

President Drew Gilpin Faust

Commencement Remarks

May 28, 2015 As delivered

Welcome to the 146th Annual Meeting of the Harvard Alumni Association at the 364th Commencement of Harvard University. It's a particular pleasure to welcome former Governor Deval Patrick of the College Class of 1978 and the Harvard Law School Class of 1982. Throughout his distinguished career in government, he forcefully argued for the power of education to transform lives. Nothing made that case more persuasively than his own remarkable life—from Chicago's South Side to the Massachusetts State House. When he was sworn in as Governor, he took the oath of office with the Mendi Bible, presented in 1841 by the African captives who had seized the slave ship *Amistad* to

the man who had won their legal right to freedom, John Quincy Adams. Governor Patrick can claim connection with both the African heritage of the Amistad rebels and the institutional roots of their defender. Adams, as you heard before from [Harvard Alumni Association] president [Cynthia] Torres, was a member of the Harvard Class of 1787, and was both the first president of this alumni association, and the son of an earlier alumnus, John Adams, of the Class of 1755. That kind of continuity across the centuries is not the least of the reasons that we congregate here every spring to renew and reinforce our ties to this extraordinary place.

Let me start by noticing what is both obvious, and curious: We are here today together. We are here in association. It is an association of many people, and many generations. We celebrate a connection across time in these festival rites, singing our alma mater, adorning ourselves in medieval robes to mark the deep-rooted traditions of Harvard, and of

universities more generally. Even in the age of the online and the virtual, an institution has brought us together, and brings us back.

We have also sung—or rather the magnificent Renée Fleming has sung—“America the Beautiful,” to honor another institution, our democratic republic, which the men and women whose names are carved in stone in Memorial Church right behind me—and Memorial Hall just behind that—gave their lives to protect and uphold.

When the founders of the Massachusetts Bay colony arrived on these shores in 1630, they came as dissenters—rejecting institutions of their English homeland. But I have always found it striking that here in the wilderness, where mere survival was the foremost challenge, they so rapidly felt compelled to found this seat of learning so that New England, in the words of William Hubbard of the Class of 1642, “might be supplied with persons fit to manage the affairs of both church and state.” Church, state, and College. Three institutions they deemed

essential to this Massachusetts experiment. Three institutions to ensure that the colonists, as Governor John Winthrop urged, could be “knit together as one” in a new society in a brave new world.

Dozens of generations have come and gone since then, and the University’s footprint has expanded considerably beyond a small cluster of wooden buildings. But we have never lost faith in the capacity of each generation to build a better society than the one it was born into. We have never lost faith in the capacity of this college to help make that possible. As an early founder, Thomas Shepard put it, we hope to graduate into the world people who are “enlarged toward the country and the good of it.”

Yet now, nearly four centuries later, we find ourselves in a challenging historical moment. How do we “enlarge” our graduates in a way that benefits others as well? Shepard spoke of enlarging “toward”—toward, as he put it, “the country and the good of it.” Are we

succeeding in educating students oriented **toward** the betterment of others? Or have we all become so caught up in individual and personal achievements, opportunities, and appearances that we risk forgetting our **interdependence**, our **responsibilities** to one another and to the institutions meant to promote the common good?

This is the era of the selfie—and now the selfie stick. Don't get me wrong: There is much to love about selfies, and two years ago in my baccalaureate address I concluded by urging the graduates to send such pictures along so we could keep up with them in their post Harvard lives. But think for a moment about the larger implications of a society that goes through life taking its own picture. That seems to me a quite literal embodiment of “self-regarding”—a term not often used as a compliment. In fact, Merriam-Webster's dictionary offers “egocentric,” “narcissistic,” and “selfish” as synonyms. We direct endless attention to ourselves, our image, our “Likes,” just as we are encouraged—and in

fact encourage our students—to burnish resumes and fill first college and then job or graduate school applications with endless lists of achievements—with examples, to borrow Shepard’s language, of constant enlargements of self. As one social commentator has observed, we are ceaselessly at work building our own brands. We spend time looking at screens instead of one another. Large portions of our lives are hardly experienced: they are curated, shared, snapchatted and instagrammed—rendered as a kind of composite Selfie.

Now a certain amount of self-absorption is in our nature. As Harvard’s own E.O. Wilson has recently written, “we are an insatiably curious species—provided the subjects are our personal selves and people we know or would like to know.” But I want to underscore two troubling aspects of this obsession with ourselves.

The first is it undermines our sense of responsibility to others—the ethos of service at the heart of Thomas Shepard’s phrase describing Harvard’s enduring commitment to graduate citizens who are “enlarged” to be about more than themselves. Not just enlarged for their own sake and betterment—but enlarged **toward** others and toward the world. This is part of the essence of what this university has always strived to be. Our students and faculty have embodied that spirit through their work to serve in our neighborhood and around the world. From tutoring at the Harvard Ed Portal in Allston to working in Liberia to mitigate the Ebola crisis, they make a difference in the lives of countless individuals. The Dexter Gate across the Yard invites students to “Enter to grow in wisdom. Depart to serve better thy country and thy kind.” Today more than 6,500 graduates go forth. May each of them remember that it is in some way to serve.

There is yet another danger we should note as well. Self-absorption may obscure not only our **responsibilities** to others but our **dependence** upon them. And this is troubling for Harvard, for higher education, and for fundamental social institutions whose purposes and necessity we forget at our peril.

Why do we even need college, critics demand? Can't we do it all on our own? Peter Thiel, Silicon Valley entrepreneur, has urged students to drop out and has even subsidized them—including several of our undergraduates—to leave college and pursue their individual entrepreneurial dreams. After all, the logic goes, Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates dropped out and they seem to have done OK. Well, yes. But we should remember: Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg had Harvard to drop out of. Harvard to serve as the place where their world-changing discoveries were born. Harvard and institutions like it to train the physicists, mathematicians, computer scientists, business analysts,

lawyers, and thousands of other skilled individuals upon whom Facebook and Microsoft depend. Harvard to enlighten public servants to lead a country in which Facebook, Microsoft, and companies like them can thrive. Harvard to nurture the writers and filmmakers and journalists who create the storied “content” that gives the Internet its substance. And we must recognize as well that universities have served as sources of discoveries essential to the work of the companies advancing the revolutions in technology that have changed our lives—from early successes in creating and programming computers to development of prototypes that laid the groundwork for the now ubiquitous touchscreen.

We are told too that universities are about to be unbundled, disrupted by innovations that enable individuals to teach themselves, selecting from a buffet of massive open online courses and building DIY degrees. But online opportunities and residential learning are not at

odds; the former can strengthen—but does not supplant—the latter. And through initiatives like edX and Harvard X, we are sharing intellectual riches that are the creation of institutions of higher education with millions of people around the world. Intriguingly, we have found that a highly represented group among these online learners is teachers—who will use this knowledge to enrich their own schools and face-to-face classrooms.

Assertions about the irrelevance of universities are part of a broader and growing mistrust of institutions more generally, one fuelled by our intoxication with the power and charisma of the individual and the cult of celebrity. Government, business, non-profits are joined with universities as targets of suspicion and criticism.

There are few countervailing voices to remind us how institutions serve and support us. We tend to take what they do for granted. Your

food was safe; your blood test was reliable; your polling place was open; electricity was available when you flipped the switch. Your flight to Boston took off and landed according to rules and systems and organizations responsible for safe air travel. Just imagine a week or a month without this “civic infrastructure”—without the institutions that undergird our society and without the commitment to our interdependence that created these structures of commonality in the first place. Think of the countries in West Africa that lacked the public health systems to contain Ebola and the devastation that resulted. Contrast that with the network of institutions that so rapidly saved lives and contained any spread of the disease when it appeared in the United States. Think about the other elements of our civic infrastructure—the libraries, the museums, the school committees, the religious organizations that are as vital to moving us forward as are our roads and railways and bridges.

Institutions embody our present and enduring connections to one other. They bring our disparate talents and capacities to the pursuit of common purpose. At the same time, they link us to both what has come before and what will follow. They are repositories of values—values that precede, transcend, and outlast the self. They challenge us to look beyond the immediate, the instantly gratifying to think about the bigger picture, the longer run, the larger whole. They remind us that the world is only temporarily ours, that we are stewards entrusted with the past and responsible to the future. We are larger than ourselves and our selfies.

That responsibility is quintessentially the work of universities—calling upon our shared human heritage to invent a new future—the future that will be created by the thousands of graduates who leave here today. Our work is about that ongoing commitment—not to a single individual or even one generation or one era—but to a larger world and to the service of the age that is waiting before.

In 1884, my predecessor, Charles William Eliot, unveiled a statue of John Harvard and spoke of the good that could come from the study of what we might call the “enlarged” life of the man whose name this university bears.

Eliot said, “He will teach that the good which men do lives after them, fructified and multiplied beyond all power of measurement or computation. He will teach that from the seed which he planted ... have sprung joy, strength, and energy ever fresh, blooming year after year in this garden of learning, and flourishing ... as time goes on, in all fields of human activity.”

In other words, that statue we paraded past this afternoon is not simply a monument to an individual, but to a community and an institution constantly renewing itself. Your presence here today represents an act of connection and of affirmation of that community and of this institution. It is a recognition of Harvard's capacity to propel you towards lives and worlds beyond your own. I thank you for the commitment that brought you here today and for all it means and sustains. I wish you joy, strength, and energy ever fresh. Thank you very much.