

2010 Harvard College Class Day  
Wednesday, May 26, 2010  
Harvard Oration  
Text is as prepared for delivery

*In the place of the life that we leave*  
By Benjamin Schwartz

During my sophomore year, I stumbled across an ode that T.S. Eliot wrote for his Harvard graduation a little over a century ago. I reread it as the terrifying prospect of our commencement rapidly approached, finding that his words had taken on new meaning as I prepared to leave what's become the second home of my young life. Eliot wrote of his departure from Harvard College:

We turn as thy sons ever turn, in strength  
Of the hopes that thy blessings bestow.  
From the hopes and ambitions that sprang at thy feet  
To the thoughts of the past as we go.

I wondered as I read it what thoughts of the past might T.S. Eliot have carried with him of a Harvard so different from the one we've known. And my friends and I began asking how we'd remember our own time at Harvard, what of our Cambridge memories will cast that long shadow of our young selves across whatever futures await.

There is much to remember of the past four years, for these have been times of great change for Harvard and for ourselves. We've seen the inauguration of the University's first female president and the installment of the college's first black dean. We've learned that regardless of on contractual obligations, you should always have a barricade for a Girltalk concert. At Harvard we've been humbled by those first failures of our young lives and grown bold walking grounds once tread by greatness. We've come to know each other as only Harvard students can, forming bonds over scorpion bowls and scallion pancakes, strengthening our ties to each other in the hopes of early years.

Tomorrow when we graduate, these become things of our past; we're told it's time to move on. There's an anxiety in this change, a bitterness in leaving those who really knew us even as we came to know ourselves. For me, there's a fear that my memories might fade with time, that more than lunches or lectures I'd only remember the

feeling of Harvard— of sharing with friends the energy of limitless potential along with the sad wisdom that some day – very soon – our time together would come to an end. And hoping to find some wisdom in the words of former graduates, I broke a promise I'd made to myself the day I turned in my senior thesis – and I went back into a Harvard University library for one last time.

It was there I found were the letters of a lieutenant in the First World War, Calvin Wellington Day. At Harvard, he had been a graduate student of physics from 1912-1914, a gifted scientist who enjoyed afternoons of research in his laboratory and evenings of typically collegiate mischief. Calvin wrote affectionately of his final days in Cambridge, of green lawns and graduation, capturing the electricity of being young and fearless at university. Returning for one last look at the Yard before he left America, Calvin remarked that he “didn't believe that a place could change so quickly as did Harvard Square after Class Day. The Yard was like a vase with flowers removed, yet beautiful.”

Calvin's wartime letters possess that same eloquence, the impassioned patriotism of a young man eager to save the world, the steady loyalty of a Harvard alumnus who followed closely the scores of the latest Yale game and the fate of his university friends. But as his time in Europe drew on, Day's letters began to reveal some of that the ugliness of World War One, chaos of battle and the madness of inaction. Nine days before his death at the Second Battle of Ypres, Day was ordered to the small village of Cassel, France. He wrote of his arrival:

“I pushed my bike up to the highest point where there is a little park, an old château, and a wireless station. Here I was agreeably and intensely surprised. The only other soldier up there was Brokenshire, Harvard Class of 1916. I hadn't seen him since we left [camp in] England. We sat in one of the stone bastions, very like those at Fresh Pond in Cambridge which I remember so well, overlooking the level plain... in the mist and gathering darkness... Here we talked of Harvard and Cambridge, and the places and girls we had known. It was a pleasing and impressive sight in the setting sun, and I was very sorry to leave it to him.”

Though Day couldn't know this was the last time he'd see his friend, though he was never again to set foot in Harvard Yard, the memory of Harvard that Calvin Day carried with him gave him peace in disquiet, a loyal friend when the world was at war.

He departed from Harvard with that same heavy sadness which weighs on us all, but quickly found that behind his fears of leaving Harvard is the truth that he never left Harvard behind.

Whether we're destined for New York or New Guinea, I've found a sort of confidence in the letters of Calvin Wellington Day that our time at Harvard continues long after commencement has come and passed. I've come to see the buildings around us; Sever and Robinson, Widener and Weld, not as tombs of the best years of our lives passed, but as enduring monuments to those feelings of unsettled excitement for the lives we are about to begin.

On Friday evening we set out to realize all that we'd hoped for together. When life has done its worst and I need a friend, I know I'll look no further than to those stood with me through the trials of undergraduate years. And when we feel the weight of the world rests squarely on our shoulders, when uglier times are upon us, Harvard memories give us a place of glad escape, a better age of our best selves to remember.

These, I think, were the "thoughts of the past" T.S. Eliot anticipated in his Harvard Ode. He closed the poem

Yet for all of these years that to-morrow has lost  
We are still the less able to grieve.  
With so much that of Harvard we carry away  
In the place of the life that we leave.

Like Eliot, I'm unsure what will come of the hopes and ambitions that began here at Harvard, and I'm unsure when and where we'll meet again, but in the memoirs of Lieutenant Calvin Wellington Day, I found reason to believe this much: that we'll never forget what this place has meant to us each, nor what we have meant to each other.