

A Class By Itself

Remarks to the Harvard College Class of 1949 50th Reunion

June 7, 1999

ALL HARVARD REUNIONS are, of course, equal. But some are more equal than others, and the fiftieth is a class that is in a class by itself.

The tenth reunion is always astonished to find that it has just passed the age of thirty, and can no longer be trusted. The twenty-fifth seems solemnly preoccupied with start-ups and productivity gains – their motto this year is “Sleep faster, we need the pillows.” The thirty-fifth is neither fish nor fowl. But you, the fiftieth, are splendidly philosophical. You care deeply about Harvard, but you were not necessarily sure – before opening your programs – whether you would be addressed by President Pusey or Lowell, or Dean Rosovsky or Bundy.

No matter, it is refreshing to arrive under an assumed name, more or less incognito, footloose and even garrulously free – happy to talk about the University as if it were a sort of remote, shimmering Platonic Idea, rather than that perpetual seething cauldron of daily campus life – whose stew is constantly stirred, whose fire never goes out, and whose lid must always be on.

I would like to say a few words about Radcliffe. I am enthusi-

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astic about – and deeply committed to – our merger and our joint creation of the new Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. But as you must know, there have been any number of storms along the way since Radcliffe was created a century ago – and many slings and arrows that Radcliffe has had to bear.

When the idea of educating women undergraduates first came up in the late 1860s, you may remember that President Eliot said:

The Corporation will not receive women as students into the College proper, nor into [any of Harvard's schools] . . . that requires residence near the school. The difficulties involved in a common residence of hundreds of young men and women of immature character and marriageable age are very grave. The necessary police regulations [would be] exceedingly burdensome.¹

Thus it was that Radcliffe College came to be established as a chartered, coordinate, residential institution on its own – linked closely to Harvard, but definitely possessing its own distinct, distant dormitories and its own eloquent police regulations.

During your years at Harvard, because of overcrowding and other unnamed contingencies, some Radcliffe and some Harvard students were actually allowed to take a few courses together. In addition, in the fall of 1945, two women teaching fellows were reported (by the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*) to have “invaded” the History Department. There was such a large enrollment in History 1 that more instructors had to be dragooned, or perhaps merely conscripted, to lead small-group discussion classes. The coming of these women, said the *Bulletin*, “was accepted philosophically by a freshman class heavily weighted by returned veterans.”

In addition, during your senior year, the first women ever (twelve of them) graduated from Harvard Medical School – whether as a result of overcrowding or not, the *Alumni Bulletin* fails to record.

All of you should take pride in the fact that, because of the sheer power of your flood-tide numbers, Harvard had its first

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serious beginnings of coeducation – if only in miniature – vigorously thrust upon it.

The creation of the new Radcliffe Institute carries to fulfillment the long, hundred-year process of bringing Radcliffe and Harvard to the point where they are to be formally and legally merged. The Institute will be an integral part of the University, attracting the very best visiting fellows and scholars from this country and abroad, and advancing research across all fields of learning, in the arts and sciences as well as in the professions.

In addition, an important part of the Institute's work will focus on the study of women, gender, and society – from an international, as well as a national, perspective.

The Radcliffe Institute will provide a flow of superb annual visitors, bringing fresh impetus to subjects that are already on the University's broad agenda. Meanwhile, Harvard's various Schools and Faculties will in turn contribute substantially to the intellectual vitality of the Institute and to its important work.

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The very large size of your class, together with your inventiveness and restless energy, had in addition to mini-coeducation, several other presumably unintended consequences.

You begat, for example, a housing crisis of unprecedented proportions, as well as a traffic crisis, and an academic degree crisis. In the fall of 1945, when you arrived, the city manager of Cambridge concluded wearily that “no permanent solution [to Harvard Square congestion] is possible” – at least not without drastic measures that seemed to lie well beyond the scope of everyone's collective ken.

As for housing, essentially everything imaginable was tried. Some ideas were rather conventional: Harvard took a three-year lease on the Hotel Brunswick, located in Boston on Boylston Street. “Among [other] possible dwellings,” reported the *Alumni Bulletin*, “are counted two country clubs and one sanatorium.”

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Then, as a special concession, the Federal Public Housing Authority assigned four hundred family units – to create what was called a “Harvard colony” – at the U.S. Army base, Fort Devens, conveniently located just thirty-two miles from Cambridge. Finally, “at the height of the tumult,” the *Crimson* reported, one freshman “sailed his twenty-three-foot sloop from Nahant to the Charles River, and then proceeded to make his home” right there on board.

Academically, you also flooded the market. In your senior year, 3,064 degrees – a record-breaking number beyond anyone’s nightmares – were awarded at Commencement. Your class walked away with 1,054 of them, and it is not at all clear who got the remaining 2,010 – or even in what subjects this riotous horde of extra degrees were awarded.

Moreover, 35 percent of your class graduated with honors – a percentage considerably higher than any previous known figure in Harvard’s history. Therefore, we are now finally in a position to state precisely when grade inflation started – and by whom.

On the other hand, it may well have been the case – and I suspect it was – that you were in fact brighter, more talented, and more honorific than all the classes that had ever preceded you. And you were obviously more brilliant than our slower-witted, lackluster, but wonderfully good-natured undergraduates of today who, like Ferdinand, browse gently among the flowers in the Yard, undisturbed and imperturbable.

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You came to Harvard at a moment of great historical significance: higher education in this country was about to expand exponentially – and many of you were in the GI vanguard. Federally funded research was really just beginning – in fact, the National Science Foundation was in the midst of being created when you were enrolled. Standardized tests were beginning to be used on a much larger scale. The library contained about 5 million books, but was

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about to grow in the next few decades to the 13 million volumes we now possess.

And despite all the hurly-burly, yours were great vintage years for teaching, learning, and research at Harvard. The new General Education curriculum was in its beginnings, and among the extraordinary Harvard faculty members who were given tenure in your last two years were: Walter Jackson Bate, Sam Beer, Jerry Bruner, Helen Maud Cam, John Fairbank, Sidney Farber, Ken Galbraith, Oscar Handlin, Harry Levin, Archibald MacLeish, Agnes Mongan, Frederick Mosteller, and Willard Quine.

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I have told you very little about the Harvard of today. But I can say with real conviction that your University remains invigorating, stimulating, robust, and as committed as ever to the view that we should settle for nothing less than the best in choosing our faculty and students and in making certain that they have the academic and other resources that they need – whether scientific labs and equipment, archives and libraries, computers and networks, museums and creative arts facilities – whatever is necessary for them to do their work at the highest possible level of quality.

Because *that* is our only mission and justification: to educate broadly, deeply, and well; to be as certain as possible that the leaders who graduate from these courtyards will be resilient, inquiring, skillful, articulate individuals and citizens who – in the words of President Conant – have been “inoculated” with “the virus of a self-perpetuating liberal education.” “It seems to me,” he wrote,

a hopeless task to provide a complete and finished liberal education suitable to this century [with just] four years of college work. The only worth-while liberal education today is one which is a continuing process going on throughout life. . . . Has the smattering acquired in college worn thinner and thinner with each succeeding year? . . .

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*Or has it provided a basis for continued intellectual and spiritual growth?*²

My own sense is that Harvard then and Harvard now is in fact offering its students the kind of education that has its eye, so to speak, on the long run, enabling its graduates to grow intellectually and spiritually, throughout their lives.

¹ *Inaugural Address of Charles William Eliot as President of Harvard College*, October 19, 1869, 17.

² James B. Conant, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers*, 1935–36, 10.

