

AN EDUCATION

Reaching Out

Letter to the Incoming Harvard College Class of 2004

July 2000

BY NOW, you will have received more information and advice than any innocent mortal should be asked to absorb. All of this information is useful. And the last thing you need, at this point, is anything more. Allow me to write to you some words that are more personal and that grow out of my own educational experience.

The most important part of your years at Harvard will be those moments and activities that help you understand what your real interests and abilities are and how you want to live your life.

Such moments can happen in academic courses that you take, or in conversations with friends, on solitary walks, in extracurricular pursuits, or in the ways that you begin to discover new patterns of meaning in the variety of your experiences. Harvard can provide you with a very great deal – teachers, advisers, laboratories, libraries, programs, computers, museums, residential Houses, and wonderfully stimulating fellow students. In the end, however, you yourself will inevitably be the person who evaluates and integrates everything. You will perceive your own meanings, develop your own values, and make your own choices.

An Education

The education that you are now beginning will certainly not be complete after four brief years as an undergraduate. It is bound, in fact, to continue to unfold throughout your entire life. Nonetheless, your Harvard years will, I hope, be an exceptionally creative, concentrated, and often intense period – at least that is what many, many, students have discovered in the generations before you, throughout Harvard's history. In addition to the intensity, I hope your time here will also be enjoyable, reflective, expansive, and even occasionally relaxing.

I have little advice to offer. But let me suggest a few ideas that may be as helpful to you as they have been to me.

First, you may well want to try your hand at many different things during your Harvard years and may not have time to be able to do all of them as well as you would like. Try to be sure, therefore, to pursue at least two or three things energetically and persistently. Try to get as close as possible to the bottom of even a few significant intellectual and human dilemmas or challenges. Only by probing deeply and by following one or two pathways or lines of exploration, for a very long distance, will you ever begin to discover the extent – as well as the limits – of what you can really create, or master, or understand.

Next, try to read some number of significant books that can help you to learn as much as possible about American culture as well as other cultures – and, perhaps, even about New England and Harvard. There is, for instance, a wonderful book by Isaiah Berlin called *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. Berlin was an intellectual historian with deep philosophic interests. He lived through many of the most tumultuous as well as devastating events of the last century. He was brilliant, omnivorous, and wise, and he writes with a fine unforced eloquence.

One of the greatest of all American intellectual autobiographies – which is also a tale about Boston, Quincy, Harvard, Washington, and London – is Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams*. It is a book about education, in the largest meaning of the word, and tells us a great deal about the major political, scientific,

Reaching Out

and more general intellectual currents of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is not an easy book, but it is one that can be read, with immense value, at different times in one's life.

Two interesting books about science – and especially science at Harvard – are James Watson's *The Double Helix* and E. O. Wilson's *Naturalist*. Both have to do with significant discoveries and theories in the biological sciences. Both are wonderfully readable. And both are by present or former Harvard faculty members.

Another book – brief and very moving – is W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. This is a personal odyssey but also a book about politics, education, and the experience of many African Americans through the Reconstruction period into the early years of the twentieth century. Du Bois graduated from Harvard, was one of the founders of the NAACP, and is as fine a prose stylist as he is an observer of American life.

Finally, the diary of Alice James (in addition to Jean Strouse's biography of Alice James) is a truly extraordinary book about a remarkable person and also a remarkable family. Both volumes chart the experience of an astonishingly observant person who lived an intensely private life in a highly public milieu. Alice James' portrait of herself, as well as Jean Strouse's evocation of the Jamesian world, are arresting, absorbing, and deeply affecting.

I am not sure that any of these books qualify as "light summer reading." But all of them are formidable human documents that can expand the imagination, and they have helped me at least to enlarge my own understanding of life and its possibilities as well as its exigencies.

I am not a scientist, and I continue to regret that I did not press myself harder to study more science in secondary school and college. Most of what I have learned in science and mathematics has unfortunately been gained amateurishly. Yet even that little makes a very substantial difference to my intellectual and everyday practical life.

It is nowadays impossible – as I am sure you know – to think very intelligently about many questions in the humanities or the

social sciences without knowing about mathematics and the sciences. Complex theories of justice, for instance, are virtually impossible to understand without some sophisticated knowledge of economics as well as statistics. Concepts of the mind – and descriptions of what we call “mental acts” – must take into account our increasingly detailed knowledge of the physiology of the brain and how we believe the brain is organized. In other words, mathematics and the sciences are not only deeply absorbing and compelling in themselves; they are linked in fundamental ways to the structure of knowledge and understanding in many fields of learning. Those of you who are scientists already know this. Those of you who are not scientists have the happy possibility of exploring new connections and ideas that are waiting to be discovered.

Are there any parting shots in such a letter? Not many. Try to write a very great deal while you are at Harvard and experiment with different kinds of writing – because experimentation forces one to develop new forms of perception and thought, a new and more complex sensibility. And try to rewrite your essays more than once or even twice: it is in the rewriting that coherence usually comes, if at all. Whatever your chosen field of study, you will not be able to proceed very far unless you constantly master new vocabularies, experiment with new forms of syntax, and try to see how precisely and sensitively your use of words can begin to reflect the very best movements of your own mind and imagination as well as your most penetrating observations of the world around you. It goes without saying that the more widely you can read – and the more intricate the materials that you read – the more you are likely to comprehend the breadth of human experience and creativity in its immense variety.

Finally, you are entering a community of peers that is likely to be more talented and more diverse – at least in its highly concentrated form – than any similar community you may ever again have the chance to be associated with. It would be a pity not to reach out in order to meet, understand, and simply enjoy the com-

Reaching Out

pany of individuals who are very different from yourself (as well as those who are rather like yourself) and who will be your classmates and associates for the next few years.

This form of “reaching out” is easier said than done. When you are tired of writing essays, or rowing on the river, or playing the cello, or doing a difficult laboratory experiment, you may quite naturally want to relax and spend time with just those few friends whom you know best and feel most instinctively at ease with. In fact, it would often be foolish not to do so. But it would also be a great loss if you could not find many occasions to make that extra extension outward in order to create new friendships with people from different backgrounds who may have very different views from your own. This usually requires real effort. It can sometimes lead to misunderstandings – and even to painful experiences. But it is one of the most important and profound opportunities that Harvard can offer you.

The Act of Reading

*Dedication, John D. Verdery Library
Wooster School, October 6, 1990*

WHEN I ARRIVED at Wooster as a freshman in the fall of 1948, the School's only buildings were the Chapel, the two cottages used as dormitories, and one "wing" – called the New Building – on the far side of the Chapel. We used the old farmhouse at the bottom of the hill as another dormitory, and the red barn as our basketball court. Coburn Hall did not exist. There was no science building, no music building, no art center, and no gymnasium. There were about ninety students, and my own Class of 1952 jumped from about fourteen strong to nineteen when a nearby school went out of business and sent us reinforcements.

What this meant, of course, was that it was very easy to bring the entire Wooster school together frequently. In fact, it was almost impossible to do anything without bringing the entire school together: three times a day for communal meals with everyone present; daily chapel, every evening just before dinner, with everyone there; evening study hall after dinner, with virtually everyone there. Even athletics, which were compulsory, were essentially the same: since there were so few of us, almost every-

The Act of Reading

one had to play on every team. In football, there were hardly enough members from the junior and senior classes combined to field a varsity squad that had both an offense and a defense. No one was allowed to be ill. A few wayward bacteria or stray streptococci could cost us a whole season.

So we were all together almost all of the time. Not only that, we were cast in a fairly similar mold. With rare exceptions, we were all boarding students; we were all males, all white Caucasians of one sort or another; we were not always charming, and it often must have been exasperating for the faculty to try to teach us anything, or even to be around us so continually, day after day after day. Somehow they stuck it out, and so did we: an untidy band of adolescents watched over by some very extraordinary teachers, inhabiting a group of distinctly unimposing buildings on a steep hillside in the midst of still unsettled woodlands in western Connecticut. How did we land here? Why on earth did everyone stay? What did we learn? And how does any of this relate to the new library we are dedicating?

These are not easy questions. But it seems clear that one reason so many exceptional people chose to associate themselves with Wooster, and then held fast to that association – as teachers and staff, as trustees, as parents and students and alumni – was the elementary fact that John Verdery was the headmaster, and that he and Suzanne Verdery drew such people to them. To those who were secure in themselves and who had, so to speak, a room or a spiritual home of their own, John and Sue somehow enhanced what was already there, enlarging the sense of what was possible in life, what values and what energies might lie beyond self-certainty or self-sufficiency. For those who were adrift or at sea – wanderers without a clear destination – John and Sue were a place of haven, an anchorage, a restorative and revivifying center to which one could always return, where one might hope to find one's bearings yet again.

Of course, all this was grounded on the fact that Wooster was

An Education

a school, that its ostensible business was academic education, and that John Verdery was its headmaster. But the process of formal learning, of reading books and writing essays, or working in the library, seemed to be mainly the vehicle – the necessary engine and the occasion – that simply made it possible for everyone to get the real work of the School somehow accomplished.

To try to understand that real work better, I recently reread John's last book, which he entitled *Partial Recall*, published in the early 1980s. It is an informal memoir of his first forty years at Wooster, and it covers virtually every conceivable problem or issue relevant to private schools. Yet I could not find in the whole book a single reference to either Wooster's library or anybody else's. In fact, only a small handful of books or writers were mentioned at all: E. B. White, Robert Benchley, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, and of course the Bible. Whatever else might be said about them, these were distinctly not the kind of volumes for which one would need a well-stocked academic library and a brand new building.

I began to ask myself why it was that the new library was John's most important project during his last years: the project he cared most passionately about and the one he pursued so persistently. And why is it so appropriate, as it surely is, that we should choose the new library – rather than some other significant part of Wooster – to name in John's memory and honor?

Again, there are no clear answers, but let me suggest two possible ones. First, as I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, one of Wooster's most powerful and inescapable characteristics, during its early years, was the tangible compact unity and wholeness of the School. It was possible to bring everyone together in a single room, several times a day; one could literally see the entire school made visible in an endless series of formal and informal rituals of confirmation and reunion.

But of course that characteristic became increasingly difficult to sustain, and for very good reasons. Beginning in the late 1950s,

The Act of Reading

there were a few more day students, and there was a strong program to attract minority students to Wooster. Within another decade and a half, the size of the School had more than doubled, coeducation had arrived, the day students began to outnumber the boarders, daily chapel was no longer compulsory, and there were formal academic departments and several more buildings. The one-room schoolhouse had given way to something more interesting and rich in its human and educational possibilities, much more responsive to the real needs of life as we now live it, but also much larger, more complicated, and more subject to the discontinuities that punctuate the rhythm of our current daily existence.

John Verdery recognized this clearly, accepting it and indeed embracing it. But he obviously did not want to give up the effort to create new ways of sustaining the fundamental unity of Wooster, even if that unity could no longer be captured in quite the same fashion as before. The new library, I think, was the unifying space – not merely physical but human, intellectual, and spiritual – that John began to focus upon. When he spoke about the library, he naturally mentioned the importance of books and proper study facilities. But he returned most often to his hope that there would be a large, inviting lounge where faculty and others could meet informally and frequently, outside their departments and classrooms. And he wanted, if it could be afforded, a large auditorium in the library: a place that could accommodate the whole school, whether for lectures or films or meetings and discussions. The location of the building and its shape also became critical: it was to be near the very center of everything, facing outward in several directions; it would be a crossroad, a place where anyone could easily stop by for a few moments, or study, or meet friends. In contrast to the Chapel of three or four decades ago, where literally everyone gathered in just one room for religious services every day, the library would be a mansion of *many* rooms, where attendance would be voluntary. It would obviously be less communal in many ways; but perhaps it would be ultimately no

An Education

less binding in its cumulative subliminal effect on the lives and minds of students and faculty alike.

The second reason that the library meant so much to John, I believe, is the very unusual value he placed on individual books, as opposed to great shelf-loads of volumes. He told me more than once that he was a slow reader, and this was a great comfort to me when I was young, because I was and still am the slowest reader I know. For John, this fact meant that he approached every book, whatever its subject matter, as if it were a kind of sacred text: to read it meant investing a good deal of time, and time was always in short supply. He would choose his books very carefully. Once under way, nothing would escape him: the meaning of every anecdote, every turn of plot, every human vicissitude – all would be absorbed. Where some people might skim, John would virtually memorize what was on the page, just as he memorized, after writing out by hand, every one of the sermons he preached week after week. In this special way, John restored to books and to the act of reading some sense of the preciousness that they held in much earlier times, when books were scarcer and harder to obtain, and when they were valued as exceptional sources of knowledge and wisdom, not only to be carefully treasured, but to be incorporated and integrated into one's own life as one tried to live it and give meaning to it.

I like to think of the new library as a form of secular chapel which John can preside over, with bright spaces that can bring together the different parts of Wooster, and with books that can – if approached in the right spirit – take on the character of sacred texts. This is the kind of testament which I believe John wanted to leave Wooster: the last building from a man who never believed that a school should have very many buildings.

In closing, I want only to add a brief coda. For all the changes that have taken place since Aaron Coburn first set up his school in the farmhouse at the bottom of the hill, and since John Verdery came as Aaron Coburn's successor in 1942, Wooster is of course still a small place as the world goes, and it still maintains its

The Act of Reading

appointed but unobtrusive vigil on a steep hill in the countryside of western Connecticut. It still has virtually no endowment. It lives, as it has always lived, close to the edge of financial peril. Yet it has always resisted the temptation to try to build very fancy facilities in order to attract a wealthier clientele in order to be able to build even fancier facilities to attract an even wealthier clientele. It has gone its own way, sticking to its essential human values. The same holds true, of course, if we think of John and Suzanne Verdery, of Donald Schwartz, Joe Grover, Hobart Warner, Korb Eynon, and so many other people who came and stayed – and stayed, and stayed. When John turned down the headmastership of Groton twenty-five years ago in order to remain at Wooster, I understood; but it was certainly not an easy decision for him, and he gave up a great deal when he decided to remain just where he was.

And of course Joe Grover, like John Verdery, was also offered any number of headmasterships, and virtually every member of the Wooster faculty let more glittering opportunities slide by. There must have been, with all the satisfactions, some occasional second thoughts, some regrets about what else one might have done. Underlying everything, however, there was also a deep sense of the inevitability of these decisions: after all, could one really imagine John anywhere else? Or Donald or Hobart or Joe? They knew what was important, and they had the self-confidence, clarity of vision, and redeeming simplicity to recognize that they were involved in creating a very extraordinary school on a small patch of land where they could be free to pursue their own special errand in the wilderness.

All of them as individuals, and the School as an institution, chose a path that was anything but the usual one. I want to finish by reading a short poem that sums up for me a great deal about Wooster and John Verdery: about the difficult choices which, because they were made, have kept so many of us together for so many years and have brought us here. As we listen to the poem, we should imagine that the speaker is a kind of collective Woos-

An Education

ter voice, a voice of the whole School reaching back to include Aaron Coburn and John Verdery, as well as John and Michael Coburn, Peter O'Neill, and all the faculty and students who continue to carry the School forward:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.¹*

Wooster and those who have given themselves to it have always chosen to take the road less traveled by. And that has made all the difference, not only to them, but to the rest of us who have benefited so incalculably from everything they have done.

¹ Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1979), 105. Orig. pub. in the *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1915.

Designed to Be a Genuine Community

Belmont Hill School Speech

October 9, 1998

WHEN I WAS thirteen years old, about to finish eighth grade in the public school of my hometown, my school principal – a tall, stern man, with a quick temper that was itself tempered by kindness and intelligence – summoned me to his office one day.

In 1948, there were a very limited number of reasons one might be summoned to the principal's office, and none of them, I assure you, was considered by students to be even remotely benign.

I showed up at the designated hour, and Mr. Maginley (for that was his name) asked me if I would like to go to boarding school, instead of high school, on a scholarship. Conversations with Mr. Maginley were usually not long, exploratory, informal, probing dialogues. In fact, the question just put to me had nearly exceeded all by itself the outer limits of the expected length of time for an interview between pupil and principal. I replied, "Yes, sir, I think I would." "Fine," he said.

Such was our faith in figures of authority, in institutions (even if completely unknown), and in the general power of education,

An Education

that I went off to the Wooster School as a “first former” (or ninth grader) in the autumn of 1948, exactly half a century ago. And the experience, without a doubt, completely changed my life: it changed my sense of life’s possibilities, my sense of what it means to learn something, and – most of all – my ideas about what a valuable life might be, and how one might try to lead such a life.

I mention all of this because, despite their differences, there are important parallels between Belmont Hill and the school that I attended. For one thing, they were both part of the New England private school movement that began in earnest during the late nineteenth century and continued for at least another four decades. Both schools were also relatively late entries: Belmont Hill started in 1923, and Wooster in 1927. Both were small, unendowed, pioneering schools, whose founders were driven by a sense of mission – inspired by the Grotons, Kents, and Deerfields that were already well established by then.

The approach to learning was basically simple and sound: find teachers who love their subjects and who also care about individual students, helping them to grow as people, not only as minds; keep the regimen of daily school life fairly spartan; think of education as a process in which the school is seen as a true community, and where many activities – in the arts, or athletics, or public service – are all viewed as genuinely educational.

The original goal, unchanged since the 1920s, was to teach young people how to participate and to lead, as well as to learn: or rather, to show how teaching, participating, leading, and learning could actually all be part of a single dynamic and humane experience.

While I cannot speak with anything approaching authority, I suspect that my years at Wooster had at least some of the features that are clearly in evidence at Belmont Hill. It is obvious from my friends among your alumni (as well as among the parents of your students and alumni) that this institution has been extraordinarily important in shaping the lives of its graduates: during their actual years on campus, and long afterward.

Designed to Be a Genuine Community

In fact, it is just this “shaping” role that is so distinctive and crucial: a role that represents the special and increasingly important contribution that a Belmont Hill can – and does – make during a time when so many schools, and school systems, are in such deep trouble, with so little ability to achieve coherence or a strong sense of direction, or to gain the active involvement of communities that care for them and expect the best from them. A school like Belmont Hill really does “work,” and it is worth taking a few minutes this evening to ask why, trying to identify some of the less visible reasons as well as the more visible ones.

Those less visible factors – often by-products and even accidents of a school’s formal educational activities – can make an enormous difference to individual students. And despite the accidental, unpredictable nature of such factors, they actually turn out to be part of the entire system, so to speak, because the school has been created and structured in such a way as to make such experiences more likely, rather than less likely, to happen. Let me mention just one or two such experiences from my own past, starting as a “first former” back in 1948.

One of the most startling events of my first autumn term was something that I’m certain did not seem to be an “event” at all to anyone else, least of all to my academic advisor, who was responsible for it. I simply showed up at his office, as scheduled, and was stunned to see that the entire side wall of his study consisted of ceiling-to-floor shelves that were absolutely crammed with books.

Yes, I had seen shelves of books before – in the slightly gloomy, Victorian brownstone public library in Danbury, Connecticut, where I had grown up. But it had never occurred to me that any individual human being might buy, read, and actually possess large numbers of books as a part of normal, everyday existence. Even more striking, it was clear that these were, so to speak, “real” books, not textbooks or ordinary school books. And they seemed, collectively, to touch upon every conceivable subject: at least, every subject that I could conceive of.

I still remember names and titles, even though most of them

An Education

were names and titles that I had not heard of before, or had barely heard of. There was Darwin's *Descent of Man*, which puzzled me. Descent from where, and when? There was a book by Groucho Marx, not very far from something by Karl Marx. There was a large volume of Eugene O'Neill's plays, Plato's *Dialogues*, and Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, which was just two shelves down from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – to which was added, later, Will Cuppy's *Decline and Fall of Practically Everybody*.

This seismic, tectonic event happened totally silently, inside me, and I know that my advisor did not have even the remotest idea that he was at that time (or on my later office-hour visits) actively engaged in teaching me anything in particular, or anything at all. On my side of the desk, however, I was experiencing a kind of revelation. Here were all these writers, ideas, poems, novels, histories, works of science, and heaven knows what: and I suddenly realized that anyone, even I, could own them and begin to explore them.

It was also soon obvious to me that my advisor knew exactly where every individual book was placed, and that he could find more or less whatever he wanted to look up, simply by flipping the pages quickly. In other words, there was an invisible order, not at all decipherable, to the arrangement on the shelves, and it must have been important because it never really changed (except for the addition of more books) during my four years at school.

I don't remember trying to articulate for myself, at the time, what this entire experience actually meant to me. But I'm certain that it is not at all an accident that I have been buying books ever since; that I have spent untold hours shelving the books in ways that make complete sense to me, but probably to no one else; and that, whenever our family has moved house, I have not really been able to begin work (or do anything else) until the cartons of books have been emptied and the library has been put back in order: because until *that* happens, it is hard for me to feel that my mind is back in order.

Designed to Be a Genuine Community

Therefore, if I'm asked what I learned at my school, one of the most powerful things was having a teacher who simply assumed that reading, and asking questions, and creating interesting conversations; that being curious about the world, looking at how the world and societies seem to function, or didn't function; that reaching for the relevant book (often a dictionary), as well as reading books, and owning books, because you somehow needed them near at hand: that all these and many related things could be, legitimately, just a natural part of life – not just a part of school, or of being a teacher, but a part of one's total existence.

It took a special teacher at a particular kind of school for all that to happen. It took a school where there was enough time, and the right kind of atmosphere, so that students and teachers could carry on real conversations, outside the classroom as well as inside: a school where teachers considered students to be people, as well as pupils.

Those are simply some of the ways in which teaching – in many shapes and forms, in the most unexpected ways – takes place in a school that is robust. Thousands of Belmont Hill students (and parents) could recount similar, as well as different, tales because these are the kinds of incidents and events – often not fully appreciated, or even understood until years later – that create the texture of life in a place that is genuinely dedicated to learning in all its dimensions.

I have just slipped from teachers and teaching to the subject of learning, and I want to say something about this other side of the equation for a minute or two. Teachers can, as we know, teach from dawn to dusk; but, ultimately, it is only the student who can learn. And learning is, of course, the heart of the whole matter. Learning is also astonishingly difficult: nearly the hardest, most difficult activity that we ever try to do, at least at the deepest levels, where the really important work needs to take place.

The process of learning is complicated and subtle, and while it clearly has something to do with teaching, it also has its own

An Education

dynamics and obscurities. Our very best efforts at formal instruction can fail dramatically, or at least they may not quite succeed. We still know all too little about how people learn, or why, or under what conditions.

If it is often a little discouraging to see how much effort it takes to make little or no progress on even elementary matters in education; however, we ought to remember that there is also a danger in seeming to make too much progress, too quickly. Sensible conclusions and correct answers are important, but they count most when they are the result of real thinking and real understanding, rather than something more perfunctory or mechanical. Moreover, many of the most difficult situations and problems, relating to so many aspects of the world and life around us, do not yield their secrets very easily, if at all.

If we really understood more about the causes, for example, of ethnic or racial tension, or the forces driving the world economy, or the motives behind a great deal of the puzzling human behavior we see every day, then we might well be in a much better position to guide the course of many events before they become destructive, or simply problematic. But we do not know enough. And even when we do, we may still find it nearly impossible to judge precisely what steps to take in order to produce the best result, assuming that the capacity to take those steps is actually available to us.

From this point of view, the best thing that a good education can do (once we have moved beyond introductory and elementary matters) is to help our students become interested, engaged, and committed inquirers: to learn how to interrogate experience and events; to penetrate beyond the merely apparent or likely; to frame and test hypotheses; to look for relevant evidence and inspect it rigorously; to imagine a range of possible interpretations of an event, or a poem, or a particular person's actions, while recognizing that more than one interpretation may well be plausible.

In addition, education in an excellent school needs to give its

Designed to Be a Genuine Community

students practice, so to speak, in choosing – in coming to conclusions on the basis of all that they can reasonably know, acknowledging that they will rarely, if ever, know enough to be quite certain. Only when students are deciding (as well as analyzing) and then acting on their decisions – whether in an exam or laboratory experiment, or in athletics, or an orchestra, or in relationships with friends – only then will they come to discover the actual values that mean the most to them. And only then can they begin to develop, much more consciously, the values that they want to stand by, and live by.

Helping young people to sort their way through to conclusions and to actions, and helping them to understand and develop their own values, is unquestionably the most difficult and complicated educational challenge that exists. It is also the most significant one. Good results cannot be guaranteed, and no particular kind of school has anything close to a monopoly on success in this hazardous arena.

Nevertheless, I myself believe that a school like Belmont Hill offers the best possible opportunities for exactly the kind of growth I have been describing, essentially because the school has been designed to be a genuine community – with all the implications of that term – rather than just an academy.

By the tone you establish, the expectations you create, and the orientation provided by the steadiness of your sextant, you make clear the fact that education is at bottom a human process that can only be counted a success if people have learned not only a good deal about many fields of knowledge and ways of thinking, but also how to live respectfully and decently – even harmoniously – with one another.

Of course there will always be the inevitable problems of daily life: the sudden outbursts, the ordinary strains, and all the problems that are bound to exist whenever two or three (or more) are gathered together. And, in addition, there must be – especially in a school or university – a full measure of space for serious

intellectual disagreement and debate. In the end, however, there also has to be a recognition that no group – certainly no society or nation – can function unless individuals can express and act upon their own convictions while, simultaneously, seeking ways to accommodate the convictions and actions of others. Mutuality of this kind is the foundation of any community, at least any community that places a high value on openness, inquiry, and the development of individual capacities and talents.

There are very few places where these important values, with all their complexities, can be taught and learned – through experience, with guidance, as well as through precept. One of the very few places where this can happen is at a school like Belmont Hill: a school that has viewed itself, from its very beginning, as an institution where all the activities of daily life – the interactions among students, teachers, the headmaster, trustees, coaches, parents, and others – are by definition educational and communal in nature. That is why this school and others like it are so crucial, indeed essential. They have always been important. Now they are indispensable.

We live at a time when very few institutions manage to survive for even a very brief span of time without simply crumbling; or being subject to an act of sudden conglomeration, takeover, or buyout; or suffering the indignity of an involuntary name change, or the chagrin of instantaneous liquidation.

The drama critic Alexander Woollcott once reviewed a newly opened, calamitous piece of theater by saying, “If this play lasts overnight, it should not only be considered a long run, but a revival as well.” By my reckoning, Belmont Hill has been going day and night, with a full house, at full tilt, for nearly 30,000 performances already – with tens and tens, indeed hundreds of thousands more performances to come.

To be part of an institution that has grown so progressively strong (from what was already a strong start), and to be participants in the process of building, sustaining, and improving this

Designed to Be a Genuine Community

school: all of that represents something more than just a remarkable achievement. It represents a way of living life, because it requires, as you well know, constant commitment, resources, energy, generosity, stamina, and intelligent purposefulness. Sustaining a school is itself a communal activity, demanding a great deal of faith, lots of hope, and uninterrupted charity. But there is no better cause. Carrying the school forward so superbly, as all of you have done, involves a devotion to precisely those central values which the Belmont Hill School embodies, and that have shaped the lives of its graduates for this past three-quarters of a century.

A Labyrinthine Collegiate Climb

Baccalaureate Address

June 3, 1997

VIRTUALLY ALL normal universities invite a different person every year to say something valedictory to the seniors – something riveting or uplifting, or hazy, impenetrable, and aromatic, or at the very least, something actually anaesthetizing – to ensure that everyone will remain in a state of more or less uninterrupted stupor until graduation (and perhaps for years ever after). At Harvard, however, we have always refused to outsource the Baccalaureate Service. It falls, therefore, to the president of the University – and it falls even more heavily on the collective crania, cerebral cortices, and sensitive auditory systems of all of you who must sit and listen – it falls to the president, year after year, to deliver another astonishing and pulverizing oration to a packed house of ingenious, restless, nonchalant, Harvard conquistadors: yearning, like Ariel, for freedom but, alas, doomed to languish in ritual academic captivity a little longer, clothed in these extravagant costumes, waiting to complete your labyrinthine collegiate climb to full beatification on Commencement morning.

Thus, every year I stand here, watching you become more

A Labyrinthine Collegiate Climb

seraphic and soporific by the minute, while I myself sink deeper into inarticulate despair: what new sermon from the mount can I possibly come up with this year? What five or ten irresistible commandments, or spectacular rhetorical thunderbolts, can I find to hurl from the heights this time around?

Two or three years ago, I found myself rifling, in search of inspirational passages, through the pages of the *Crimson*, the *Lampoon*, and even the *Wall Street Journal*, looking for nuggets, gems – even rhinestones in the rough – that I might be able to smuggle into a sentence or a paragraph.

I finally found, in the *New York Times*, some reports of what several designated hitters at other graduations had said. One headline urged the senior class to live life to the fullest. That's an original idea, I said to myself – it might be good for two and a half pages, if I use large type and speak very slowly. But then I saw another headline, in even bolder letters, imploring every individual to live up to their full potential. Ah . . . even more original, I thought. But it is unfortunately not grammatical, and it is also obscure: I'll never manage to get it past the vigilant Class of 1997. Maybe the sleepy squadrons of 1996, maybe the wayward dreamers of 1998, but not '97 – not that glittering assembly with its 1,392 Rhodes Scholars; sixty-six saxophonists; its NCAA women's basketball and men's baseball virtuosos; its fearless Phillips Brooks House battalions of *Crimson* berets; its six million campus reporters singing their daily hosannas of praise outside the president's office; its nine tight ends; and its lovable loose cannons.

Since there was no way to slip anything by you, I decided that if I couldn't beat you, I would join you and elect myself an honorary member of your very clever class – which I have done, just this morning, signing my own degree, *summa cum laude*. Now we are at least in the same boat, and, already, I feel much brighter, wittier, and even younger.

In my last round of research, I discovered that confessional speeches are all the rage this year. A large *New York Times* article

An Education

stated (about a week ago) that graduation speakers really ought to talk about their own personal tragedies. “That is definitely the latest trend,” said the *Times*, “That’s what students want to hear about. That’s the way to have an impact.”

I have lain wide awake for the last three nights, searching my psyche for some trace of the tragic, watching the sepulchral light of the moon casting lugubrious shadows as it moved slowly over the huddled objects in my room: the once vibrant electric treadmill, now rusted and fallen into disuse; the large bottle, half empty, of diet cola, reminder of the previous evening’s riotous revelry, full of sound and fury, without the consolation of even a single calorie; my tattered academic robe, long ago ransomed for the dull repetitive pattern of paper-thin pinstripes on borrowed blue Brooks Brothers suits – fatal sign of yet another soul cast into darkness, lost in the deep administrative recesses of Massachusetts Hall.

But the more I thought, the more I realized I could never share the Shakespearean depth and Sophoclean shock of these experiences with you – any more than I could confess in public that my Italian grandmother never learned to speak a word of English, and always thought that, because the Fourth of July was so festive, it must be Garibaldi’s birthday.

I have nothing devastating to relate, no grand propositions for you – no large theory of life that can help you go with unbounded certainty from the general to the particular. You will probably need some sort of theory in order to make your way through the decades ahead. But I doubt that the theory will be of any use to you, unless it is in close touch with all the nuances and particularities of experience, which will yield their secrets only if you genuinely explore and interrogate them – expanding your range as you go, while trying to clarify and understand, as well as absorb, whatever you encounter. Dr. Johnson once said that “curiosity is the first passion and the last” – by which he meant that there is no stronger or more persistent desire than the human desire to know,

A Labyrinthine Collegiate Climb

to discover as much as we can about who and what we are: where we have come from, where we are going, and what may be the value of all that we choose to do during our brief, susceptible lives.

So, be curious. Start with the assumption that we know very little (if anything at all) about the people and the events which surround us – and which inevitably involve us as participants. Assume that we also know much too little about ourselves. Virginia Woolf's line is worth remembering: "A biography," she wrote, "is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas [we know that each of us] may have as many as a thousand."

This recognition is an attitude of mind that sees each of us not only as "I" or "one," but also as a kind of locus – an intersection where shifting feelings, ideas, interests, convictions, passions, compulsions, perceptions, delusions, self-delusions, and illuminations converge; that each of us has any number of conflicting and competing selves which we are always in the process of trying to identify, comprehend, and also harmonize; that we barely arrive at one possible interpretation of even a single set of experiences before we realize how fragile our brave new insights really are: how they can, in fact, be suddenly displaced by a deeper or simply different reading of events – either by ourselves, or someone else.

From this point of view, every significant flicker of experience can make a difference. Every flicker can change the whole look and lighting of a major scene at a crucial moment in your existential drama. Late in life, when he was very ill, Henry James was visited by friends whom he had known for decades. "I have the curious sense," he said, "that I am not the bewildering puzzle to all of you that you are to me." For James, experience was always ambiguous – and therefore tantalizing, frustrating, inviting, bewildering, and also isolating. Right to the end, his closest friends seemed beyond his reach, and his sense of distance was increased, not reduced, by the fact that his friends did not seem to share his own feeling of deep puzzlement. It may not be very

An Education

hard in life to move beyond the surface of things, learning more, pressing further and further. But behind every door, there is another one.

This is clearly not the place to leave you – isolated, puzzled, fruitlessly pursuing a thousand evanescent selves, just two days before Commencement.

The way out, of course, is to recognize and accept these many complications, including the fact that you yourself are much more complicated than you may realize: that you have actually learned to be – partly unconsciously, partly by imitating others, partly by experimenting with some of those different selves inside you – you have, to a considerable extent, learned and chosen to be what you are in the process of becoming, and what you think you want to become in the future.

If Harvard has helped you at all during these four years, I hope it has stimulated you to keep reimagining the possibilities of your life and the ways that you can give shape to it. Not all of the choices, by any means, are yours to make. But many of them certainly are.

I hope that the roles you choose to play, the person you choose to become, and the drama you are involved in creating will have some real sweep and scope to it; some (heroic) epic entrances; perhaps some foolish lapses into melodrama; a good fair share of wit; some wild, tumultuous exits, followed by scenes of the most unimaginable sentiment – and then, perhaps later, a few blessed moments of unexpected transcendence.

Meanwhile, as you move forward, there will inevitably be any number of long, dark passages, when the parts of your drama – yours and other people's – no longer seem to fit together. You may feel miscast, maybe not large enough for the role, like the notorious Lord Admiral of the British navy, Edward Carson Brown, who failed to distinguish himself – at every single turn – but who was at least perceptive enough to explain, in one of his few memorable pronouncements, that “my only qualification for being put at the head of the navy, is that I [feel] . . . very much at sea.”

A Labyrinthine Collegiate Climb

Above all, remember that those passions and interests – and the values they represent – connect you inevitably to everyone you know, and even those you do not know. As you act, try to anticipate the implications of what you are doing; think about the effect on others; do as little harm as possible, and be as charitable as possible – even more charitable than you think you can be. Because without charity, either in giving or in receiving, we are nothing: nothing more than the clamor of sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

+ + +

My classmates, be generous to yourselves and to others. You will do well. You already have done so very well. Meanwhile, I hope that you will remember us and return often: that you will think of this lovely place – with its Yard, its quadrangles and Houses, its libraries and chapel and trees – that you will think of it as a place that is permanently yours, as a home where you will always be welcome, and always warmly received.

Keeping Our Memory Accurate

Department of Afro-American Studies Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration

April 8, 2000

I RETURNED TO HARVARD in 1991, and can speak at first hand only about this past decade. But I would still like to glance backward a few decades to remember how sparse was the formal knowledge of – and real education in – any aspect of the African American experience. I want to use myself as an example of the kind of ignorance that prevailed at the time.

I entered secondary school in the fall of 1948. It was a very small school – a total of ninety students and eleven teachers – on a remote hillside in rural Connecticut: high academic standards, a demanding curriculum, and an astonishingly dedicated faculty.

Nonetheless, during my four years there, I did not read a single work by an African American, or a single book *about* African Americans, and there were very few references in our American history course textbook to African Americans. Nor were there any African American students in the school.

I do not say this in any spirit of criticism of the school or its teachers. I'm only describing a situation that must have been typical then of hundreds of thousands of students, in thousands of towns throughout the entire United States. I knew essentially

Keeping Our Memory Accurate

nothing about this absolutely central aspect of our collective heritage. In fact, not only did I not know anything, I didn't even (as was once said of a legendary benighted student) suspect anything.

How far had I progressed, if at all, by 1958 or 1968? A little, but not very much. Reading about major events in the press, such as the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the entire unfolding of the civil rights movement, was one thing. But serious study, actual knowledge in any depth, was a totally different thing. And in that arena, I moved incredibly slowly.

By the 1960s, I had been reading Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and others. But if you had asked me who Zora Neale Hurston was, or Alain Locke, Sojourner Truth, James Weldon Johnson, or even Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley, I would have drawn a complete blank. If there is any solace to be drawn from my own situation (and it is, of course, of no solace), the only explanation I can offer is that schools and colleges at the time provided us with little or no help of any kind.

But here it is essential to be honest. Neither I – nor countless others like me – reached out, or sought with energy on our own to find out more; to understand not only the *terribilità* of our society's past, its history and experience, but also to recognize how little that history had changed. As a result, we failed to see – or acknowledge – how much responsibility we ourselves bore for the continuation of circumstances that remained unjust. Ignorance there was, but also a devastating blindness.

In Martin Luther King's last book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, published in 1967, he wrote:

The history books ... have almost completely ignored the contribution of the Negro in American history. ... All too many [people] are unaware of the fact that the first American to shed blood in the revolution which freed this country from British oppression was a black seaman named Crispus Attucks. [They] are almost totally oblivious of the fact that it was a Negro physician, Dr. Daniel Hale Williams,

An Education

*who performed the first successful operation on the heart, . . . and that another Negro physician, Dr. Charles Drew, was largely responsible for developing the method of separating blood plasma and storing it on a large scale, a process that saved thousands of lives in World War II.*¹

Similar points could easily have been made about the nation's lack of knowledge concerning the brilliant contributions of African Americans to the music not only of our own country, but of the world. And Ralph Ellison began to construct, at least as early as 1970, a new genealogy for the American language, American speech, and American literature.

In his stunning essay, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison reminded us that Walt Whitman

viewed the spoken idiom of Negro Americans as a source for a native grand opera. Its flexibility, its musicality, its rhythms, free-wheeling diction, and metaphors as projected in Negro American folklore, were absorbed by the creators of our great nineteenth-century literature even when the majority of blacks were still enslaved. Mark Twain celebrated [that same idiom] in the prose of Huckleberry Finn; without the presence of blacks, the book could not have been written. No Huck and Jim, no American novel as we know it. For not only is the black man a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence, but Jim's condition as American and Huck's commitment to freedom are at the moral center of the novel.

*In other words, had there been no blacks, certain creative tensions arising from the cross-purposes of whites and blacks would also not have existed. Not only would there have been no Faulkner; there would have been no Stephen Crane, who found certain basic themes of his writing in the Civil War. Thus, also, there would have been no Hemingway, who took Crane as a source and guide.*²

These few examples only touch the surface of all that was still either unnoticed, or unknown, or consciously omitted and there-

Keeping Our Memory Accurate

fore uncelebrated, concerning the history and contributions of African Americans – and of African American experience – to the large pattern of the national and international history in which we all share, and through which we are all so deeply related to one another, through so much of the dreadfulness of the past, as well as through moments of close kinship and love.

Therefore, if we want to grasp at least part of the impact and significance of what has happened since 1970 – shortly after Dr. King wrote his last book, when Ellison wrote the essay from which I just read, and when Harvard's Department of Afro-American Studies was founded – we need to visit the stacks of Widener Library, or bookstores, or visit any number of Web sites, or read our University's course catalogue to see that there has been nothing less than an incalculable expansion, a massive seismic shift with continuous reverberations, in terms of the extent of new knowledge, and the capacity for greater self-knowledge, that now exists in this nation because of the powerful growth of African American studies as a central field of learning during the past three decades.

When we think about major progress in most spheres of life, it is not surprising that we tend to focus on political, legal, economic, societal events – on achievements arrived at through great struggle, conflict, and pain. But there are other very profound, if less dramatic, victories that are also difficult, and every bit as vital (indeed, essential) to our ability to make even elementary sense of our world, of ourselves, of our values, and of our purposes.

From this point of view, new illuminating knowledge gained through persistent, deep research – research that can so often seem fruitless and inconclusive while it is in process, knowledge gained through careful analysis, through imaginative as well as incisive scholarship: these are among our most precious resources. Very few things are as powerful in helping our quest to understand other individuals and groups, or grasp the substantiality of what they have experienced or created. Little else will equip us so well in our effort to keep the human record honest, straight, and

An Education

clear; to keep memory *accurate* as well as *fresh*; to make the present comprehensible, or to endow the future with potential meaning and hopefulness.

This form of knowledge and understanding, with its own kind of saving power, is what research and teaching – what faculty and universities – can at their best provide to us, so long as we come to the enterprise with minds and hearts that are open and yet disciplined, responsive but also discerning.

Of course, this task never ends. There is always so much more to do. From one perspective, we have barely begun – in the many fields that encompass Afro-American and related studies, and in our human and institutional conditions – the process of genuine education that needs to take place before knowledge becomes understanding, and understanding is transformed into increasingly humane and communal relationships.

From another point of view, however, the distance traveled from the ignorance and blindness of 1970 is immense. And a large proportion of the pioneering work and many of the landmark studies and changes, have come from Harvard's superlative faculty in its Afro-American Studies Department, as well as from a number of the University's cognate departments and programs.

It is not a boast, but rather a simple fact, that Harvard's department leads all others in its brilliance, in its magnetism, in its contributions to learning as well as to public life, in its rich variety, and in the sheer abundance of its inspiring human qualities.

The list of the department's faculty in this year's course catalogue includes a large portion of the world's most distinguished scholars in Afro-American studies, including Anthony Appiah, Lawrence Bobo, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Barbara Johnson, Randall Kennedy, Jamaica Kincaid, Lorand Matory, Marcy Morgan, Orlando Patterson, Werner Sollors, Cornel West, William Julius Wilson, and of course our extraordinary chair, leader, force of nature, and friend, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

If the Department of Afro-American Studies is now embedded in the heartland of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, as well as in

Keeping Our Memory Accurate

our professional schools, all of the faculty I have just mentioned, and many others from Harvard's past and present, are responsible for that great transformation in knowledge and understanding.

If Harvard undergraduates and graduate students, and so many younger people throughout the world, can now learn and even take for granted far more than I had ever "suspected" half a century ago, then these are the teachers and scholars who have made that possible.

Is there more to be done? Yes – far, far more – and at times the journey ahead can often seem more difficult than the distance traversed, if we mean progress in real understanding, and therefore in the conditions of life for so many African Americans and others in our society. There is still ignorance and blindness – and too often the pathology of hatred and violence – to be overcome.

At the same time, I want to assure you that this university is fully dedicated to the continuous building and expanding of Afro-American studies, in all their richness and complexity.

And Harvard will continue to take ethnicity and race into account, along with many other factors, as it admits students. We will also continue to provide whatever amount of financial aid is required to keep the doors open at the College to talented students from all backgrounds and circumstances.

Finally, if I may speak to our graduates among you, we look forward to seeing you and welcoming you here, again and again, whenever you come: anniversary or no anniversary; in season and out of season; in the best of times or the worst of times. This is your Memorial Church. These are your quadrangles, pathways, and halls of learning. This is your Harvard.

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 41–42.

2 Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 109.

Intensity and Form

Sydney Freedberg Memorial Service

April 27, 1998

MY FIRST MEETING with Sydney Freedberg was one of those lucky chance encounters that turns out, later in life, to have been far more significant than I could possibly have guessed at the time.

I was in my first year of graduate study, and had arrived at Harvard, more or less fresh from Oxford, only several months before. For some reason, my spring-term collection of seminars in very early to quite senescent English Renaissance literature included intensive readings in the inspired, but also barely intelligible, verse of *Piers Plowman*; Robert Burton's endlessly cheerful *Anatomy of Melancholy*; and John Dryden's *Fables*, written during his declining years in a style that was an original, but not totally irresistible, mixture of suppressed neoclassicism and hearty, quaint Chaucerianism.

Searching for comic relief, I found in the pages of the course catalogue an offering by someone called Professor Freedberg, with lectures that apparently included a slide projector and color transparencies, featuring Technicolor samples of selected works by Masaccio, Piero, Mantegna, Botticelli, and others. So I wandered over to the Fogg one day, at the appropriate time, masquerading

Intensity and Form

as a *quattrocento* interloper, and immediately became mesmerized by Sydney's matchless voice, the undulations of that spoken prose, with all those modulated syntactical transitions, that diction and rhetoric shaped to figure forth the patterns of meaning in paintings that Sydney's own style somehow managed both to envelop and to illuminate simultaneously.

After the lecture, I found myself standing outside the Fogg, at the top of the steps, when Sydney emerged for a quick cigarette. We chatted for a few moments – never having met before – and somehow the question of what we were reading came up. Sydney asked me if I had read Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*. I hadn't. You should, he said. It is very powerful and disturbing. It is an important book.

I was intrigued, surprised, and even moved. This person – a sort of energized Pater, scholarly Vasari, more volumetric Berenson, more full-bodied Wölfflin all rolled into one – this person was reading contemporary German fiction, grounded in the Nazi period and the war. I learned only later, of course, about Sydney's own war experience. But in that first meeting, I felt not only an immediate rapport, but also the sense that there must be any number of levels of complexity within this stylized, imposing, but also approachable Self standing next to me.

We all know that deep reservoirs of feeling and affection, as well as strong urgencies, coexisted in Sydney with an equally strong desire for equilibrium, poise, and balance: unusual intensity, pressing against an equally unusual passion for form. While I could not possibly have understood or articulated much (if any) of this back in 1961 on the steps of the Fogg, I knew that I wanted to see more of this person – to learn more from him, and to try to come to know him better as a friend, if at all possible.

Sydney's book on Andrea del Sarto was published two years after that first meeting, and I still have a pencil mark on page twenty-seven, next to a sentence that discussed "the absence of any unaccustomed spiritual dimension" in Andrea's work. "There is," Sydney wrote, "the tenderest subtlety . . . and there are episodes

An Education

of excitement, but there is no urgent passion. . . . Andrea does not have . . . the motive – the aspiring tensions of the mind and spirit . . . powerfully to develop the resources of his own new variant” of the classical style.¹

When I read this, I understood (or *thought* I understood) a great deal more about Sydney because his idea of the classical style at its apex was obviously a dynamic one, in which spiritual, moral, and other human passions are constantly in tension with idealized forms – with the grace and fluency of rhythmic lines and shifting patterns.

The apparent incongruity that I first felt between Sydney’s Piero or Mantegna on the one hand, and his engagement with Günter Grass on the other, suddenly diminished and soon disappeared. The dynamics of the man were so closely linked not only to the Renaissance painting and style he was so passionate about, but also to contemporary literature and many other aspects of life that were not “classical” in any conventional sense, but that nonetheless possessed urgency – possessed moral and other energies seeking expression in one or another kind of aesthetic form, where form and aspiring energy simply needed one another, if either was to become at all coherent, or reach resolution, or be sustainable.

All of Sydney’s books stand in our library, on a convenient shelf, as tokens of friendship, true *souvenirs* – reminders of what we learned from him, of what he himself achieved, and of what he meant to us. As a person, scholar, and connoisseur, he was all of a piece: formidable but affectionate; exacting and self-exacting, but generous, human, and very deep. He cared about art because he cared about life. All of us who were fortunate to be his friends are now diminished – greatly diminished – by his loss. The world seems just that much less intriguing, less welcoming, less intricate and surprising, less affectionate, and surely less grand in the quality and capaciousness of its aspirations.

1 S.J. Freedberg, *Andrea del Sarto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 27–28.

Something Luminous

Harry Levin Memorial Service

October 20, 1994

I AM HERE to say a few words about Harry Levin, mainly in my role as one of his countless students. I first sought him out not long after I came to Harvard, from Oxford, already focused on Elizabethan literature.

I needed a dissertation advisor who would not only be open-minded and patient, but also indulgent: because while I was quite sure that I wanted to write on the poetry of Philip Sidney, I was far from having any particular topic in mind. I knew only that Sidney's work interested me, and that his poetry seemed to me to be very important.

To my astonishment, that was enough for Harry. He immediately agreed to supervise me – purely “on spec,” as we might say, more or less sight unseen. It all happened very quickly and graciously, and I came away from my meeting with him almost wishing that he had said no instead of yes. For, after all, if he was willing to take a chance on me, that meant I had no choice but to deliver. And at that moment, deliverance in any tangible shape or form seemed very far off indeed.

As events turned out, he was the ideal supervisor. He would

listen very attentively to my rather disconnected perceptions and ideas with his head slightly tilted, and an expression that seemed to indicate real curiosity on his part. He always gave me the reassuring impression that I might actually say something interesting and more or less intelligent. And he seemed hopeful on one's behalf: hopeful that the conversation on any given day would be enlivened by a new insight or remark worth remembering.

The chance of achieving that result was, of course, very remote. Since Harry had read virtually everything, and since his own mind had already raced far beyond the edges of whatever literary space I was just beginning to explore, there were certainly not many – if any – surprises one could ever hope to offer him.

His own advice, meanwhile, was always tentative rather than prescriptive. There were no sudden showers of lists of articles or books one was told to consult. Of course it was important to be reading widely and learning everything possible about the entire Elizabethan period and beyond. But there was always the conviction, which Harry so strongly communicated, that the poetry itself – in my case, Philip Sidney's own work – mattered first and last, and that if one stayed with the poetry long enough, it would sooner or later yield up its secrets.

Looking back, I can now see how his entire way of teaching and advising was so consistent with his own approach to literature and criticism. In his essays and books, he could be systematic and press an analytical argument when he felt it was necessary. But more than anything, he was guided by his extraordinary sensibility, by those wonderful antennae always scanning and picking up the least flicker of any significant literary vibration in the atmosphere. Those qualities, so intuitive and finely tuned, made him the best possible supervisor for a young and uncertain student like myself.

They also insured, almost by definition, that there would be no Levin "school" of criticism or followers, no obvious legacy in terms of a transferable critical methodology or apparatus, because

Something Luminous

no one could really emulate him. How does one emulate an original and unerring sensibility? He wrote with unselfconscious elegance and style; and that, too, precluded imitation.

We are left in the end with essays and books of literary criticism that are in fact unique, because they are so clearly the mark of this particular mind and man: work that continues to stimulate us with its learning, its stunning insights, its sudden aperçus, its bright illuminations.

In 1974, after Edmund Wilson's death, Harry wrote an eloquent tribute to Wilson. Toward the end of the essay, he quoted two couplets that Wilson had once sent to a number of friends in the form of witty but serious New Year's resolutions and advice. Reading these lines, one can see why Harry plucked them out of all of Wilson's writings, and why they might have had a special meaning for Harry himself: because they do seem to embody so much of his own character, his own attitudes, his own perspective on both life and literature.

*Beware of dogmas backed by faith;
Steer clear of conflicts unto death.*

*Keep going; never stoop; sit tight;
Read something luminous at night.¹*

1 Harry Levin, *Memories of the Moderns* (New York: New Directions, 1980), 197.

Consequential Minds and Presences

*On the Occasion of Receiving an Honorary Degree
Oxford University, November 23, 1998*

IF THERE IS any academic approximation of the *ne plus ultra*, it is surely an honorary degree from Oxford. I have rarely before suffered from any delusions of adequacy in my works and days. But if there is anything at all that might tempt me to succumb, it would be just this experience of being awarded a Doctorate of Civil Law – or indeed any other sort of law – *Oxoniensis*. For this experience, and for this occasion, I thank you.

History, in this case stretching back more than three and a half centuries, is not always kind or convenient. Harvard's debt to Oxford is in many ways profound, but if we think for a moment about origins, then I fear that my own university must be seen – in its early relationship to Oxford – as nothing less than a renegade, indeed, an apostate.

You may (or perhaps may not) remember that the first meeting of the stockholders of the newly chartered Massachusetts Bay Company was held in the town of Cambridge, England, in August of 1629. And by far the largest number of educated people who sailed to New England, especially to Massachusetts, in the

Consequential Minds and Presences

1630s had been spawned by Britain's most feverish and notorious nurseries of puritan learning – Emmanuel College, Trinity College, and similar unreliable resorts at Cambridge University.

Of the original twelve Overseers appointed in 1638 to look after the newly born Harvard College, seven had degrees from Cambridge, four had no degrees but had either brothers or sons who had attended Cambridge, and one – only one of the those first twelve apostles – was an Oxford man: John Davenport of Merton.

And Davenport – one might almost have guessed – turned out to be among the most disputatious, restless, fractious, and choleric of the twelve. He lasted only one year on the Overseers, and then left precipitously to found a new city in an utterly obscure, desolate place somewhere to the south of Cambridge: a place called – as fate would have it – New Haven, Connecticut, ultimately the home of President Levin's formidable and now, under his wise rule, altogether unfractious institution of learning, which still houses within it a College named Davenport.

So it was that even the one, single, lone Oxonian particle at Harvard left not the slightest electrical trace or charge there, but ultimately made its only lasting, visible – indeed imperishable – mark on the body politic of our cousins at Yale.

There is one final twist to this brief saga. In 1636, the very year in which Harvard was founded as a puritan congregational College, Archbishop Laud was the reigning High Church Chancellor of Oxford, and he received King Charles I in suitable splendor on a state visit, precisely here, in these very precincts.

In fact, as we know, Oxford became (for a while) King Charles' Anglo-Catholic military headquarters during the early years of the Civil War – while Harvard and Massachusetts were sending radical puritan colonists back across the sea to serve as reinforcements on behalf of Mr. Cromwell's effort to unseat King Charles and (yes) even to vanquish Brasenose, Balliol, and all our other local collegiate haunts.

An Education

As a result of these discomfoting events, the city where Angelica and I now reside is called not Oxford, Massachusetts, but Cambridge. And John Harvard's name is to be found on the graduate rolls not of New College or Christ Church or Magdalen, but of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

Fortunately, the memory of all that distant contentiousness had dissipated by the time I entered Oxford in 1956. The 1950s were an unusual historical moment: they seemed distinctive then, and they continue to seem so in retrospect. There were still lingering traces of the aftermath of World War II: modest scarcities; very little heat, and certainly not any hot water in my New College rooms; a muted spartan spirit; and a sense that the very great weight of experience – from the previous half century of war and economic devastation – had certainly not yet been lifted.

But if there were ample residual skepticism and wariness, born of experience, there was also a feeling that much of the world had now been given a new lease on life, with a touch of revived innocence and even some qualified confidence about what might be done to make the future different from the past.

Most of all, it was a time of consequential minds and presences, before the era when entire new systems of universities had been created; before the number of academics working in every conceivable field of learning – across nations, and around the world – had grown to such vast proportions; before ever-increasing specialization; before the professionalization of methodology, the stultifying effects of untethered theory, and the advent of great avalanches of academic manuscripts and articles cascading annually into print.

In short, it was in many respects an age of innocence, not in terms of the quality and power and incisiveness of the minds at work, but in terms of the relative lack of heavy and elaborate machinery employed in the process of production. There was, so to speak, a very great deal of output for a modest amount of required input. The yield was high, and the number of interlocu-

Consequential Minds and Presences

tors still small enough to constitute a genuine community of people engaged in the most serious – but not humorless – forms of creative and disciplined study, as well as continuous conversation.

In 1956, W. H. Auden had just been installed as Professor of Poetry, and I went immediately to Blackwell's to buy one of those little pamphlets – another sort of modesty and innocence in presentation – containing Auden's first major lecture, "Making, Knowing and Judging."

During my years at New College, Isaiah Berlin gave his inaugural lecture – another pamphlet, entitled "Two Concepts of Liberty." George Kennan was the Eastman Professor in 1957–58, and I remember listening to his Reith Lectures on the BBC in the fall of 1957. There was Hugh Trevor-Roper's inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of History, and J. L. Austin giving the lectures that would eventually become the wonderful little volume called *Sense and Sensibilia*.

Meanwhile a young John Bayley was my main tutor in English literature, with Lord David Cecil offering regular classes in literary criticism at New College, and Christopher Tolkien doing his best to teach me the stresses and strains of Anglo-Saxon.

The little pamphlets and the books from Blackwell's began to pile up rather quickly – especially since almost everything seemed to cost either one and sixpence, or at most two and six. One read, one talked, one traveled, looked, listened, and sometimes learned.

Was it really so unusual a time – so refreshingly bright and exhilarating – or was it mainly because I was one and twenty and very much in the mood for exhilaration? I rather think that there was in fact something special about that particular moment: it was, as Henry James might have said, "the real thing." Not that today isn't also perfectly real – and also excellent. But it is a reality and an excellence that exist on the further side of another intervening half century of experience – experience that has especially transformed the nature of academic and university life around the globe, including our modes of inquiry.

An Education

Allow me to close by simply expressing my deepest thanks: for the honor you have bestowed; for the indulgence you have shown to the renegade apostate past of Harvard; for the rich experience of the comparatively innocent and always inspiring Oxford I knew as a student – and for the continuing power and warmth of the Oxford that I know today, and that I continue to treasure dearly.

Passion As Task

*Address to Celebrate the Close of the University Campaign
Sanders Theatre, May 13, 2000*

A FEW YEARS AGO, in this very theatre, we began a major undertaking together, and we did so without knowing quite how, or perhaps even whether or when, we might finish.

There were certainly enough challenges when we set out, and if we had thought about them too long, we might well have decided not to go forward at all. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Class of 1821, once remarked that any great or substantial performance requires at least “a little fanaticism in the performer.” He might have added that a tinge of naïveté, and a touch of the quixotic, can also come in handy.

Early on in the campaign, Fred Glimp sent me a *New Yorker* cartoon showing a puzzled, slightly stunned, and exasperated banker sitting at his desk, staring at a piece of paper and saying: “A billion is a thousand million? Why wasn’t I informed of this?”

Too much information, too soon, is not necessarily a good thing. A certain amount of blessed innocence can sometimes enable us to play stunning cadenzas, create sublime soufflés, and even soar well beyond the most aerial of fund-raising goals.

An Education

The chief problem with such performances – or in fact any performance – is that they may not, of course, actually succeed. “The play,” wrote Heywood Hale Broun about an ill-fated work, “opened at 8:40 sharp and ended at 10:40 dull.” “I saw the piece under extremely unfortunate conditions,” said George S. Kaufman about another bit of drama doomed to oblivion. What were the unfortunate conditions? “The curtain,” said Kaufman, “was up.”

There is always a risk that the show (or the soufflé) will flop, and ours certainly had no guarantee of success. We faced, almost inevitably, a profusion of potential difficulties. We knew, for instance, that thousands of Harvard graduates and friends had not really been visited – perhaps not even fleetingly waved at – by anyone from the University for quite a long while previous to the fund drive. Then, after so many degrees of separation, they found themselves suddenly lavished with decanal, provostial, presidential, and even loftier ministrations. What could possibly have accounted for this unexpected superflux of warmth and jollity?

One thing that certainly did not account for it was anything resembling the Reverend Mr. Collins’ behavior in *Pride and Prejudice*. You may remember that at one point in the novel, Collins became unaccountably more demonstrative than ever before, because he had begun to have marital designs on one of Mr. Bennet’s daughters. Alert to the Reverend’s transparent motives as well as his extravagant manner, Mr. Bennet turned at one point and said, “May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?”

In the case of our own campaign, we can answer candidly that there was simply no time – even if we had wanted it, which we did not – for “previous study” or rehearsal. Our impulses were very much “of the moment,” and they sprang, sometimes quite awkwardly, from our collective concern for – and commitment to – the University.

Nonetheless, there was some worry – given the extraordinary size of our goal – that alumni and others might just run away in droves, or find ways to avoid engaging in conversation, at the

Passion As Task

very appearance of a dean, or indeed of anyone who looked even remotely “developmental.” Bob Stone’s long and large shadow quickly became one of the icons of the fund drive: instantly recognizable far in the distance, it allowed plenty of time for people to dive off their respective boulevards into the surrounding shrubbery, or simply scatter indiscriminately.

Even if the streets were sometimes emptied, and the echoing squares deserted, legions of Harvard loyalists nonetheless did rally around: our national campaign chairs; our honorary campaign chairs; our Major Gifts Committee chairs and members; our many campaign advisory committees and chairs for the professional schools and other important units; the Committee on University Resources and its remarkable executive committee; the Harvard College Fund and its chairs; the Harvard Alumni Association; reunion class agents and secretaries; the Board of Overseers; the Corporation; literally thousands of individual volunteers, abroad as well as in this country; and, indispensably, our extraordinary professional development staff and its consummate leadership.

+ + +

This immense assembly was, in my entire experience, the most talented, dedicated, effective, and numerous multitude ever gathered together on behalf of a single university. And, clearly, it required at least that much firepower to overcome the last challenge that I want to mention: to wit, the widespread perception that Harvard did not, perhaps, need any more money or resources than it already possessed.

This issue was, of course, a serious one. What may be less well known is that the perception was far from new. In fact, it has a quite long and interesting history, and I want to take a few moments to discuss it, because it can help to place our present situation in a useful perspective. It can also increase our understanding of the unusual – in fact, historic – significance of the campaign we have just concluded.

Glancing backward, here is a sample of what we can find:

An Education

The President [of Harvard] has long been impressed with a conviction that the wealth of the University is greatly overestimated by her friends and by the public.... She is not wealthy; partly because she has control over only a limited portion of her income. The greater part of her funds are given on strict and inviolable conditions, and are not applicable to the new emergencies of the times.¹

That was President Thomas Hill in 1868. Hill was one of our more astute presidents, and he wanted Harvard to become and remain the preeminent institution of its kind in the nation. Why were more resources necessary? Recent increases in the number of students, Hill explained, had led to the need for more classrooms and recitation halls, more financial aid, and more scientific equipment.

For example, the Rumford Professor (who was then a chemist) was in the awkward position of having to borrow most of his laboratory equipment from a local manufacturer before each lecture, and then cart it all back immediately afterward. This practice, along with other logistical marvels, contributed only moderately to President Hill's efforts to increase productivity at the University.

Quite apart from a shortage of equipment, there was always the threat of a potential dearth of students, difficult as that may be for us to imagine today. Larger numbers of students were essential to the academic health and strength of the College. But because each student cost more to educate than the tuition that was charged, the arithmetic never seemed to work out quite as cleverly as our predecessors had hoped. President Hill acknowledged in one of his reports, "The very prosperity of the College creates its poverty."

The year 1867 was not necessarily an optimal moment for assessing Harvard's financial situation. If we make another probe, however, we find the following:

An opinion appears to be prevalent in the country that Harvard is a rich institution which has only to ask for money in order to obtain

Passion As Task

*it in limitless amounts, but unfortunately the work she is doing today exceeds her resources, even with the most rigid economy.*²

That was President Lowell in 1911, a president who is generally regarded as having reigned at a time when it was possible to have all of one's cake and to eat it, too. After all, Mr. Lowell built more buildings (with more colonnades and cupolas, as well as more pilasters, with a greater *mélange* of Palladian, Mannerist, and neo-Georgian portals and porticos) than any other president in Harvard's history. Yet, as he confessed more than once in his annual reports, the University was in deficit a great deal of the time, and even "ordinary" faculty salary increases were enough to make the deficit grow.

Finally, one last piece of presidential lamentation:

*Two legends are now current in certain circles in the United States: one is to the effect that the days of private philanthropy are over; the other is that Harvard, unlike other universities, is so rich it needs no more money. Both [legends] are demonstrably false.*³

That was President James Conant in 1948, and he followed this opening statement by saying that the University's endowment – largely restricted and therefore inflexible, with very little of it available to the President and Fellows – covered just 25 percent of Harvard's operating budget; that salaries needed to be raised; that the cost of scientific and other facilities was increasing rapidly; and that tuition had recently grown by more than 30 percent and could not continue at such a pace. "The question which is uppermost in the minds of all college presidents today," said Conant, "[is] how to meet the increased costs [of higher education]."

+ + +

If we take the statements made over the course of about a century by Presidents Hill, Lowell, and Conant, it is worth asking whether we can account for so persistent a presidential impression con-

An Education

cerning Harvard's relative poverty, in the face of so strong a general public perception concerning Harvard's considerable wealth. How did such an apparent paradox come to haunt this very modest institution of ours, and what was the reality of the situation?

The beginning of an answer can be found in an essay written, not so long ago, by Oscar Handlin. "Harvard College," wrote Handlin,

was always poor, strapped by a meager endowment. . . . Mismanagement by Treasurer John Hancock (Class of 1754) and the disturbances of [the Revolutionary] war wiped away [even the few endowed funds that existed]. In the nineteenth century, despite Harvard's longevity, prestige, and reputation, the total [income from endowment] remained small and vulnerable . . . less than \$200,000 in 1845.⁴

If circumstances were relatively dire in 1845, they were somewhat – but *only* somewhat – better sixty years later. For instance, in 1904, a plaintive and obviously frustrated President Charles Eliot found himself facing his seventh deficit in nine years, and he decided – fearless fellow that he was – to cut the salary budget of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in order to bring things into balance. He did so, and he even survived. But in the following autumn, the undergraduate student body contained 118 fewer matriculants than predicted, and the loss in tuition revenues was substantial enough to leave the president still paddling about in an unappealing pool of crimson-red ink.

Therefore, the University's financial strength and stability were very long in coming. They were mainly a product of the last three-quarters of the twentieth century. Even then, however, the change was gradual, and there were any number of setbacks. In fact, we have almost certainly forgotten just how recent was the creation of certain programs that today may seem absolutely essential, eternal, and integral to everything we do.

For instance, some years after World War II, President

Passion As Task

Conant reported that tuition still continued to rise rapidly and that more and more students were applying for financial aid, creating a great deal of stress and strain for the College.

To meet this steadily worsening situation we have, in the last two years, greatly expanded the use of loans and student employment. . . . Scholarship stipends have been trimmed. . . . Perhaps even more serious, we have been forced to restrict undesirably the number of candidates for admission to whom we could give scholarship help. We are now making scholarship awards to a significantly smaller proportion of our students than either Yale or Princeton is, and we are losing scores of promising boys because of our inability to help.⁵

That was January 1952. There was no Harvard policy of need-blind admissions and need-based aid – not even an expectation (just forty-eight years ago) that the University could ever hope to achieve such a policy. And although it may seem preposterous, we are said to have been losing scores of talented students, simply because of a lack of money, to two other notorious institutions that were less exotic, mythic, and polynomial than Harvard.

+ + +

So, what are we to conclude? There does seem to have been something genuine about Harvard's relative poverty – whether in John Hancock's day, or President Hill's, or President Lowell's, or even as recently as President Conant's. But does that mean the legend of relative wealth was a total illusion?

Not really. If we look more closely, we can see that the University decided, about a century and a half ago, to begin to press beyond the limits of what nearly all other American colleges or universities were prepared to do, either in terms of quality or quantity, of depth or breadth, of intellectual variety and scope and reach. In fact, Harvard decided to pursue all the different aspects of its multifarious agenda simultaneously.

It was not necessarily surprising, therefore, that revenues for

An Education

the operating budget seemed always one or two steps (at least) behind expenditures, and that the endowment – not large to begin with, and always heavily restricted – had a very difficult time reaching the point where it began to be at all consequential in size.

Let me offer one or two examples of this process, in slightly greater detail, to observe what actually happened. The way in which Harvard approached the creation of its library, for instance, can give us – in a snapshot – some idea of how the University's financial dynamics tended to work. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, our library already had a reputation as the best college library in the United States, even though it had virtually no funds for the actual purchase of books. People and institutions had simply begun to send materials to us, free of charge.

During the mid- to late nineteenth century, we received – in a short space of time – 1,500 volumes from a Dr. Henry Wales: volumes “mostly on philology, in German, Italian and Oriental literature.” Then from somewhere in outer darkness arrived an interesting collection of modern (not ancient) Latin poetry, together with “sixty-two volumes and nineteen pamphlets, largely of the same character.”

From the Midwest came eighty-four volumes of the legislative documents of the State of Ohio. From across the Atlantic, fifty-four volumes of duplicates from the imperial library in Berlin; then a singular copy of the Koran from someone in Calcutta, and a fine collection of manuscripts in the language of the Delaware Indians. Baptist societies, Sunday School societies, and all manner of bibliomaniacs sent us their most *recherché* treasures. Finally, the City of New York sent us ninety-four volumes of its own imperishable bureaucratic prose, together with an apparently accurate map of itself.

All this (and much more) came pouring in, and we accepted it all, creating near-crisis conditions. President Eliot reported one year that there were “42,000 [uncatalogued] volumes kept in 16

Passion As Task

different buildings, of which only four are fireproof.” Stacks of books in the aisles of the main College library made the place more or less impassable. There was a perpetual shortage of staff as well as space. In other words, Harvard was determined to have an unparalleled university library collection, even if there was no place to put it, and even if faculty and students could not actually find – and gain access to – the books they were looking for.

Nor was the financial problem solved – in fact, it was for a while made worse – when Widener Library was eventually constructed. Archibald Coolidge, the chair of the Library Council and himself a great benefactor, wrote:

For me the tremendous question is one of finance. How are we going to move into the new building, how are we going to run it when we are in, how can we buy any more books, or catalogue them.... I feel rather hopeless and bewildered.... Even my private finances are crippled.⁶

In a public statement after the dedication of Widener, Coolidge wrote that the new library offered “unequaled opportunities.” But, he added, the “dark side to the picture is the cost of running ... such a Library as Harvard now possesses.” When asked by a friend how much money was expended on the construction of the new library, Coolidge replied that he did not know, and he doubted that he – or anyone – would ever know. Nor, given the nature of the predicament, was it clear that he even *wanted* to know.

Nevertheless, Coolidge added, “We need not now enter into the question of ways and means. In its Library, as elsewhere, Harvard has to accept the burden of its greatness.... Whatever difficulties such a possession brings with it, they must and will be overcome.”

+ + +

We can see something like this pattern repeated in nearly every

part and parcel of the University, decade after decade. When the renowned Professor Louis Agassiz was brought from Switzerland to Harvard, for instance, little did the President and Fellows suspect the full extent of what they were about to unleash. Professor Agassiz believed that the *Jardin des Plantes* was the premier research facility of its kind in the world, and nothing less than a New England equivalent of that Parisian phenomenon could possibly be adequate for Harvard.

Soon afterward, Professor Agassiz began – on many occasions – storming the Caribbean seas and the vast Gulf of Mexico in search of every conceivable specimen that could be seized. Like a marauding, benign conquistador – or a curatorial Captain Ahab – he pursued his objects with irresistible force and passion.

In 1867, for example, President Hill reported that Harvard's collections had “been made rich by the return of Professor Agassiz from Brazil, bringing with him an untold wealth [of objects] gathered principally in the Valley of the Amazon.” This new hoard, said President Hill, has “been repacked in fresh alcohol, but it is still in a state comparatively useless, crowded in barrels and kegs in the cellar, for want of room to bring them into sight.”

And this, of course, was only the beginning. At various times in the next decades, Agassiz acquired tens of thousands of items, including – in one good year – “a mass of fossil vertebrates, mainly mammalian, . . . from Wyoming, Kansas, and Texas”; an “important collection of Solenhofen fossils. . . , and an immense and very valuable collection of the Silurian fossils of Bohemia.”

With the help of his own separate board of trustees, and his own private financial means, Agassiz built his own version of the *Jardin des Plantes* – what we in Cambridge now affectionately call the Museum of Comparative Zoology – and he added exhibition room after room, wing after wing, without any financial contributions from Harvard.

Eventually, of course, the professor and his board deeded their entire establishment – together with its unfortunately insufficient

Passion As Task

endowment – to the President and Fellows. It would have been churlish to have greeted this act of munificence with anything less than an ecstatic chorus of hosannas. Yet President Eliot's subsequent annual reports reveal how difficult it was to swallow, in its entirety, the whole of the MCZ. Fifteen years after Harvard had accepted responsibility for the Museum, Eliot praised its cornucopia of curiosities, but he also recorded – as he put it – “three unwelcome facts.”

First, the Museum desperately needed more exhibition space, including an “aquarium and a live-stock room” to house various sorts of not-yet fossilized living creatures. This particular lacuna presented an unusual challenge for an otherwise tranquil university that had been designed mainly for the care and nourishment of ordinary human beings. Second, as always, more staff were needed for the Museum. And third, the MCZ owed the University \$24,113.79, a debt incurred when the Corporation loaned the Museum enough money to construct its most recent addition of an unspecified number of cubic feet.

+ + +

Whether we consider the growth of the library, or Mr. Agassiz's Museum, or Harvard's expansion of departments, professional schools, and other important empires unto themselves, we can find the same sweeping forward movement, across a broad institutional front, with expenditures nearly always outpacing revenues.

This approach to university growth and educational aspiration was obviously very risky. And it is clearly not a methodology that could usefully guide us today. But the theory that lay behind it was fundamentally simple. It seemed to Harvard and its leaders that it was far better – in those earlier expansionist times – to try to be unsurpassingly superb and to live, if necessary, close to the ragged edge than to be supremely safe, without ever discovering where the edge might possibly be.

If this was a hazardous course to take, it was nevertheless

An Education

rooted in the deep conviction that if one could create something absolutely excellent, people would eventually be drawn to it, would value it, would identify with it, would contribute to it, and would cherish it. And that is precisely what happened. The hazard turned out, in the end, to be a hazard of good fortune.

Harvard was, in a real sense, constantly racing to catch up with itself, even as late as the 1950s, when our financial aid program – and a good deal more – was struggling against difficult pressures. And this unusual situation helps to explain why, given all that the University had undertaken, built, and achieved in the century that preceded the 1950s, it was possible for Harvard to look very wealthy in terms of its facilities – its array of schools and libraries, departments, laboratories, and museums: it was possible for Harvard to look as if it had, in effect, everything one could possibly want or need, while at the same time it was equally plausible for the University to be nearly always behind in terms of its ability to support financially the exceptional quality, scale, and variety of all that it had created. The very prosperity of the University, as President Hill had suggested, contributed to its feeling, if not of poverty, then at least of considerable financial difficulty and stringency.

+ + +

Since the late 1950s and early 1960s, several developments have obviously happened – step by step – to change Harvard’s situation significantly. In this regard, the significant contributions made during the presidencies of Nathan Pusey and Derek Bok were obviously crucial to establishing a genuinely firm foundation for Harvard’s financial health. There is, however, a final reason that can help us to explain why we felt so relatively “less well off” just four or five decades ago, and how we have come to reach the different position in which we now find ourselves.

That reason has to do – overwhelmingly – with all of you in this room, and your fellow graduates and friends who are not

Passion As Task

present. You have provided, through this watershed University-wide campaign, the extra and indispensable resources to undergird all of Harvard more strongly and indisputably than ever before.

You have shared the conviction that the edge – not the ragged edge, but the edge and outermost limit of knowledge, learning, and inquiry – is precisely the region that Harvard must explore; that what the University has already achieved in terms of excellence should be not only sustained but extended, because in education, that is what motivates all of us: the strong desire to press forward, and to peer more deeply, in order to gain the clearest possible understanding of reality and of ourselves.

For your conviction, and for your abiding generosity, I want, on behalf of the entire University community, to express profound gratitude. You had a goal, a task, that was greater in magnitude and far more formidable than any other in the history of philanthropy. You surpassed the goal by an amount so great that it would, in itself, represent an extraordinarily ambitious target for all but a handful of the world's educational and cultural institutions.

In this, and in so many other ways, you have set a singular standard, demonstrating beyond any possible doubt the significance and fundamental value to society (as well as to individuals) of education and research, of learning in all its dimensions, across the wide span of the liberal arts and sciences and their closely related fields of knowledge in the professional schools. And you have done this in an intensively collaborative way, conceiving of the University as a single institution that must – now and in the future – function as a unity, as well as a collegium of distinctive individual parts.

If we ask, therefore, why this campaign has been genuinely historic in its significance, we can see that it has consolidated in an unprecedented way the educational and financial strength of Harvard University in its entirety. It has, in effect, brought to culmination a process of moving Harvard from the more precarious

An Education

predicament described by President Conant less than fifty years ago to our current position. That move – viewed in the light of the long span of the University’s history – has been a very recent one, far more recent than we might have suspected. And you who are here in this hall, together with others, have made the decisive difference in guiding us from those less settled seas of an earlier era to this more sunlit haven of time that we are blessed with today.

+ + +

There will, inevitably, be moments in the future – just as there have been in the past – when other challenges will arise, and we (or others) will be asked for help to guide Harvard and to keep it strong. Indeed, there may possibly be far more difficult days ahead than we have witnessed in earlier eras. But I draw great hope from several sources.

First, I am an optimist – not a foolish one, I think, because there is after all some pertinent evidence to draw upon. Great universities have been durable and resilient for many centuries, and if there is any lesson to be drawn from their history – and there may not be a lesson – I believe it can be stated quite simply. Aspiration and excellence are our essential guardians, because all of us need – and therefore all of us will stand ready to support – examples of the best that can be achieved. If we remain unwilling to settle for less than the best, I am confident that we will remain all that we are today – and more, far more, in the future.

Next, I believe that the bonds of friendship that Harvard inspires, and the loyalty it receives, are extraordinary in their kind. I say, in all candor, that the breadth of your vision; your ability to distinguish between what is genuinely significant, and what is simply endemic to the vexations of our common sublunary existence (exasperating as those vexations may often be); and, perhaps most of all, your depth of understanding concerning the University’s central purposes, its values, its commitment to free thought and free expression, and its passion for learning: all of these qualities – which you have demonstrated so consistently – are remarkable,

Passion As Task

and have inspired you to create an enlightened fellowship and strong friendships powerful enough to carry this vessel of ours not only through periods of calm in future times, but also through all the storms that lie ahead, however turbulent they may be.

If such bonds of fellowship and friendship did not exist, and had not existed in the past, it would be hard to explain what could conceivably have led so many hundreds of thousands of people to commit so many human and financial resources, on such a massive scale – over so many centuries of time – to create, nurture, and watch over such a cloistered and yet disarmingly open and engaged a university as this one. Unless we felt that the University's quest for knowledge, as well as its pursuit of excellence, was a shared venture in which we had all participated, it seems impossible to comprehend how something as imaginative, sweeping, and compelling as Harvard could ever have come into being, and commanded such continuous affection and commitment.

Finally, I believe that adversity (at least *some* degree of adversity) is not necessarily a bad thing: indeed, it can often be a salutary thing. Henry James, Harvard Law School's most famous dropout, once wrote about his own craft and his own sense of circumstance: "We work in the dark," said James, "we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task."

Those words have haunted me for many years, because they seem to me to dramatize a marvelously moving, quietly heroic, and wonderfully generous response to a profound predicament. To work in the dark, with doubt as a companion, but not to diminish one's passion for the task; to do whatever one can, and to give what one has: this situation represents a mode of action under continuous adversity, which in turn elicits a mode of faith and commitment sustained by continuous passion. The energy and determination in James' lines are tangible, and they would not – could not – exist except for the consciousness of doubt and darkness.

Let us live with some measure of doubt, but let us also be

An Education

confident and passionate. Let us do whatever we can, now and in the future, whatever the circumstances may be. Meanwhile, as a gentle reminder of earlier, darker days – days that were also met with energy and courage – I want to close with a passage written not long before the United States entered the Second World War. The passage appeared in a spring 1941 issue of the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*. The moment was a menacing one, when the possibility of brutal defeat in Europe and beyond seemed very real. And with such a defeat, of course, would certainly come the devastating destruction of peoples and institutions, including universities as independent centers of free inquiry and speech, of impassioned pursuit and discovery.

Up the river sweep the beams and half-beams of homeward suburban cars against the slower-moving glitter of inbound Boston traffic. The Weeks Bridge, a pretty Georgian fragment thrown across the Charles, and her less beautiful elder sister to the west, flank the batteries of increasing window light from the Houses and the Business School. It is Monday evening ... and the graceful Lowell tower emerges in the gloom, touched off by ... modern reflectors, cunningly concealed. Cambridge is a city of spires now, even by night, and at other times there are three of them ablaze at once.... A pretty sight, with spring so faintly stirring in the night air: a moment of security, almost, in a world so pitifully insecure.

The lights of Harvard's Cambridge come on with a greater front and a steadier shine than they did for our more somnolent ancestors....

Light has always been one of the first symbols of colleges and learning. Centuries and electrons have not changed us there. The point is that at Harvard the lights can still come on – in fair weather or in rain, in a time of free thinking, or of the soul's own darkness, when [we] shall save [our] birthright only by a masterful resolve.⁷

Passion As Task

That darkness, nearly sixty years ago, was very great, as was the need for masterful resolve. But, as Henry James suggested, there is a profound sense in which we always work in the dark, we always need and desire beacons of hope to bring us light. And there is really never a moment when our resolve can afford to be less than masterful.

Thank you for your own masterful resolve during these past few years. Thank you for your friendship and companionship. Thank you for assuring that, at Harvard, “the lights *can* still come on – in fair weather or in rain, in a time of free thinking, or of the soul’s own darkness.” Thank you, finally, for the brightness that you have brought to the University through all that you have accomplished during these last years that we have shared together.

- 1 Thomas Hill, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1867–68*, 4.
- 2 A. Lawrence Lowell, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1909–10*, 23.
- 3 James B. Conant, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1947–48*, 11.
- 4 Oscar Handlin, *Glimpses of the Harvard Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 48.
- 5 James B. Conant, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1950–51*, 19.
- 6 W. Bentinck-Smith, *Building a Great Library: The Coolidge Years at Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Library, 1976), 90.
- 7 “Editorial: The Lights Come On,” *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, March 22, 1941, 701.

Self-Education

President's Associates Dinner Remarks

November 17, 2000

I HAVE RECENTLY been thinking a great deal about Harvard, and about universities. And I thought I would simply share with you some ideas reaching as far back as the seventeenth century, and then forward to this very academic year.

I have a simple theme. I want to suggest that, insofar as education and teaching are concerned, matters have improved considerably over the past three hundred and more years. I will also say something about our current undergraduates and what it is like to teach them, since I tried doing precisely that earlier this year.

For many decades after the founding of Harvard College, the faculty consisted almost entirely of students who had very recently graduated (people we would now call graduate-student teaching fellows), with the sole exception of the president, who was often the lone adult in the professorial ranks. The undergraduates, meanwhile, were not always completely charming. In fact, they seemed at times so intractable that when Increase Mather, minister of the largest church in Boston, was invited to be president of Harvard, he replied, a little indelicately: "What? Should I

Self-Education

[give up] preaching to 1500 souls . . . [in order] to expound to 40 or 50 children, few of them capable of [any] edification” whatsoever? So Mr. Mather, along with several others who were approached, decided that there were much greener pastures to be found elsewhere, as compared to whatever grass and clover were then growing in Harvard Yard.

Early in the eighteenth century, a young Boston newspaper reporter named Benjamin Franklin found great pleasure in regularly excoriating Harvard, whose students he regarded as ignorant and arrogant, as well as lazy and languid. Fashionable dress seems to have been one of their most intense preoccupations – a charge that appears to be at least partly borne out by the fact that, in 1754, Harvard College felt compelled to pass a new ordinance declaring that “every candidate for his degree [must] appear in black, or dark blue, or grey clothes, and that no one wear any silk nightgowns.”

We know at least as much about student discipline in those earlier eras as we do about anything academic. It does seem to have been the case, however, that plane geometry was about as far as most Harvard eighteenth- and even early nineteenth-century students progressed in mathematics. We know this because, toward the end of senior year, Harvard undergraduates engaged in an annual, solemn nighttime ritual in the Yard, presumably chanting and gesticulating as they went. At the conclusion of this festival rite, they buried, ceremoniously, a copy of Euclid’s *Elements*, bidding it *adios* forever.

We also know, from the diary and letters of a bright Princeton undergraduate of the same era, that his class succeeded in covering only about a dozen pages of his chemistry textbook after an entire year of study. And having gone to Princeton partly because of his strong interest in history, he found that there was absolutely no instruction in that subject during the whole of his first two terms – and not much in sight as he looked further down the road.

Given the fact that Harvard, Princeton, and some other col-

leges clearly graduated some intelligent, literate, well-informed, and capable leaders during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we might well wonder how that could possibly have happened.

There are several reasons, but one in particular was important. Many of the gaps and other deficiencies of the cramped, prescribed curriculum, and often deadly teaching methods, did not cause nearly as much intellectual damage as we might imagine, because recent research on this subject has shown that student-organized debating societies, essay societies, literary and other publications, and similar activities created many of the most valuable and powerful learning experiences for undergraduates.

In fact, at Princeton, the two major debating societies had, in their own buildings, quite large libraries consisting of recent and contemporary books in philosophy, literature, history, religion, and other subjects: many of the books, in other words, that the college library was not itself acquiring.

So the students essentially created their own informal and lively curriculum, their own reading habits, and their own methods of teaching and learning – methods that were based mainly on discussion, argument, questioning, criticizing, and debating. Henry Adams, who graduated from Harvard in 1858, was absolutely withering about the College's formal curriculum and instruction. But looking back, half a century later, he wrote about his election in his senior year as Class Orator for Commencement. After his speech, one elderly gentleman commented on Adams' "perfect self-possession":

Self-possession indeed! [wrote Adams.] If Harvard College gave nothing else, it gave calm. For four years each student had been obliged to [present himself] daily before dozens of young men who knew each other to the last fibre. One had done little but read papers to Societies, or act comedy in the Hasty Pudding, not to speak of all sorts of regular exercises, and no audience in future life

Self-Education

would ever be so intimately and terribly intelligent as these. . . . Self-possession was the strongest part of Harvard College, which certainly taught men to stand alone. . . . Whether this was, or was not, education, Henry Adams never knew. He was [however] ready to stand up before any audience in America or Europe, with nerves rather steadier for the excitement, but whether he should ever have anything to say, remained to be proved.¹

How Harvard managed to transform itself from the ossified methods of the 1850s or the 1750s into a different kind of college for serious and stimulating learning is an intriguing tale, but one that is much too long and complicated to relate on this occasion. But part of the answer was that Harvard found ways, in effect, to institutionalize in its formal curriculum and pedagogy many of the lively and energetic forms of learning that the students themselves were already practicing.

The prescribed course system, which allowed for very little student choice, was completely changed by President Eliot's creation of the "free elective system," which meant that the College soon needed a different kind of faculty, with much deeper knowledge across a much wider range of subjects. The "recitation system" of instruction (where students essentially memorized material and then "recited" what they knew in class) was gradually displaced by discussion groups designed to be, as President Eliot said, "Socratic" in nature.

Then, late in the nineteenth century, the teaching of science was also totally revamped. In 1886, the departments of chemistry, physics, botany, and zoology established experimental courses for entering freshmen. These departments, President Eliot wrote, "will be studying the difficult problem" of how "to teach a science of observation by experimental methods to young persons whose mental training has been received almost exclusively through book-study of languages and mathematics."

So in subject after subject, the student was placed in the posi-

An Education

tion of being a much more active, inquiring, exploring agent: a co-participant in experimentation, or in library research for a seminar paper, or in any number of other activities.

By 1932, President Lowell was in a position to write about the nature of teaching and learning at Harvard in a way that would have been unthinkable a century earlier:

Teachers can impart facts – not, perhaps, better than an earnest student can get them from books – they can explain, present points of view, and, if the pupil is not too reluctant, they can stimulate and inspire; but unless the student desires, or is provoked, to learn, he will profit little. He must be made to educate himself, working out things by his own effort. . . . To absorb and give back the information and ideas of the teacher may win good [grades] in many courses, but for training and fortifying the mind it is less valuable than power acquired by voluntary exertion in pursuit of an object. In short, the essence of all institutions of higher learning should be self-education under guidance.²

So, in the space of about sixty or seventy years, Harvard College adopted and articulated a new vision for undergraduate education – a massive change that we now take more or less for granted. This is not to say, however, that everything worked as planned. In fact, President Lowell also wrote, more than once, about the fact that everyone

who has taught a freshman course in a subject requiring the use of books dealing with large questions is aware of the fact that freshmen can read paragraphs, or a few pages covering a definite point, but that they can rarely read a book; that is, they have not the habit of sustained thinking needed to grasp and hold a continuous line of thought and take in its full meaning.³

In short, we had our vision and our defined standards, but there was still a very great deal to do in terms of actually achieving the goals that we had set for ourselves.

Self-Education

Well, how are we managing today? As you might expect, matters are (and always will be) rather less than perfect. But the situation is encouraging and exciting. To find out whether our current freshmen could read more than a paragraph in a sustained and intellectually coherent way – or write more than a paragraph – I decided to teach a mini-course to a dozen entering freshmen this past September, during the week *before* freshman orientation. We met for two hours every morning and two hours every afternoon for a week, with three papers due between Tuesday and Thursday. This was an intellectual version of Outward Bound and similar programs that we offer freshmen during that same week. Our seminar subject was lyric poetry – all sorts of poems from different periods, but a good deal of difficult twentieth-century verse.

I want to say a few words about how the students in our seminar coped with one very short poem, but before that, let me give you some sense of what these students were like, in their own words. In answer to a question concerning the kind of poetry that interested them, and whether they read any poetry in any languages other than English, I received answers such as:

I read poetry in French – mostly Racine, Hugo, and Apollinaire. I speak some Italian and made one enjoyable abortive attempt to read Dante's Inferno in the original. This summer I have had a lot of fun reading (slowly) The Canterbury Tales in the original, so in some sense I might be able to add Middle English to my list [of languages].

Then in response to a question concerning how they spent their last three summers, I received: “Double Session Football Camp”; “Youth Fellowship to Israel”; “Playing tennis and playing piano”; “Computer graphics programming”; “Five-Star Basketball Camp”; “Community Service Program on St. John's Island, South Carolina,” and so on.

I found myself, therefore, with a dozen public-spirited, athletic, poetry-readers, and the first poem that we discussed – a

An Education

beguiling little bit of off-hand conversation – provoked quite strong reactions in the seminar.

This Is Just to Say

*I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox*

*and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast*

*Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold⁴*

Some students read the poem as a subtle but devastating exposé of human evasiveness and selfishness. The speaker is seen as trying to pass off his actions as a perfectly natural and understandable midnight raid on the icebox, with only a brief conventional apology to the other person – perhaps his wife. The speaker (according to this reading) doesn't seem to care that the plums were probably chosen to be shared at breakfast. He seems entirely insensitive, except that he's alert enough to realize he should at least admit to having done something that perhaps he should not have done.

Other students disagreed: the poem is not a profound moral drama. Rather, the poet is trying to record and present ordinary behavior that occurs every day between people who know each other very well and understand each other. There were the plums. The speaker was suddenly attracted to them. He disposed of them, and then he wrote a note to explain what happened. It shows the strength of the relationship and the easy trust between these two

Self-Education

people, rather than exposing any great selfishness that threatens to divide them.

There were other readings and other views, and we talked for at least an hour, trying to see what we could make of these elusive lines that at first sight seemed so transparent. We did agree that this was a very carefully crafted poem and that it would be possible to trace the ways in which the lines are organized: the number of syllables in each word and line, the subtle patterning, the careful placement of key words and phrases – in short, the thoughtfully composed, subliminal order.

But what, after all, did we think the poem is “about”? We decided that something important *did* happen here: a form of transgression (eating the plums) followed by an appeal for forgiveness, with the two words “Forgive me” placed strategically and conspicuously as the first line of the last stanza.

At the same time, we concluded that the poem did not seem to be an exposé of deep selfishness on the speaker’s part. There is a sense in which this is a minor, modest transgression, well within the range of our ordinary, imperfect, everyday lives. In fact, as readers, we are almost invited to participate in eating the plums: the last three lines of the poem seem almost to celebrate – certainly to appreciate – the deliciousness and sweetness of the fruit. The objects of this world evoke desire. In that sense, they may be hazardous. On the other hand, we cannot very well do without them, and the poem seems to suggest that we are not wrong to respond to their beauty and to experience their bounty.

We sensed, in other words, a delicate balance in this situation. The daily ritual of a relationship – the expectation that things will be shared, and the important symbolic act of “breaking fast” together – has been momentarily disrupted. And yet, there is also an instantaneous act to repair the damage, with a note that is itself a gentle confession. We sense that forgiveness will be forthcoming, because the transgression is seen and felt to be understandable, even natural.

We even raised the possibility that there is here a very distant

An Education

echo of Genesis, the Garden, and the Fall: forbidden fruit, indulgence, dislocation, and the need to find a way to reconcile. But if so, this is a *pianissimo* version, and these rather innocent plums are not at all tragic in their implications.

Further discussion led us to think about the poem as a metaphor for the very nature of human relationships – the way in which human communities must function if they are to remain healthy: every day there are innocent or less innocent temptations, potential falls and necessary repairs. The students talked about *their* experience of learning to live together as a new community – soon to be part of a much larger university community in which they themselves would be constantly sending and receiving signals or messages that would have to be patiently read and interpreted, and that might possibly begin with a line such as, “This is just to say.”

In effect, therefore, the poem, and our seminar, became one way of thinking about Harvard as a human place, as well as an academic place. And our few lines of verse seemed to reassure all of us that it was natural – in fact, inevitable – to stumble, and equally possible and natural to recover or restore equilibrium. Indeed, this process was central to the experience of learning, of growing, and of building relationships that would ultimately be more durable because they had been so fully tested.

There have been many wonderful moments during these past ten years at Harvard. And this week of teaching – of watching young people reach more deeply to understand words, implications, and meanings – was as important an experience as any I have had. I can now (should there have been any doubt) wholeheartedly testify that matters really *have* improved over these last three hundred years: our freshmen can, rather remarkably, read *many* paragraphs, entire volumes, and a great deal of difficult poetry with sustained intensity and comprehension. For this, and for so much more, Harvard is deeply and gratefully in the debt of friends such as you who have come together on this occasion, because it is your continuous engagement, interest, and generos-

Self-Education

ity that make it possible, year after year, for us to bring such extraordinary students to this extraordinary College and University.

- 1 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 69.
- 2 A. Lawrence Lowell, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1931–32*, 7.
- 3 A. Lawrence Lowell, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1923–24*, 7.
- 4 William Carlos Williams, “This Is Just to Say,” *Collected Poems, 1909–1939, Volume 1* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1986), 1: 372.

