

The Senior English Address

By Felix de Rosen '13

One day during spring break, I went for a walk in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Wandering aimlessly between trees and graves, I stumbled upon a tombstone, half buried in snow, with an inscription that intrigued me: "Charles A. Ditmas, Jr. 1910-2001. Keeper of the Clocks of Harvard College". Cool! I wanted to find out more.

It turns out that Charles Ditmas was appointed by Harvard in the 1940s to clean and maintain the University's many antique clocks, which were scattered around campus in museums, halls, and residences. Charles was known on campus for his eccentric behavior and the black tool bag he always carried with him. He once gave the University Police a grandfather clock that belonged to another department, claiming the gift earned him the right to park anywhere on campus.

Charles really loved clocks. "All clocks have their personalities," he wrote, "their chronic ailments, their individualities. Their voices differ: some speak so fast that one can scarcely hear them—much less understand what they say; others are so ponderously slow, almost unwilling to give their information. Still others are most unsure of themselves. They hesitate and seem to apologize when they speak. One is reluctant to accept their words." Running his fingers along a clock's wood casing, Charles would whisper, "How are you feeling today?"

It would be easy to dismiss Charles as having an over-active imagination, but if you really think about it, hearing voices in clocks is not that extraordinary. Upon seeing a beautiful work of art, we say it *speaks to us*. Inspiring stories *touch us* and hardship *shakes us*. Our feelings *happen* to us. We do not will them in the same way that we do not walk into love. We *fall* in love, pulled by a force so powerful and so completely beyond our control.

What strikes me about Charles's relationship with clocks is that he never worried about what seems so obvious to the rest of us: clocks tell time. They symbolize the unceasing passage of time. Every second forward is a unique moment lost to eternity.

Charles was unfazed by the passage of time because he was enraptured by the inner engineering of the clock and the elegance of its casing. That is why he hated battery clocks and electric clocks. They had no soul, no feeling. They were more precise, truer to time, but he could not talk to them.

You see, Charles simply liked the feeling of a clock's tick, its texture, and the story it told. If you probed him further and asked him why he liked these, he might shrug and say "I just do." One could not rationalize it. It was simply intuitive - a feeling.

Now, what does this have to do with Commencement? Today, the word *commencement* refers to a beginning. But in fact, the word *commencement* comes from the Latin "*com*"—together—and "*initiare*"—to initiate. We are being initiated together, thrown forward into new worlds. It's easy to see this day as one would look at a clock. Clocks tell time. Commencement tells time: the passage from one age to another. It is harder to see a clock and our Commencement as outside of time. It is hard because we seek to understand time, to control it. But the passage of time, like much in life, lies beyond us. It lies beyond our control.

We do not control where we are born, nor do we control when we are born,

and death is not a choice. Fear, anxiety, and hope are only natural responses to the utter vastness and uncertainty of the universe. These feelings flow inside all of us, and they should guide us. On this day of Commencement, we can listen to them. Amidst the trees and red bricks that surround us, we can listen to their breath and they can lead us to unexpected places. Indeed, if you listen carefully enough, even the plainest things can become the source of infinite joy and wonder: a clap of thunder, the beating of your heart, even an old clock.