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Commencement Speech
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Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

With Commencement today, we close our year of commemorating Harvard's 375th birthday. From an exuberant party for 18,000 in torrential rain and ankle-deep mud here in Tercentenary Theatre last fall to today's invocation of John Harvard's spirit still walking the Yard, we have celebrated this special year and this institution's singular and distinguished history. Founded by an act of the Great and General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, Harvard was the first college in the English colonies and is the oldest in what has become the United States. Harvard was already 140 years old when the nation was founded. There are few institutions in this country or even the world that can claim such longevity.

But what does such a claim mean? At a time when the buzzword of “innovation” is everywhere, when the allure of the new drives business, politics and society, what do we intend by our celebration of endurance and of history? Why do we see history as an essential part of our identity? Why is Harvard’s past an invaluable resource as we decide how to shape the future?

In a quite literal sense, history creates our identity – who we as Harvard actually are – and as a result who we aspire to be. We live in a community made up not just of the students, faculty and staff now here – or even the 300,000 Harvard alumni around the world. We are part of a community that extends across time as well as space. We acknowledge an indelible connection to those who have come before – predecessors both recent and remote who remind us of what is possible for us by their demonstration of what was possible for them.

Harvard’s history instills both expectations and responsibilities as it challenges us to inhabit this legacy. One cannot study philosophy here without sighting the ghosts of John Rawls, Willard Quine, Benjamin Peirce, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or William James.

One cannot study law without thinking of the 18 Harvard Law School alumni who have served as Supreme Court justices, including the 6 currently on the bench – not to mention the graduate in the White House and the seven presidents with Harvard degrees who have preceded him. Those who appear on Harvard stages surely imagine themselves as Jack Lemmon or Natalie Portman or Stockard Channing, directed by the equivalents of Peter Sellars, Diane Paulus, or Mira Nair. Or perhaps our aspiring actors see themselves in John Lithgow and Tommy Lee Jones, who returned together for Arts First weekend earlier this month to reminisce about their thespian adventures in Cambridge. And those seeking to change the world through technology are sure to reflect on Zuckerberg, Ballmer and Gates. In these domains and so many others, we have the privilege of living alongside a remarkable heritage of predecessors.

We have certainly not come to work and study here in Cambridge and Boston because of the weather – though this past winter suggests climate change may be altering that. We are drawn here because others before us have set a standard that extends across centuries in its power and its appeal. We think of ourselves in their

company; we seek to be worthy of that company, and to share our days with others similarly motivated and inspired. We want to contribute as they have contributed in every imaginable field. We want to know – to understand – societies, governments, eras, organizations, galaxies, works of art and literature, structures, circuits, diseases, cells. We want to make our lives matter. We want to improve the human condition and build a better world. We want Harvard to ask that of us, to expect that of us and to equip us to accomplish it.

History shapes our institutional ideals as well as our individual ambitions. Having a history diminishes the grip of the myopic present, helping us to see beyond its bounds, to transcend the immediate in search of the enduring. It challenges us to place our aspirations and responsibilities within the broadest context of understanding.

We expect the future to be as long as the past; we must act in ways that are not just about tomorrow – but about decades and even centuries to come. This means that we teach our students with the intention of shaping the whole of their lives as well as readying

them for what happens as soon as they leave our gates. This means that in the sciences – and beyond – we support research that is driven by curiosity, by the sheer desire to understand – at the same time that we pursue discoveries that have immediate measurable impact. And it means that we support fields of study – of languages, literatures, cultures – that are intended to locate us within traditions of reflection about the larger purposes of human existence, enabling us to look beyond ourselves and our own experience, to ask where we are going – not just how we get there.

Even in our professional schools, designed to educate students for specific vocations, we seek to instill the perspective that derives from the critical eye and the questioning mind; we charge our students to think about lasting value, not just quarterly returns.

These commitments shape our institutional identity – our discussions and decisions about what a university is and must be. As both higher education and the world have been transformed, Harvard has not just weathered the past 375 years. It has changed and flourished – from its origins as a small, local college designed to produce educated ministers and citizens, to its emergence as a

research university in the late 19th century, to its transformation into a national institution, and its development after World War II as an engine of scientific discovery and economic growth, as well as a force for significantly broadening social opportunity.

We are now in another moment of dramatic shift in higher education: globalization and technology are prominent among the forces that challenge us once again to examine how we do our work and how we define our aims. This year alone we have launched a new university-wide initiative to think in fresh ways about our methods of learning and teaching, a new university-wide Innovation Lab to help our students bring their ideas to life, and edX, a new partnership with MIT to embrace the promise of online learning for our students while sharing our knowledge more widely with the world.

As we reimagine ourselves for the 21st century, we recognize that history teaches us not just about continuity – what is important because it is enduring. History also teaches us about change. Harvard has survived and thrived by considering over and over again how its timeless and unwavering dedication to knowledge

and truth must be adapted to the demands of each new age. History encourages us to see contingency and opportunity by offering us the ability to imagine a different world.

Think of how Harvard changed as we came to recognize that our commitment to fulfilling human potential required us to open our gates more broadly. The continuity of our deepest values led us to the transformation of our practices – and of the characteristics of the students, faculty and staff who inhabit and embody Harvard. What was once unimaginable came to seem necessary and even inevitable as we extended the circle of inclusion and belonging to welcome minorities and women and in recent years to so significantly enhance support for students of limited financial means.

Our history provides “a compass to steer by” – to borrow a phrase from Massachusetts Bay Governor John Winthrop. It fills us with confidence in our purposes and in our ability to surmount the risks of uncharted seas. With the strength of our past, we welcome these unknowns and the opportunities they offer as we reimagine Harvard for its next 375 years. For nearly four centuries now,

Harvard has been inventing the future. History is where the future begins.