

Graduate English Address

“How to Be Bewildered at Harvard”

by

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How To Be Bewildered at Harvard

To get into Harvard's Widener library, you first climb a huge, imposing set of steps. After you do that and you finally enter our most monumental temple of learning, you see another imposing set of steps, and, if you're me, you pause—because you're winded. The whole ordeal feels like an architect's heavy-handed attempt to teach some life lesson like “Knowledge is hard.” Anyway, once you catch your breath, you climb the second set of steps to find, at the top, a Gutenberg Bible.

As you probably know, the Gutenberg Bible is the oldest example of a book made with a printing press, a revolutionary information technology. As you probably don't know, I *love* books. The most exciting part of coming to Harvard for me was getting the library card, because, if you love books, this is a good place to be. In fact, I'll tell you how big our collection is here: The librarians *aren't even sure* how many books we have that are bound in human skin. They think probably just one, but if you don't *know* how many human-bound books are in your library, you have a lot of books.

Of course, I don't only love the physical books—I love what's inside them. In particular, I love literature and sacred texts, like the Gutenberg Bible. So in order to study them, I came to Harvard Divinity School, which turns 200 this year. And I'm glad I did, because it is a magical, kooky place where the people are always friendly and often know a language you've never heard of and sometimes bump into you because they're doing walking meditation and no matter what you just said, it reminds someone of a line from the mystical poet Rumi.

Of course, every part of this university is special. Students from Harvard College and our various graduate and professional schools routinely become leaders in their

fields: Nobel-winning physicists, educators, billionaires, poets, politicians and on and on. Those books I love? Many of them were written by Harvard grads. And we create not just works of literature, but law books, music books, the account books of Fortune 500 companies. And quite a few former students have had history books written *about* them. For instance, presidents as politically different from one another as George W. Bush and Barack Obama both hold degrees from this university.

Regardless of your own political opinions, I think you'll agree that Harvard graduates have a habit of going on to matter to the world. For good and for ill, often at the same time. And that's where the divinity school comes in. Because, though it sits on the edge of campus, I believe it is the university's moral center. In the chemistry lab and the math department, the goal is to solve problems. In the divinity school, problems are wrestled with, but they are never vanquished. That's because some problems just come with being human, and they need to be confronted again by each generation. No new technology, no printing press or app, is going to settle the problem of greed, or death, or hate. And at the divinity school, we think about these problems, and about how people have dealt with them through the ages, and how to do what right we can in the face of all that's wrong.

As it happens, that reminds me of a line from Rumi. "Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment." Harvard graduates will change the world, one way or another, because we're clever. But we must be more than that. We must be willing to become bewildered: neither approaching a problem arrogantly, sure that we already know the answer, nor throwing up our hands and walking away. Becoming bewildered means

admitting some problems don't have quick fixes. It means learning from mistakes, learning from the other, learning what it is we can't learn.

And those are things Rumi can teach us about. Rumi, an immigrant from what is now Afghanistan to what is now Turkey, an immigrant from the 13th century to our own, a Muslim mystic. Rumi has something immensely valuable to tell us, but we have to listen really hard for it, with humility, and for the rest of our lives.

Be proud of what you've accomplished here, but know it's only the beginning. Earlier, I mentioned the lesson of the Widener steps. Well, after a few years here, I'm sure you'll agree that knowledge *is* hard. But wisdom is even harder. We'll need both out there, whatever our field of study, because this world is complex and contradictory, and if we're not bewildered sometimes, we're doing it wrong. But we'll go forth anyway, to change the world and also to be changed by it, to write our own books. Those books may be made of paper or published digitally, or what you leave behind may simply be the legacy of the acts that make up a life. Regardless of their form, your books will be good books if you are willing to be bewildered, if you take on this messy, tragic, lovely world and confront its problems in good faith.