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Anatomy of the “If”
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Most of my academic career here has been spent behind the lens of a PD-170 digital video camera. So let me ask you. How is everyone feeling today? How does this *moment* feel right now? What does it look like? What does it smell like? What does it taste like? What does it sound like? You see, for the past four years, I’ve devoted my academic coursework to becoming a filmmaker, meaning that the diploma I’ll be receiving tomorrow certifies me to be the ultimate outsider looking in, always through the eyes of someone else. My undergraduate years have been about seeing the world in fragments, through the eyes of the camera and perhaps, more importantly, through your eyes. It’s a lens thing. Seeing what somebody else sees and being drawn into it, but in a different sort of way. Through the disparate lenses of my peers, I’ve lived my Harvard experience a thousand different ways.

So, I feel like I stand here today as something of an outsider. As a filmmaker, I’ve learned to observe patterns in the lives of those who surround me. With this in mind, I hope that my observations over these past four years can offer those on the inside, a little “outside” insight, before we part ways.

Well, getting back to the question I initially posed to you, I’ll try to answer it myself. How do I feel right now? I’m scared. I’m scared not because I am standing before 1600 incredibly talented individuals, not because I fear pending failure, or success, but because I’m afraid that *this* will stop. On a campus that never sleeps, where momentum is constantly breathed into every experience, every moment—whether small or grandiose—my greatest fear is that I will slip into a numbing security and a complacency once I leave these gates. That I will no longer feel pushed along, motivated by an unnamed force, which compels me ever forward.

Now it might be easy to define this force as some kind of drive to succeed. A desire to avoid failure. But for the sake of this reflection, let’s divorce the binary of

success and failure from the picture. So, why do we push ourselves? Why do we feel this internal motivation to endlessly propel ourselves forward? I think it's because complacency and stagnation are far more daunting than this never ending propulsion. It's scarier to think about just standing still rather than tackling the next big task, be it a problem set, a sporting event, a libretto, or a thesis.

What is the underlying source of this momentum? I think it begins with what I call, "if-statements." In each moment when we must make a decision of varying magnitude, we are faced with endless possible choices. We obsessively replay these alternatives in our head. In fact, they are integral to this idea of momentum; to this constant replotting and remapping of our various potential paths. Let's take a moment to get inside the anatomy of the "what if."

It's been said that one of the main things that separates humans from other species is their ability to conceptualize "what if" and imagine realities that are not their own. We, as Harvard students, take this to an entirely new level. We devote our time to dreaming about where we could be, without much time to revel in where we are and what we're doing. But when we take the beauty and benefit of the imaginative scope of the human being to this extreme, it can stop being helpful and start being an impediment.

What motivates us to never accept the reality of our situations? We exist in a world born of our design, where the ghosts of memories remind us of what could have been and the many possible permutations of what could still be. Some say this makes us visionaries, but a refusal to accept reality is a rather painful way of life. It's what pushes us to fight for more; to never accept less than what we strive to be. Because if we accepted the *now*, the way things really are, we'd lose our momentum. More importantly, we'd lose our way. And that's one thing I've come to learn at Harvard. We never stop. We're always moving. It's this eternal fear of the desired "what if" turning into a complacent "what is" that propels us forward.

What it comes down to is that we're so afraid of potentials working themselves out to realities that it makes us *inappropriately* fearless. You all defy fear daily, in fact. You laugh in the face of terror. You strip naked the night before finals and run fearlessly around the Yard. But I challenge each of you to see the merit and the strength that can come from fear. We are surrounded by people who tell us that we're on top of the world; that we have all possible roads ahead of us; that we're *about* to make life choices. But the scary thing is that we've already made a lot of those choices, and many of us—most of us—haven't realized that yet, because we're unwilling to cast off our fearlessness and become vulnerable.

So today, I stand in front of you, because I want you all to know the power both of fear and of being aware of the choices you have already made and will continue to make. Fear does not yield paralysis, but instead, this vulnerability can push us to a new level of introspection and self-discovery.

At first, when I was writing this speech, I couldn't find an ending. By this point, we've already repeatedly asked ourselves, "what if?" And because of that simple question, with the completion of these four years, a new cycle has already begun. Once again, for us all, the momentum has begun to build.

So now, *right now*, let's pause and together become the outsiders. Let's step back and value our fear precisely because it makes us fearless. It might be worth appreciating, if only for a second, how many different "ifs" we all have. How much potential we've built up over the past four years and how, at this turning point, the fear of what comes next can be our best friend. We've just got to run with it.

Thank you, dear friends and fellow classmates of the Class of 2010, and congratulations.