

13) “There’s Something About John Harvard” Matthew Whitaker ’12

Although there are over sixteen hundred graduating members of the Class of 2012, there is one individual whose name we are here to celebrate above all else: John Harvard. The man. The myth. The legend...but not the savage.

We have so many unanswered questions about John Harvard: “What made this man so important?” you may ask if you are a historian. “What makes this guy think he’s more important than me?” you may ask if you took Math 55 as a freshman. “What was John Harvard’s name?” you may ask if you took Expos 10 as a freshman. Unfortunately, we know very little about our college’s namesake, whom we imagine to sit across the yard on his bronze throne, steeped in history, and urine. We don’t even know what he looked like, since the man depicted in the John Harvard statue isn’t even John Harvard, a fact you can learn from any fun, peppy Crimson Key tour guide, or one of their (begin shouting) unmistakably shrill counterparts from Unofficial Tours.

We don’t know if John Harvard possessed the verbal mastery of T.S. Eliot, the scientific ingenuity of Bill Gates, or the dashing good looks of...Bill Gates. All we can be certain that John Harvard possessed was a 320-volume collection of books, and an estate worth at least 780 pounds, which is the amount he donated to a newly established Massachusetts college upon his death in 1638.

That’s it? Seven hundred and eighty pounds? “Ha! Pocket change!” you might scoff if you’ve been hired to an overpaid post-college job like corporate consultant, or Harvard janitor. Indeed, our university is named for the English minister John Harvard simply because he donated his books and 780 pounds. So, what would John Harvard say if he could come back to life today, just to see what his dying contribution has done for his name?

“Crikey!” he might say if he were Australian, which he was not. But seriously, imagine how it would feel to learn that, over nearly four centuries, your own name had become synonymous with scholarly brilliance, elite exclusivity, and what Webster’s Dictionary would define as “not gettin’ any.” To find out that you had become an international brand name, like Johnson & Johnson or Blue Ivy Carter. How would one react to all of this?

I am sure that John Harvard would be honored to see his name printed on the resumes and sweatshirts of the world’s most promising geniuses. After all, we are all geniuses. Each and every one of us was valedictorian of our high school class. We all have an IQ of 300...billion. We’ve all achieved local glory in our hometown

newspapers. Getting accepted to Harvard certainly landed me on the front page of my hometown paper: The New York Times.

John Harvard would also be excited that the yard named for him has become an international tourist destination. Why wouldn't he be excited about that? What's not to love about all those tourists? Take it from somebody who lived on the first floor of Stoughton: you don't even need to set an alarm clock if you can be awoken everyday by a Korean family taking photos of you sleeping.

But what would John Harvard say about the more controversial issues on campus? Would he be embarrassed to see how the school named for him was portrayed in films like *The Social Network*? And speaking of the *Social Network*, how confused John Harvard might be to learn that his name is associated with the world's most popular stalking platform. "What exactly is Facebook?" I can hear him asking. "How do I untag all of these photos? And who is this Luis Martinez that keeps writing on my wall?"

Yet ultimately, I think that John Harvard would mainly feel a humble sense of pride to be here today, looking at the promising young adults whose education he endowed from a distance. After all, John Harvard donated to this school so he could contribute to others, not to boast his own achievements. In fact, he didn't have many achievements to boast. By the time he left his historic donation, John Harvard was only thirty years old. How crazy is that? The only thing I can hope to donate by the time I turn thirty is sperm. I'm not joking—that's currently my only prospect for paying rent next year. But at least I'm following my dreams, right? (chuckle, then silence) I'm so scared.

But consider, for a moment, how ironic it is that Harvard is named for somebody who contributed more than he achieved. We are a student body that seems singularly focused on achieving things for ourselves, and we frequently use Harvard's name as a benchmark for our personal achievements. Yet we Harvard students so rarely make any effort to contribute to others. Not even to purchase a paper from the Spare Change News guy—"Young lady. Young man. Well hello, young man! Young laaady." Nevertheless, it is my profound belief that we should not, and must not, achieve without contributing.

We already have followed John Harvard's example through contributions we've

made to our campus, our peers, and our friends. And we will continue to follow his example through contributions we'll make long after tomorrow, when we commence our freshman year in the real world. Our contributions may not be monetary, like John Harvard's was. These contributions may surface through intellectual breakthroughs, artistic creations, humanitarian acts, or hilariously high-profile incidents of plagiarism and identity fraud.

So, within the Class of 2012, whose name will still be remembered in three hundred and seventy-five years from now?— when tenured professors have been replaced by robots, and the “shuttle” does not take you to the quad, but rather to the moon, where Harvard will need to build new dorms because construction in Allston will still be incomplete.

I hope that we will continue to not only remember those who achieved, but those who contributed. So, fellow classmates, when you take your last steps around this great yard, please take a moment to stop at the John Harvard statue. And before you unzip your pants to pee on that statue one last time, say, “Thank you, John Harvard. Thank you.”