

President Drew Faust Commencement Afternoon Address

May 29, 2014, Tercentenary Theatre, Harvard University

As delivered

Good afternoon alumni, graduates, families, friends, honored guests. For seven years now, it has been my assignment and my privilege to deliver an annual report to our alumni, and to serve as the warm-up act for our distinguished speaker.

Whether this is your first opportunity to be part of these exercises or your fiftieth, it's worth taking a minute to soak in this place—its sheltering trees, its familiar buildings, its enduring voices. In 1936, this part of Harvard's yard was called Tercentenary Theatre, in recognition of Harvard's three-hundredth birthday. It's a place where giants have stood, and history has been made.

We were reminded this morning of George Washington's adventures here. From this stage in 1943, Winston Churchill addressed an overflow crowd that included 6,000 uniformed Harvard students heading off to war. He said that he hoped the young recruits would come to regard the British soldiers and sailors they would soon fight alongside as their "brothers in arms," and he assured the audience that "we shall never tire, nor weaken, but march with you ... to establish the reign of justice and of law."

Four years later, in this same place, George Marshall introduced a plan that aided reconstruction across war-stricken Europe, and ended his speech by asking: “What is needed? What best can be done? What must be done?”

Here, in 1998, Nelson Mandela addressed an audience of 25,000 and spoke of our shared future. “The greatest single challenge facing our globalized world,” he said, “is to combat and eradicate its disparities.” Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female head of state in Africa, stood here 13 years later and encouraged graduates to resist cynicism and to be fearless.

And here, on the terrible afternoon of September 11th, 2001, we gathered under a cloudless sky to share our sadness, our horror, and our disbelief.

Here, just three years ago, we marked Harvard’s 375th anniversary dancing in the mud of a torrential downpour. Here, Franklin D. Roosevelt had celebrated Harvard’s three centuries of accomplishment in a comparably soaking rain.

Here, J.K. Rowling encouraged graduates to “think themselves into other people’s places.” And Conan O’Brien told them that his “every failure was freeing.”

Here, honorary degrees have been presented to Carl Jung and Jean Piaget, Ellsworth Kelly and Georgia O’Keefe, Helen Keller and Martha Graham, Ravi Shankar and Leonard Bernstein, Joan Didion and Philip Roth, Eric Kandel and Elizabeth Blackburn, Bill Gates and Tim Berners-Lee.

I remember feeling awed by that history when I spoke here at my installation as Harvard’s 28th president, and when I reflected on what has always seemed to me the essence of a

university: that among society's institutions, it is uniquely accountable to the past and to the future.

Our accountability to the past is all around us: Behind me stands Memorial Church, a monument to Harvardians who gave their lives at the Somme and Ypres and Verdun during World War One. Dedicated on Armistice Day in 1932, it represents Harvard's long tradition of commitment to service.

In front of me is Widener Library, a gift from a bereaved mother, named in honor of her son Harry who perished aboard the Titanic, a library built to advance the learning and discovery enabled by one of the broadest and most diverse library collections in the world. Widener's 12 majestic columns safeguard texts and manuscripts—some centuries old—that are deployed every day by scholars to help us interpret—and reinterpret—the past.

But this afternoon I would like to spend a few minutes considering our accountability to the future, because these obligations must be “our compass to steer by,” our common purpose and our shared commitment.

What does Harvard—what do universities—owe the future?

First, we owe the world answers.

Discovery is at the heart of what universities do. Universities engage faculty and students across a range of disciplines in seeking solutions to problems that may have seemed unsolvable, in endeavoring to answer questions that threaten to elude us. The scientific research undertaken today at Harvard, and tomorrow by the students we educate, has a

capacity to improve human lives in ways virtually unimaginable even a generation ago. In the last year alone, Harvard researchers have solved riddles related to the treatment of Alzheimer's disease, the cost-effective production of malaria vaccine, and the origins of the universe. Harvard researchers have proposed answers to challenges as varied as nuclear proliferation, American competitiveness, and governance of the Internet.

We must continue to support our answer-seekers, who work at the crossroads of the theoretical and the applied, at the nexus of research, public policy, and entrepreneurship. Together, they will shape our future and enhance our understanding of the world.

Second, we owe the world questions.

Just as questions yield answers, answers yield questions. Human beings may long for certainty, but, as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, "certainty generally is illusion, and repose is not the destiny of man." Universities produce knowledge. They must also produce doubt. The pursuit of truth is restless. We search for answers not by following prescribed paths, but by finding the right questions—by answering one question with another question, by nurturing a state of mind that is flexible and alert, dissatisfied and imaginative. It's what universities are designed to do. In an essay in Harvard Magazine, one of today's graduates, Cherone Duggan, wrote about seeking what she called "an education of questions." I hope we have indeed given her that.

Questions are the foundation for progress—for ensuring that the world transcends where we are now, what we now know.

And questions are also the foundation for a third obligation that we as a university owe the

future: we owe the world meaning.

Universities must nurture the ability to interpret, to make critical judgments, to dare to ask the biggest questions, the ones that reach well beyond the immediate and the instrumental.

We must stimulate the appetite for curiosity.

We find many of these questions in the humanities: What is good? What is just? How do we know what is true? But we find them in the sciences as well. Can there be any question more profound, more fundamental than to ask about the origins of the universe? How did we get here?

Questions like these can be unsettling, and they can make universities unsettling places. But that too is an essential part of what we owe the future—the promise to combat complacency, to challenge the present in order to prepare for what is to come. To shape the present in service of an uncertain and yet impatient future.

We owe the future answers. We owe the future questions. We owe the future meaning. The Harvard Campaign, launched last September, will help us fulfill these obligations, and pay our debt to the future, just as the gifts of previous generations anchor us here today.

As today's ceremonies so powerfully remind us, we also owe the future the women and men who are prepared to ask questions and seek answers and search for meaning for decades to come. Today we send some 6,500 graduates into the world, to be teachers and lawyers, scientists and physicians, poets and planners and public servants, and as our speaker this morning reminded us, ready in their own ways to be revolutionaries—graduates ready to take on everything from water scarcity to virtual currency to community

policing. We must continue to invest in financial aid to attract and support the talented students who can build our future and also to invest in supporting teaching and learning that ensures the fullest development of their capacities in a rapidly changing world.

If we fulfill our obligation, today's graduates will have found the "education of questions," Cherone described, a place where, as she put it, "ceilings are only made of sky." But look around you: we are there. This space is a "theatre" without walls, without a roof, and without limits. It is a place where extraordinary individuals have preceded us, a place that must encourage our graduates—of today and all the years past—to emulate those men and women, to look skyward and to soar.