

A Kind of Destiny

Over two centuries ago a man came to Harvard uncertain of his future and his fate. He had received an offer he could not refuse: though he felt unworthy, he wrote to his family and said he felt “a kind of destiny” was driving him to Cambridge.

He spent his first night sleeping - here - in Harvard Yard and awoke the next morning - July 3, 1775 - to take command of the troops of the United Provinces of North America - the fledgling Continental Army.

George Washington had a unique Harvard application process. His admissions committee was the Second Continental Congress, and his experience at Harvard would not only define the final 24 years of *his* life, but the startup he launched here would go on to change the course of human history. –

Just across the street is a group of monuments under a tree: one displaying strapping, uniformed soldiers in perfect rows welcoming Washington to Cambridge. Another says: “Under this tree, Washington first took command of the American Army – July 3, 1775.” I’ve always felt a sense of awe for this world-changing spot. But then I did some research and found something less romantic.

In reality, Washington’s Harvard Welcome Weekend was less than grand – and his first year at Harvard was down right awful. On Sunday July 2, he rode into a deserted town - soaking wet and half sick. In fact, the welcoming reception was canceled due to rain, and several soldiers wrote “nothing new” or “remarkable” happened on July 3.

Imagine if we could go back in time to this very spot that day in 1775. We would be sitting in a very different Harvard Yard -- a field full of makeshift tents, ununiformed soldiers, and a rough defense position setup in place of Lamont Library. One historian described the scene looking like Woodstock, NY in 1969. A volunteer, undisciplined, and underequipped militia of farmers and merchants: This was the group Washington had come to lead against the most powerful military force on earth.

But Washington took what was offered to him here at Harvard and he made the most of it -- and I'm not just talking about the brass doorknobs or the metal roof he took off Harvard Hall to melt into musket balls.

He took ideas that existed only as words and writings and turned them into reality for millions and generations to come. ---

Less than a year later, after pushing the British out of Boston, Washington received an honorary degree from this fine institution -- his first academic degree. And like many Harvard graduates, he went on to take a prominent position in New York City -- and it almost killed him. Well, the British nearly killed him, and we almost lost the entire war. In fact, the next seven years of the war effort would become the most challenging years of his life.

Today, you will be offered a piece of paper that represents *your* short time at Harvard: the memories, your all-night study sessions, your successes, your failures, your first A... minus --- and the friendships that will last a lifetime. Through these experiences you've developed, practiced, and honed the skills you'll need... but sitting here today facing an uncertain future, it might seem difficult to connect the dots to your destiny. But have faith, because there is a kind of destiny waiting to be fulfilled that is uniquely yours.

Washington had to go through a difficult transformation process, even after receiving his Harvard degree, to turn his "kind of destiny" into a real force that could change history... and he discovered could not do it alone. The individuals and incidents that faced him over the next seven years whittled, carved, and sculpted him into the monumental man we remember today. The army he thought he was coming to transform... ended up being the force that transformed him.

While you may not realize it yet, some of the most meaningful lessons you will take from this experience have come from the people who have been learning right beside you – they've challenged you, pushed you, inspired you, supported you, and ultimately helped reveal a better version of yourself. **You see, the question is not only what you will take with you, but who you will take with you.**

On July 4, 1775 – still a full year before the Declaration of Independence – Washington declared in his first general orders to the troops that “all Distinctions of Colonies will be laid aside; so that one Spirit may animate the whole, and the only Contest be, who shall render, on this great and trying occasion, the most essential service to the Great and common cause in which we are all engaged.”

Just as Washington began his mission, here at Harvard, to unite the 13 colonies, we are here to celebrate the unity and the diversity of our 13 schools.

Whether you are driven to solve the world’s largest public or private problems, find a cure for that dreaded disease, alleviate human suffering, generate knowledge and push education forward, work across religious and cultural divides, create effective legal frameworks, construct the future world we live in, or use technology to enable new discoveries and innovations --- Whatever “kind of destiny” is compelling you today, imagine the countless lives that are waiting for you to step up.

In two centuries who might be talking about the grand mission you started here in this Yard today? Who will be talking about you, saying: “They sat right there under that tree in that spot.” Let today be your moment to take the opportunity that has been given to you, bring that “most essential service” only you can provide to this “Great and common cause”, and together – let us *not* just go change the world, but let us go serve the world with *passion*.