroad tracks were to the west and to the north was Ensign Peak. Beyond Ensign Peak were some intriguing mountains and I often pondered what was on the other side? As a young teenager I decided to find out for myself and set out one day to climb the large peak that was visible from my front porch.

Believing that my journey to the top would be rewarded with glorious views and hoping I would be able to see forever once I reached the top, kept me motivated to climb for hours. It was challenging but I was exhilarated. The higher I went, the more excited I became. I had never climbed a mountain before, and I was looking forward to the view I would see on the other side.

Now, many years later I have a son and a grandson who are also drawn to the mountains.

My oldest son has climbed all 26 of the highest peaks in Utah. He completed that goal last year. He said the biggest lesson he learned on Mt. Nebo, the highest mountain in the Wasatch Range was that you just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other!

His son, my grandson, is more than a hiker, he is a climber. He climbs with ropes up the sheer rock faces of challenging cliffs and has convinced his wife to climb with him. I'm sure the views are breathtaking, but one mistake could be disastrous.

They have spent years training, practicing and preparing with proper equipment, detailed maps and a great deal of anticipation and excitement. Being unprepared is not an option for a successful climber.

Each year nearly 500 climbers attempt to the world's tallest mountain peak that tops out at just over 29,000 feet—Mount Everest. From 1922 to 2019 more than 300 people have lost their lives trying to reach its summit.

These climbers have to train, use quality gear, rely on support and Sherpas and learn to carefully adapt to the terrain and altitude. Even after all that, many of these climbers experience dehydration, altitude sickness, frostbite, hypothermia, hypoxia, and even earthquakes—yes, even earthquakes.

Jim Davidson, a noted climber, wrote about his experience on Mount Everest in a book called *The Next Everest* which was published just last week. He was one of the climbers who was on the mountain when a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal in 2015. He was fortunate to have survived but 17 other people perished on Everest that day. Needless to say, he wasn't able to continue to the summit, but was able to descend the mountain thinking he would never go back. But three years later he did go back and successfully reached the top.

When he was asked: Was it worth it?

He paused for a few seconds and then said . . . “Yes! And it was worth it, **not** because I stood on the summit, but **because I engaged with the challenge and followed it to the end.** Me standing on the summit certainly didn’t change the world, and I don’t even think it changed me very much, it was just a few fleeting minutes out of 35 years of mountaineering. I was only up there about 15 minutes max so why go through it? Well, I think it was taking that big challenge and trying to create myself into someone that can rise up to the challenge. That was the real benefit, not just standing on the summit. . . the real lesson that I learned . . .was picking that challenge and trying to rise up to it.”

To recap Jim’s advice: Whatever your challenge is, pick something that speaks to you and strive for it. And then craft yourself into becoming big enough to reach your goal.

Getting an education is a lot like being a mountain climber.

This journey that you have been on –that has brought you to this point-- has taken a great deal of time, effort and sacrifice. I’m sure climbing your mountain has not been easy.

Nor has it been for the faint of heart. Sometimes the path was clearly marked. At other times it was rocky, craggy and undefined. Sometimes you had to stand at a crossroad and decide which way to go. Or maybe you had to stop and rest for a while before moving on.

Each of you has chosen a challenge, a high goal, and crafted yourself into becoming big enough to reach it.

Today you are on top of your world! And you should be!

You’ve reached your summit. But where do you go from here?

Well, today you begin to make history.

So, for right now, enjoy your 15 minutes on this summit, because this is **not** the end of your journey. This is just the beginning.

Remember my story about hiking my first mountain and thinking I could see forever once I got to the top?

Well, I **could** see forever but what I saw was an endless range of more mountains and valleys.

I have to admit, in that moment I was disappointed. I thought I would be able to see all the way to the next state but what I did see was that the world was much bigger and much more complicated than my 6-foot square block neighborhood. I also began to understand that I could do and be whatever I decided to if I put my energy into the desired goal.

After all, I had just climbed my first mountain!

Mr. Rogers said, “Often when you think you are at the end of something, you’re at the beginning of something else”

This mountaintop you stand on today—allows **you** to see forever and now you have fresh choices to make.

This is the crest from which you will make those important decisions that will literally shape the future: yours, mine and quite possibly the future of the whole world.

There is nothing as constant as change and you can be the change you want the world to see.

You have important things to do—you are at a pivotal time in history. COVID has shown us new ways of doing things. It has shed new light on our challenges and exposed important changes that need to be made.

It’s unlikely we will ever go back to the “old ways” because our foundation has shifted. Life has experienced a great upheaval. Our country needs healing, social ills

need to be addressed in new ways, and we must continue to recover from the pandemic.

Every generation has had its challenges, but yours may be the most impactful yet. Are you ready, willing and able to address what comes next?

A butterfly emerges from its cocoon in the form of a completely new creature bringing peace, beauty and tranquility to the gardens it visits. Like the butterfly, you are emerging from college transformed and equipped to be the change the world needs. Just as the butterfly can't see its own wings, at this moment you may not be able to see the impact you'll have on those around you or recognize your own beauty or contributions, but the world will, and I believe your generation has been prepared for this time.

You are next in a long line of important history makers.

Like mountains, historic events are formed when there is a great upheaval, when people are stretched, and when new ideas and solutions are being formed.

We've recently experienced a great upheaval.

As a result, we're a little more cautious when we meet and greet others using fist and elbow bumps or a nod of the head instead of a handshake or an embrace. We treat diseases and infections more seriously and we're more willing to stay home to recover when we're sick.

Businesses have adapted from office work, to work from home scenarios. Children have been homeschooled right alongside working parents, and technology has advanced like lightning – "Zoom" is now a household word.

These are just a few of the groundworks for major history yet to be written, and you will be the authors.

In recapping a timeline of some of the major historical events I'm sure you'll recognize:

1. The Middle or Dark Ages with a lack of forward thinking, no cultural developments and a time of religious struggles.
2. The Renaissance which brought about the invention of the Gutenberg Printing Press, Agricultural innovations, and more people drawn to live in cities. Some of the world's most famous pieces of art were produced during the renaissance such as:

The Mona Lisa

The Last Supper

Statue of David and

The Birth of Venus

3. Jumping now to the Pandemic of 1918 – when the Spanish Flu killed 50 million people worldwide and brought about new public health policies, preventative medicine and expanded access to health care.
4. FDR's New Deal in the 1930s brought major changes to the way apartments were designed requiring them to have 3' hallways and separate bathrooms to reduce spread of disease in urban areas.
5. The Truman Era brought about the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the development of the Atomic Bomb, the first TV program broadcast in color, the desegregation of the military and an increase of married women in the workplace.
6. And the current era but certainly not the last, is the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic/social justice era that has brought about changes in many areas like Normalizing Working from home and work/life balance. Increased IT advancements, most notably– Zoom.  
Heath care innovations like as telehealth and precision medicine, a focus on mental health and wellbeing and a new emphasis on social justice, diversity and equality. From this vantage point, you will write the next chapter of

history.

During the course of your education, you have experienced tectonic movement in the form of challenges, opportunities and trials as well as successes and failures.

But like the events of the past, and similar to the ever-shifting events that will create your new mountain ranges, your charge now is to look outward and upward, to act with accountability to humankind. Beginning today, your life will no longer be just your own. You now belong to a family of leaders that will design and build the future.

Your influence will be impactful and lasting.

You can imagine and create wherever you want in the worlds of technology, art, science, architecture, social accountability and other fields that are not evident today but will surely be visible in time.

As you stand on the peak of your mountain and survey the landscape in this post-COVID era, may I suggest a few key areas of focus while you're defining your next adventure:

**Be kind.** Kindness creates permanent change for the better. Kindness is contagious, it draws people to you and works like a smile. When someone smiles at you, it's pretty hard not to smile back, so start your own "kindness" movement.

**Serve others.** Share what you have. Use your time, talents and resources to serve others- Lift someone who is down. Giving back and paying it forward will not only help those around you but will give you a new perspective. Service creates empathy and empathy shows love.

**Be civil.** Use good manners and be polite, even if you don't agree with someone. We're in serious need of civility right now. Civility can and will change the world for the better.

**Be courageous.** Let your courage drive out fear. If you let fear determine your actions, you will never know what you are capable of becoming. Fear is contagious but so is Courage . . .so choose courage. Look inward and face your challenges and trials and then have the courage to look outward and welcome the future.

**Be inclusive.** Embrace diversity – you will be surprised how this will make a difference. Let’s work to create a future of inclusion of everyone. Ideas are not proprietary, they are inclusive.

**Be Innovative and Flexible** in life and in your career – it’s imperative that you bend. If the world hadn’t responded to the challenges of COVID, more people would have lost their lives and livelihoods. Being innovative and flexible will prevent us from becoming stagnant.

**Be patient and forgiving.** Without patience and forgiveness, our relationships will wither.

**Keep money in perspective.** Use it to do good. Money doesn’t define who you are—but what you do with it does. So, work hard but don’t let riches be your driving motivator.

**Be grateful.** Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life and satisfies the soul.

**Be successful.** Success begets success. I believe success has at least three important components:

1. The depth of your relationship with a higher power.
2. The quality of your relationships with others.
3. Your stewardship over the gifts and resources with which you have been blessed.

WINSTON CHURCHILL said – “Difficulties mastered are opportunities won.”

I would like to encourage you to Lead with Love and Success Will Follow.

Remember, you can’t climb a mountain by sitting on the sidelines.



Thank you for the opportunity to join you on this most wonderful day! My best wishes to you in all you survey.

Congratulations!