

Harvard College Class Day
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Harvard Oration
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Love and Hate

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About two thousand years before any of us were born, an eminently sleazy Roman poet wrote a two-line poem that captured one of the deepest and truest paradoxes in the human condition.

His name was Catullus and I call him sleazy because, by today's standards and prejudices, he was a pederast and a pervert. But by any period's standards he was also a genius, possessed of an aesthetic and empathetic sense that plainly outstripped most of his contemporaries just as it plainly outstrips most of ours.

We therefore understand him as a paradox just as he could understand us, as a species, as creatures of paradox.

The two lines he wrote are these

Odi et Amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requires.

Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior

"I hate and I love. Why do I do this? perhaps you ask.

I don't know, but I feel it being done, and I am tortured."

My speech to you today is premised on a bold assertion, which, I think, has been made before, by asserters distinguished and obscure, and which, if we are honest with ourselves, will not seem so bold at all.

The assertion is this: if you have made it through four years at Harvard without coming to both hate and love this place—and all it represents, and all that it promotes and creates—then you have not been paying attention.

Many of us, certainly, will admit—particularly on this most nostalgic of days—that we have fallen in love with this place. Some of us will maintain that we hated it, and always hated it.

Maybe those people aren't here. Maybe they, like those high-school rebels who refused to buy their yearbook, are off glowering and congratulating each other for not subscribing to this crap. For not drinking the Kool Aid. But each of us, from the most cynical and jaded Advocate board member to the cheeriest Admissions Office tour guide, harbors a mixture of the two emotions, whether they admit to it or not.

And how could we not? We witness contradictions everywhere we look. The school swallows up artists and philosophers, dancers and dreamers, from every corner of the country, from many corners of the earth. It cherishes their diversity, their vitality, their individuality. Then it corrals them together for four years, inculcates a new lexicon of concentrations and secondaries and houses and PAFs, pushes them through distribution requirements that remain arbitrary, bequeaths to them a slew of traditions from Final Clubs to handwritten exams, and plunges us all into a sound-proof, airtight bubble—from which we are to emerge, in some alchemical miracle, as people qualified to wear a trademark of excellence and successfully avoid paying our fair share of the taxes.

I hate and I love. I hate the hoops I had to jump through but I loved the tricks I learned in the process. I hate the term papers I had to write but I love the friends I met at 3AM in Lamont Café because of them. I hate the rejections, the disappointments, the heartbreaks, the failures, but I love the victories that were all the more sweet for them. I hate the way how in four years an endless horizon contracted into a fork in the road, but I

love the way those roads call my name, as if they were made for me, as if they have been waiting patiently for my focus to sharpen since the moment I opened my eyes.

But our ambivalence is still more complicated than that. We do not merely hate the struggle and love the reward. We love the struggle and we hate the reward. We hate specializing but we love finding our niche. We love the thought of becoming our own person but we hate the thought of becoming old.

We love the thought of moving forward. We hate the thought of letting go.

“Why do I do it? Perhaps you ask. I do not know.”

This place will never make sense to us. It made no sense in freshman week and it makes even less sense now. We can't know the effect this school has had on us, what effects we have had on each other, any more than we can lean back through time and pick the brains of our younger selves. And because we can't know we can't know how to feel.

But knowing doesn't matter. We don't choose how to feel. Catullus wrote, “I feel it *being done*, and I *am tortured*.” It's the passive voice. Our feelings happen to us. We feel the way we do about this place, and about this moment, because of what has happened to us, even more than because of what we have done. The ambivalence we must feel is a natural consequence of the ambivalence with which life regards even the luckiest among us.

The feelings are not opposite, and that is the pearl of clarity hidden in this murky paradox. Anyone who has been in love knows how quickly it can boil over into hatred, and anyone who has really been “in hate,” if you will pardon the phrase, must know how similarly tenacious the feeling can be, and how, under just the right circumstances, it can blaze into something else, something beautiful.

The truth is, hate and love are not opposite ends of a spectrum. They are close cousins, if not siblings, and their common blood is their intensity. That is why I say that if each of us does not feel both for this place, then we have not been paying attention. Only

such confused intensity of emotion is commensurate with the enormity of the impact it has had on our lives.

So however we feel, whatever ratio of emotions colors each of our perspectives, this day ultimately means the same thing for each of us.

We call this time commencement week. Commencement. The word means beginning. Beginning what? Beginning our lives? Have we been postponing them? Beginning our careers? Plenty of us aren't. Or: is it beginning to forget? The slow unraveling of the ties we've wrapped around each other. The gentle fading of the stressors of yesterday, the fears, the promises, the dreams. In a matter of days this place is going to vanish from our lives, and everyone in it will become a kind of ghost, nothing but a collective figment, a shade preserved in our imaginations of how our college friends used to be.

Before they got rich, before they got married, before they settled down or moved away or grew up. Before our trajectories at last diverged.

All of this is going to fade for us. The intensity is going to wane. We ought to embrace it, and cherish it, while it still lasts.

So to all of you, and to all of Harvard, I say: Odi et Amo. I hate and I love, and I would have it no other way.

Thank you, and take care.