

Harvard College Class Day
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Harvard Oration
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The Harvard Oracle
Lewis Bollard

Four years ago, we converged on this same Yard for the Freshman Activities Fair. We were headstrong and sure-footed: we had aced the SAT, made it into the elect 9% to enter these gates, and already accumulated our first 100 Facebook friends. Our high school friends admired us, tourists in the Yard photographed us, even our siblings congratulated us. We were all paragons of success and had the ambitions to prove it. As we strode through the Activities Fair signing up our email address at every desk, we dreamt of becoming President of the Crimson, Captain of Varsity Crew, and a straight-A student to match.

Then things started going wrong. For some, the moment came in Ec 10, when the first problem set was returned with a check minus, not a check plus. For others, it came in Expos, when the first draft came back with a grade that looked eerily like a 'C'. For me, the moment arose in Annenberg when I realized I was seated between the world fencing champion and a concert violinist, and one then leaned over and politely asked, "So, what do you do?"

In some sense, the four years since then have all been downhill. The Crimson President, Crew Captain, straight-A student trifecta didn't exactly work out, and for many of us neither did half our other aspirations. We've quit most of the groups we joined that day, even if we're still having trouble unsubscribing from their email lists.

Harvard, far from delivering the limitless success we dreamt it would, seems sometimes to sow only doubts about whether we might in fact be the “admissions mistake.” And yet I suggest this afternoon that those doubts may be Harvard’s greatest gift to us. For they forced us to do something that the progression of perfect exam scores, star athletic performances, and unmatched talents that got us here never did: to step back, re-evaluate, and ask who we truly are.

At the Oracle at Delphi, an inscription above the entrance read simply, “Gnothi Seauton”—Know Thyself. Similar words could be inscribed above the entrance to every dining hall and dorm room, for it is here that the real work of Harvard took place: the debating, questioning, and studying that led us to discover what we care about, and what we hope for. It is here that we began to conceive of ourselves as larger than lines on our resumes, larger even than the degree certificates we receive tomorrow. And it is here that we began to learn that most important kind of Veritas: the truth about who we are.

As we enter the turbulent world beyond these gates, this self-knowledge will be crucial. If the financial crisis of the last year has taught us anything, it is that even the loftiest institutions can fail and the surest experts can be wrong—and that their hubristic certainty is often part of the problem. And if the crisis has induced numerous sleepless nights for members of our graduating class, it has also forced many of us down the road “less traveled.”

This road is often rough. I still remember my father’s parting words as I left New Zealand for Harvard. “I wish you many failures,” he declared happily. At the time it didn’t seem like a particularly nice thing to say to someone boarding an airplane, so I ignored the comment. But in the years since, as I’ve spent endless nights working on

papers that were never quite perfect and applications that never quite succeeded, those words have seemed ever more apt. As sports columnist Bill Lyon quips, “If at first you don’t succeed, find out if the loser gets anything.”

And here at Harvard, the loser does get something. For in the Harvard Oracle, failure serves as education. Every unsuccessful audition bears a clue to our true strengths, every lost sporting contest a clue to our human limitations, and every job rejection a clue to what we really dream for.

The Puritans who founded Harvard College called this process finding one’s “calling.” As we leave these gates, I hope that you have had enough doubts, setbacks, and frustrations to find yours.

Congratulations, Class of 2009, and thank you.