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Address at Harvard University Commencement
Tercentenary Theatre
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As prepared for delivery

President Faust, Fellows of Harvard College, and Members of the Board of Overseers;

Provost Garber and Members of the Faculty and Staff;

Distinguished Guests and Members of the Reunion Classes;

Proud Families and Friends; and most especially

Deserving Graduates of the Class of 2015:

I'm deeply honored to be with you. I'm humbled in fact to be in the company of my fellow Honorands, today's and throughout this University's storied history. And I'm awed to be in the presence of all the brainpower and promise gathered here this afternoon.

But I am also a little intimidated.

Forty-one years ago, when I was a freshman in Holworthy, surrounded by my brilliant new classmates, I was convinced there would come a soft knock at the door one night from the Dean of

Admissions with the awkward news that my admission had been a mistake and that I should quietly gather my things.

I often feel that way in Cambridge, not just at this august institution.

I've spent the past semester as a Visiting Fellow at the Innovation Institute at MIT. While some of my vintage may still refer to MIT derisively as "that vocational school just down river," I met students there who were already dazzling Nobel laureates with their inventions – as teenagers!

Even campaigning for governor was a special challenge in Cambridge. I can't even count the number of times out on the trail when I was asked a policy question by someone who had already written a book on the subject.

I trace these feelings in part to the fact that as a kid Harvard was not part of my universe. I grew up on welfare on the South Side of Chicago and was the first in my family to go to college. When I told

my grandmother I had been admitted to Harvard, she screamed with pride and delight, then paused and asked, “Now, where is that anyway?”

That same grandmother would be proud today. She would react to the feelings I’ve described having when I’m in this rarefied community by smiling and saying, “it keeps you humble.” Of course, a Cantabridgian would more likely sniff and paraphrase Winston Churchill with the quip that “I have much to be humble about.”

All of which is to say to you graduates today that I know how gifted you are, how well-prepared you are, how high-achieving and sought-after you are. I know how confident you are in your talents and in your opinions. And I know the world needs much of what you have to offer. The world is indeed yours for the taking.

Even so, I want to urge you to be a little uneasy. I’m not talking about the kind of unease all new graduates feel about careers or money or romance. I’m not inviting you to feel envious of your classmates’ accomplishments or unworthy of your own. I’m talking

about the kind of unease that comes from being a little unsure that you already know all you need to know, the kind of restlessness that compels you to look beyond yourself for answers and meaning.

You graduates came to Harvard with big ideas and you leave with big capacities. But still, as my grandmother would say, what you don't know could fill a book. As far as you have journeyed to achieve today's milestone, your education is incomplete. Think of yourselves as educated more in the sense that Louis Pasteur described, as "learning to listen to anything, without losing your temper or your self-confidence." Because if you are listening, listening with unease, you will hear the yearnings of a restless world.

I'm not sure we were listening very closely to those yearnings when I was an undergraduate. In the mid-1970s, Harvard had just settled down from a long season of student unrest. A few years before, student protests over the Viet Nam War had rocked the campus, and women moving into the formerly-all-male River Houses had been a source of widespread upset. Only a few years before that, grandmothers and school kids, preachers and sharecroppers

had marched over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma to demand access to the ballot. In other words, on the eve of my arrival here, civil and human rights and issues of war and peace were matters of current events.

By the time I got to campus, students were comparatively complacent. Because we had missed all the fun, we occasionally acted out in offbeat ways. In Dunster House we got all exercised over the decision to stop serving hot breakfast in the dining hall. Cold cereal, fruit, yoghurt, pastries, juice, coffee – all this would be available every morning as usual. But if we wanted an egg, we'd have to walk a block to Leverett House. Outrageous! One spring morning we marched on Leverett, complete with banners, beating drums and scores of fellow students never before seen at breakfast time. We took to the streets over pancakes!

So, it's a marvelous improvement, in my view, to see students these days take to the streets over issues of real consequence.

In response to the yawning economic gap between the rich and the poor in this country, workers and students and many others set up tent camps on Wall Street and the Occupy Movement quickly spread to many other cities, including Boston.

The killings of unarmed black men by unaccountable police officers in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten Island, New York moved young people and many others to take to the streets to proclaim that Black Lives Matter.

The failure of national policy makers and citizens alike to reverse climate change compels students, faculty and alumni, on this campus and others, to ignite a new divestment movement.

Predictably, each of these actions has been criticized.

The Occupy Movement is faulted for having no agenda beyond discontent, for having called attention to the critical truth that social mobility – a central feature of the American idea – is disappearing without offering a solution.

The marchers under the banner of Black Lives Matter are faulted for similar shortcomings, for trying to shut down highway traffic instead of proposing specific programs and policies to help us heal the devastating lack of understanding between police and young black men.

Climate change activists are faulted for putting symbols above substance by demanding divestment in fossil fuel companies when this is widely believed to be unlikely to affect anybody's actual behavior.

I share some of those concerns and critiques. But I am also grateful that students today are putting far more important issues on the table than hot breakfast. Indeed I welcome the engagement of today's generation of activists and the heightened consciousness they have demanded of the rest of us. And I am hopeful that those in power will make more of the profound ends they seek than of the imperfect means of their protest.

Don't get me wrong. I hate mob behavior. I hate violence, of any kind. I don't want unrest in the streets. But I do want unrest in our hearts and minds. I do want us all to be uneasy about the grim realities of black men and families and the widespread nonchalance about poverty. I want us to be uneasy about the chronic desperation in communities some of us are just one generation away from living in, about the way we dehumanize the fellow souls we call "alien," about the carelessness with which we treat the planet itself. I want us to ask ourselves hard questions and to start asking our leaders hard questions about the state of the American Dream, why the poor are stuck in poverty and why the middle class are just one paycheck away from being poor. And I want us all to be a little uncomfortable about how few of our comforts we share.

I want us to be uneasy because if enough of us are uneasy, we might begin to feel some urgency about finding solutions to the things that make us so. I honor the work that many philanthropies and government programs and individual saints do to show compassion and kindness to others. As governor, I saw up close the practical impact that affordable housing or sentencing reform or a great

teacher has on an individual person, family or neighborhood. And if policy matters most where it touches people, maybe it's the point of individual contact that we should celebrate most. But somehow to settle for that is to make peace with large scale suffering, to accept the way things are as the way they ought to be.

To me, that seems fundamentally un-American.

This is the only Nation in human history organized around a set of civic aspirations. Not religion or language or geography or even a common culture, none of the things that normally organize a nation; but instead a handful of transcendent civic values. And we have defined those values over time and through struggle as freedom, equality, opportunity and fair play. These are the ties that bind us across time and all sorts of mostly superficial differences, and that have made America the envy of the world. As one great Israeli statesman puts it, "America is the only superpower whose power comes from giving, not from taking." Indeed, our greatest gift – to this poor black kid from Chicago and to strivers of every type and kind for generations – is a reason to hope.

In fits and starts through our history, those values have compelled us to reach higher, to do big things. I worry that as a Nation we are forgetting how.

Over 16 million of our neighbors and family members, who once couldn't, can now afford to see a doctor, thanks to the President's health care reforms; and yet we focus on the embarrassing fact that at the outset the website didn't work as if that discredits the objective itself. Our roads, rails and bridges are in a state of dangerous disrepair, needing years of focused work; and the best the Congress can muster is funding for 2 months before they leave on vacation. When President Faust called to invite me to address you this morning, she reminded me that from this very podium General George C. Marshall announced the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II. I wonder what reaction General Marshall's idea would elicit today. A collective groan? A wistful sigh? And yet across America and across the globe, big ideas are exactly what the world craves.

The graduates of this University are trained to think big. Will you be uneasy enough to act big? What will you do with what you know?

You know that the answer to chronic poverty is opportunity; that opportunity comes from an economy that grows out to the marginalized, not just up to the well-connected; and that economic growth of this kind requires a massive reinvestment of time, ideas and money – by industry and by government -- in schools, in infrastructure and in the innovation industries that are fueling the future.

You know that community policing, where police are of and in the communities they serve, is a strategy that makes us safer. And you also know that, whatever methods we pursue for better policing, race and racism is still too close to the surface of everything from commerce to the Twitter commentary about whom celebrities date. You know that what's happening in Ferguson or Baltimore is but the frayed edge of a neglect that is undermining our country, and that

declaring ourselves officially “race blind” or “post-racial” as a way to end division and discord is neither honest nor responsible.

You know that climate change is too serious a threat to human survival to tolerate anything less than an orderly and purposeful shift to a carbon-limited if not carbon-free economy. You also know that that requires a real plan with all players (yes, including Big Oil and Coal) at the table; and that the way to move us all together is to seize the countless opportunities to create wealth and jobs which such a transition has and will present.

Poverty. Racism. Climate change. Big, even daunting challenges. But every one is of our own making and surely therefore cannot be beyond our capacity to care about and to solve.

We have leaders here in this graduating class ready to chart a course to higher ground, ready to listen for the needs and the answers that are rising from community and to drive the innovations and make the sacrifices necessary to save our country and our kind. We need you, and we need you to be uneasy. We need uneasy

leaders who can get outside your own ambitions and think about the world's. We need uneasy leaders who won't let your ideals be casualties of your confrontations with reality, who refuse, as Dr. King said, "to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history." We need uneasy leaders, straining to hear the yearnings of the powerless as clearly as we do the expectations of the powerful, and willing to think and act big.

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I'm especially proud of the performance of Massachusetts students during my tenure as governor. I'm proud of the fact that not only did we fund the schools at record highs in each of the years I served, even during the global economic collapse; but our students ranked first in the Nation in student achievement each year and at or near the top in the world in math and science.

And yet for the nearly two decades we have been on our education reform journey, achievement gaps persisted. The kids stuck in those gaps are poor or kids with special needs or kids who

speak English as a second language. Of course, to have an achievement gap at all is an educational and an economic challenge; but to let it languish for as long as we had was, to my mind, a moral question. These are our kids, too. And that made us uneasy.

So we set to work on a big reform. And we faced all the predictable hurdles and naysayers. The charter advocates had one answer. The teachers unions had another. The business community had yet another. Parents in suburbs had one set of demands not always consistent with parents in cities. And so on and so on. In the end, we put the children first. We acknowledged that all children can learn and that all have their own ways of doing so. And ultimately we crafted a piece of legislation that provided new rules and tools to meet children where they are. It was a triumph of every interest group for the common interest. And slowly but demonstrably we are closing achievement gaps in Massachusetts public schools. What was the big idea: that no child's destiny should be defined by her zip code of birth.

I visited a school in Boston that was using all of these new tools. On every measure, in just a few years, that school had lifted itself from one of the worst in the City to one of the best in the state. Its students were proud of their achievements and purposeful about their future. You could see it not just in their test scores, but in their eyes, their posture, their attitudes. They have not yet overcome their poverty. They have steep hills yet to climb. But they will climb them because they have a reason to hope, and they are making the very best of it.

They, and children like them everywhere, are the reason your idealism matters.

I'm not asking you to live in a world of ideals alone. Idealism is no substitute for hard-headed problem solving. To make change you have to gain influence and use power, to develop policy and implement action plans, to be accountable. You have to organize. But ideals let us imagine big ideas. And you can't organize what you can't imagine.

So, I welcome you to a world of big needs, in search of big thinking and big actions. I welcome you to a world where a few will find countless reasons why you can't while countless masses silently pray you will. I welcome you to a world where great beauty and extraordinary kindness live side-by-side with unspeakable cruelty, suffering and neglect. And I challenge you to be so uneasy about that that you are compelled to ask who but you should act.

God bless you and good luck, Class of 2015. Thank you.