

## **The Senior English Address**

### **“This Shaking Keeps Us Steady”**

**Lois Elizabeth Beckett '09**

As we assemble here today, for the Commencement of the class of 2009, it's hard to imagine that an earthquake might ever shake these stately buildings. The ground of Harvard feels like steady ground.

Freshman year, though, my friend from California used to walk past these columns and towers and worry about earthquakes. I remember him looking up at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. “That’s crazy,” he said. He had never seen a church steeple made of stone.

That was the first time it hit me: that some people live in places where they can't trust the ground they walk on—where they might wake up any morning with their beds shaking and their books tumbling from the shelves.

I wanted to tell my friend, “Dude—you're in New England. The ground—it's under control.”

I thought he should see these buildings as I saw them—the guardians of knowledge, historic and secure.

Turns out, the science of seismology got its start right here, in 1755, when Professor John Winthrop was awakened one morning by the “vehement agitation” of his bed. An earthquake had toppled the chimneys of Boston and broken the weather vane on Faneuil Hall. All the church steeples tilted to the side. Winthrop, professor of “natural philosophy,” decided to measure where the bricks from his chimney had landed and calculate their velocity. The next week, he gave a lecture on the subject in the college chapel.

“The causes of earthquakes are incessantly at work,” he told his listeners. “It may seem rather a wonder that we have no more earthquakes, rather than that we have so many.”

New England: maybe *not* so safe.

Today is a day of celebration, a day to rejoice in what we have accomplished. Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa: we’re graduating. It’s important to mark this with pride and with gratitude—for the hard work of the many people who brought us here, for sacrifice and serendipity.

But today is also a day of uncertainty—not just for the graduating seniors, trying to find our new place in the world, but for everyone. Young or old, this year it has felt sometimes as if what we knew were falling down all around us.

The class of 2009 is graduating amidst a global financial crisis that few people—even at Harvard—saw coming. We've watched the collapse of the financial system ripple outwards, hitting the most vulnerable, leaving no place untouched. There are more problems, less money to address them.

Now I know the members of the class of 2009 have always liked a challenge. But this—it's a big one.

Sooner than most graduates, we've had to face the realization that the world is unsteady, that so little of what we thought we could count on is guaranteed.

That's what my friend from California understood already. He came from a place where they build their buildings knowing that the earth will shake beneath them. They plan for this in California. They think about what happens if you build a steeple of stones and they all come tumbling down.

There weren't enough people, over the last few years, who looked at America's financial system and said, "Whoa guys—are we sure this is structurally sound?"

It's not easy to be the person who asks that question. But if none of us ask, we see where we end up.

We Harvard kids are good at working within systems of power. It may be this skill, more than the others, that has won us our Harvard degrees. Many of us graduating here today will continue to live as we've lived in college: overworked, underslept, running on caffeine and the buzz of accomplishment. As we against our deadlines—piling brick atop brick atop brick—we'll have few incentives to question what we're building. Speaking truth to power isn't easy—especially when power is giving you a paycheck. That's true whether you work for an investment bank, or a charity, or a university.

But we are building our futures on shaky ground. We can't forget that.

Yes, sometimes it may feel like a struggle just to keep doing what we're doing every day. But we have to take responsibility for the systems in which we live and work—however difficult these systems are to understand, however risky it may seem to critique them.

Hardest of all is finding the courage to do this—to make the effort and build something right—knowing that it might not last. That no building is earthquake proof.

This is the kind of courage Theodore Roethke writes about in his poem, "The Waking." It's a poem I turn to when I'm not feeling so brave. Roethke writes:

"God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,  
And learn by going where I have to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.

What falls away is always. And is near.

As we go out today, on the many paths of our future, I have no advice, just these words, part prophecy, part prayer. "This shaking keeps us steady. What falls away is always, and is near."