

Free Expression in a Diverse Society

Commencement Day Address, June 4, 1992

GATHERED in this Yard, with its great trees and simple buildings, we might well believe that we have the power to create and sustain the deepest possible human harmonies. For our universities do have this power – especially through their commencement rituals, and through the shared experiences of tens of thousands of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends.

But if we feel a special sense of unity at times like this, we also realize how rare such moments are, and how few people are fortunate enough to experience them with any frequency. Much of the world is in considerable disarray, and as we look about, it is obvious that we have more than enough problems and issues to occupy us. I would like to talk about one which – for want of a better term – I will simply call the problem of living together.

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How, on this increasingly populous and heterogeneous planet of ours, where geographical boundaries are now so permeable, where we are no longer insulated from what is happening in countries far across the world, where ideas as well as people move from

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place to place more swiftly than they can be absorbed; how, with so much flux, and so many random acts which no amount of preparation can ever fully anticipate; how shall we find the human capacity and the resources necessary to live peacefully and fruitfully together?

We rub elbows every day with people whose religious and political beliefs differ from our own, people of different nationalities and cultures, people from different racial or ethnic groups who may speak languages we do not know, people who have their own cuisines, their own music, their own modes of dress. And if we do not literally encounter such a range of people every day, we read about them, we hear about them, we watch them on television.

Given this diversity and the increasingly close quarters in which we live, we might conclude that matters could be far worse than they are. But most of the time, I believe, we are inclined to think just the opposite: we ought to be doing much better.

I am frequently asked, for example, why it is that ethnic, racial, and other relations among students seem to be so tense on many campuses throughout the country. Why do students of different races or religions or cultures sometimes choose to eat, or even live, separately from one another? If our students – so capable, so carefully selected, so clearly intended for leadership in the future – cannot live together more harmoniously, taking every opportunity to intermingle and learn from one another when conditions are so favorable, what can we possibly expect from the rest of the world, most of whose people live in conditions that are barely tolerable? The assumption behind these questions is usually clear: that the situation on our campuses has become worse in recent years – or, at the very least, has not improved.

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There are no simple answers to these questions, nor do we have time here for a long analysis. But I would like to start by framing a hypothesis for your consideration. I ask you to entertain the

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idea that the situation on our campuses today is at least as good as – and in some respects better than – that which existed at many times in our past. What we see today needs far more subtle interpretation than I can provide in a few minutes. But the divergent and sometimes conflicting student voices on campus are often signs of vital and even necessary controversy, of healthy self-assertion, of difficult but essential human growth, and of jarring but important moments of sudden discovery and self-discovery. They can also bear witness to sobering events that are painful, disturbing, and even repugnant. But it is precisely this complex intermixture of experiences that usually characterizes periods of profound change in life; and I believe that we are indeed in a period of such change.

Let me elaborate. I think there are at least four important characteristics which make the present moment different from – and potentially more healthy or positive than – earlier periods.

First, the diversity we now have is greater than at any previous time, and that means there is a wider range of voices ready to speak out. If we think for a moment of the collegiate world of the 1950s (when I was a student), the differences between then and now are striking.

In many of our institutions, there were scarcely any black students, or Asian Americans, Hispanics, or Native Americans. Women were still excluded from most of the major private universities. Jews were still largely restricted by quota, and Roman Catholics were few in number. Political outliers – whether very conservative or very liberal – were either quiescent or nonexistent. Assertive religious orthodoxy was virtually unknown. Gay and lesbian students were scarcely acknowledged as a reality. Students from foreign countries were present in only very modest numbers. And how many physically impaired students did we enroll, and how much institutional attention did we focus upon their particular needs?

To be sure, campuses were generally more tranquil through-

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out the period from 1945 until the mid-1960s. But that tranquility was purchased at the cost of not including vast segments of our society. We are immensely more inclusive now. We should not be surprised that we are also – sometimes, at least – rather less tranquil.

My second point is this: our new inclusiveness is neither timid nor tepid. Many students as well as faculty have not been shy about speaking out. And whatever complications this may have added to our lives, the polyphonic results are fundamentally better than something more plainly monotonic. In addition, the freedom we enjoy is manifestly preferable to any artificial consensus that might be created through subtle or more overt forms of censorship. We know that such censorship was not uncommon at many universities through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and that the resulting human and intellectual price was very high.

A Harvard audience in particular should remember that barely a century ago, Charles Eliot Norton – a formidable figure from our university's past – was nearly denied tenure here because he was thought to be an agnostic – which in fact he was. And Cardinal Newman's little novel, *Loss and Gain*, quietly records the poignant tale of an Oxford student who was suspended from his university for questioning some of the Thirty-Nine Articles while also expressing an interest in the tenets of Roman Catholicism.

Current critics of the university scene, who see threats of oppression from either the “politically correct” or the “politically incorrect,” are rightly concerned about any form of intellectual or other coercion. Such coercion has no place in a university, and we know how damaging its effects can be. Even when there is vigorous debate, there is a worry that some voices will dominate and that others will feel too reticent to speak. There is also the hazard that certain groups will press for decisions that would be unwise or simply wrong. These dangers are real, and critics have not been slow to point them out. Our own goal is clear: we must remain fully committed to creating and maintaining a climate on cam-

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pus that is genuinely civil and tolerant, while also open to a wide range of views.

Maintaining the actuality of such openness is not always easy, because civility and “tone” cannot be legislated. Nor is there any way to insure that everyone will feel equally at ease in the large forum of a major university: much depends not only on the climate we create but also on differences in individual temperament and disposition – on personal impressions, inclinations, and will. It is all the more important, therefore, that those who are in positions of responsibility evaluate arguments and decide issues on the merits, seeking to do what is best, rather than what may seem most “responsive” at any given moment.

Although some recent critics of universities have correctly identified important issues such as those I have just mentioned, they have, in my view, also tended to overlook much of the full – and crucial – historical record on this topic, and have tended to imply that there were times in the past when a maximum of true freedom of expression and diversity were combined with a maximum of civility and tranquility. I doubt seriously that a careful reading of the record will sustain that view. At the very least, we need – on this subject, above all – far more scholarly and meticulous attention to all the relevant evidence, and a much more informed discussion than we have had to date. Few current subjects offer an easier target for those who are interested in it for ideological or political or polemical reasons. Surely it is time to turn to our most scrupulous observers of institutions and our very best historians of education for clarification and deeper understanding.

Let me expand a little on this second point. What we now have on our campuses, as already suggested, is a plenitude of voices and views that are sometimes – but far from generally – discordant. While I have stressed many of the positive aspects of this situation, I certainly do not underestimate the depth and difficulty of the issues it raises. For example, individuals and groups have sometimes been deliberately provocative and offensive in their state-

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ments about other members of the university. Others have used obstructive – if nonviolent – means in an effort to press their points of view. These forms of action are fundamentally different from one another, and each must be evaluated on its own terms.

But we do need to recognize that each has the potential to divide communities quite sharply; and some actions, if they constitute the direct harassment of individuals, obviously infringe upon basic rights. Over time, patterns of behavior that are divisive or clearly disruptive can take a heavy toll, especially in the setting of a residential university. Precisely because universities are intrinsically open and conducive to free expression and debate – and because their decision-making processes are highly consultative as well as subject to constant review and criticism – we all have a special responsibility to use these processes in such a way as to increase understanding and to resolve differences whenever possible. At the very least, we must respect and accept conscientious disagreement by exercising a large measure of mutual patience and forbearance.

While acknowledging the difficulties and possible hazards of our present situation, I do want to return to my fundamental point: we have an exceptional degree of openness and free expression on our campuses, and I doubt whether we have ever had so many articulate voices exploring a broader range of perspectives with so much confidence. To some observers, this variety may seem more like cacophony than polyphony; and we do have our intensely cacophonous moments. But when I listen to the student discussions that take place on campus every day, I hear – far more often than not – something that is remarkably humane, searching, spirited, and “conversational” in nature. And if that is indeed the case, do we not have reason to take some real pride in this fact?

Third, in spite of the complexity that a wide range of voices and views can create, we have been – and must continue to be – unyielding in our determination to uphold the right of free speech for all students, faculty, and invited speakers. There is a powerful university-wide consensus behind this principle on our

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campus, and that is a great credit to faculty and students alike. There have been hundreds and hundreds of speakers at Harvard this year, expressing an immensely wide range of opinions on countless topics. Not one single speaker has been blocked, not one has been shouted down. There can be no swerving from this steady course.

Fourth, we would be mistaken – as I have already suggested – either to exaggerate the amount of tension or conflict that exists on campus, or to underestimate the full extent of intermingling and real learning that take place among students and faculty. People do succeed in reaching across gaps; deep friendships are formed; moments of exhilaration – as well as discouragement – are shared. Day in and day out, the University works as a lively, interesting, and convivial place where students and scholars live together and learn from one another.

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I have asked you to entertain the hypothesis that matters on our campus may well be better today, not worse, in certain important respects. I have cited four main reasons: a far greater inclusiveness than ever before; a much greater willingness on the part of many students and faculty to express their views openly; a strong commitment to the protection of free speech; and a vital community of students and scholars who learn from one another with great vigor, seriousness, and enjoyment. I would now like to offer a few additional observations to keep in mind as we continue to evaluate our present situation.

The first involves some sweeping and therefore certainly debatable generalizations about how human beings tend to behave. I am neither a pessimist nor a deep skeptic. But I do believe that our species – viewed from a broad historical perspective – has generally been tribal and sectarian; quite passionately attached to political, religious, or other convictions, sometimes with violent results; deeply intolerant of groups or castes or races that have been categorized as impure or inferior or apostate; and highly

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nationalistic in our modern era – even pathologically so throughout much of our twentieth century.

If this analysis is at all correct, then any society or institution which deliberately tries to seek out and embrace diversity is acting against the grain of strong human instincts and much human behavior. Such attempts have scarcely ever been made. America, for all its imperfections and contradictions, remains the one bold, idealistic, though yet unfulfilled, living experiment that has consciously set itself the task of including people of widely divergent backgrounds from every part of the world.

And our university – as well as others – has recently taken upon itself an even more challenging role: to maintain the values of diversity and free expression, while also attempting to create a humane community in which people respect one another's differences, and seek to understand and know one another well. Defining this complicated task – this task of living together – is relatively easy. But finding the means to achieve it is far more difficult. Indeed, it is a task that has never, to my knowledge, been tried before on anything like the scale that we are attempting.

Why, then, should any of us ever have thought, even for a moment, that the job would be easy? When the populations of the world have quarreled and fought for millennia in order to protect their religious, ethnic, national, linguistic, and other characteristics or symbols of group identity, why should we expect thousands of younger people – even when working with faculty and staff – to create easily or swiftly the kind of community that virtually all humanity has tended to resist? Indeed, to see the continuing strength of the world's resistance, we need only read about what is taking place in the streets of what was once Yugoslavia, or in regions of the former Soviet Union, or Northern Ireland, or the Middle East, or parts of Africa, or elsewhere.

I do not find it surprising, therefore, that we should find tensions between Jewish students and black students on our campuses, or between white students and Asian Americans, or between

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different groups within the Hispanic community. Nor do I find it strange that students from the same ethnic or other groups should often seek one another's company at meals, or in their dormitory accommodations.

I would be deeply happy if there were even more intermingling than there is, and I believe strongly that our institutional structures – and the spirit that we seek to create on campus – should foster such intermingling. But if we look closely at our larger American society (and if we are candid with ourselves), we cannot fail to notice that vast segments of our population live, socialize, and even work with people who have racial, religious, or cultural characteristics very similar to their own.

These patterns and boundary lines are created partly – though not entirely – by choice, and they are generally guarded with vigilance. We know the statistics and anecdotal evidence, for example, that demonstrate the powerful obstacles encountered by many minority families when they try to move into “majority” neighborhoods. We also know about the conflicts that arise when the reverse occurs, or when borderlines between different minority groups fall into dispute.

If we are alert to these and similar characteristics or social structures that define – and always have defined – so much of our national life, we should be able to understand more clearly the rhythms and patterns of our students' lives. Indeed, we may well discover that our students manage their affairs rather better than the rest of us. So, while I look forward to a time when there will be less tension and misunderstanding on campus, I would be surprised if that happened very rapidly or painlessly. Our undertaking, by its very nature, brings into close association many different people with different views and perspectives, and this fact alone guarantees that there will be debate, disagreement, argument, and difficulty.

In this respect, it is helpful to reread some of our most thoughtful statesmen on this general subject. Neither Abraham

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Lincoln nor Martin Luther King turned away from the kind of challenge we are discussing, but neither promised any simple solutions. And for a frank, unvarnished view of the conception of humankind that underlies some of the thinking behind our Constitution, we can learn a great deal from rereading James Madison's contributions to *The Federalist Papers*.

Madison had very little confidence that the full exercise of freedom in a democratic or republican society would lead to easy agreements or tranquility. Instead, he viewed the human species as highly factional – addicted to forming tightly knit groups that in turn struggle with other groups. This was of course one of the reasons that he favored a complex system of checks and balances in our government, with its careful separation and distribution of powers: he hoped that, through such a structure, the power of particular groups would be blocked or contained by the contending force of other groups. “The latent causes of faction,” Madison wrote, “are . . . sown in the nature of man.”

A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points. . . ; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, [all these] have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.¹

We certainly do not have to agree with Madison, at least not entirely. And our government, as well as the spirit of our political and civic life, owes an obviously profound debt to that more optimistic Jeffersonian stream of thought which is part of our national identity. But the tendency to associate with people who have characteristics and values similar to one's own is as typical of America as is our persistent effort to dissolve such distinctions in order to promote intermingling through the vehicle of a

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national “melting pot.” A good deal of “melting” does take place. But we also continue to have our Polish American and Asian American societies; our Columbus Day, Easter Sunday, and St. Patrick’s Day parades; and our Latino, Italian American, African American, and Hasidic neighborhoods.

The reality of America’s unity or its diversity is far from simple: most efforts to find a single metaphor or succinct phrase to describe our aspirations or our actual national experience capture part of the truth but are inevitably less than adequate. We are a melting pot – but also a nation of free, equal, and unique individuals; a mosaic of different cultures and groups; an assemblage of fifty separate states; a union or single nation “indivisible”; a “rainbow coalition”; an expanding New Frontier or Great Society; a ground where Madison’s contentious factions struggle; a land of opportunity for individuals with the desire and will to succeed; a lonely crowd; and an aggregation of separate racial or ethnic communities who live in clannish ways.

Our national search for self-definition is obviously one of the continuing, unresolved dilemmas of America. At what levels of experience do we in fact intermingle and “melt”? Do we try – in substantial measure – to preserve, cherish, and celebrate our different cultural or ethnic customs and traditions? Or do we prefer – with little fanfare – to live our quite separate lives? Or do we manage, in some complex manner, to act in several of these ways, adjusting ourselves to different roles at different times?

The troublesome and threatening factions that Madison feared are – when viewed from a more positive perspective – the familiar and unifying political parties that we join, the religious congregations we belong to, the “single issue” organizations we form, and the extended families and identifiable neighborhoods that we sustain. But whether we assign a more negative or more positive value to our human inclination to create such associations, the gravitational pull of that tendency is clearly very strong. Madison’s incisive analysis should remind us, at the very least, that our

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nation and its complex institutions will almost always contain assertive subgroups or subcultures or “factions.” Even if these groupings are often benign, we can scarcely expect that matters will ordinarily proceed smoothly, with little friction or stress.

Before concluding, let me underscore one additional point: our current enterprise in diversity is quite recent in origin. In the nation as a whole, much *legal* discrimination against African Americans ended only in the last three to four decades, and the removal of many *de facto* restrictions on some groups is still far from complete. Most major private universities have been coeducational for only the last twenty-five years, and their inclusion – in any significant numbers – of individuals from a wide variety of political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other groups or persuasions is even more recent.

From the long perspective of human history, we have had scarcely more than a fleeting second of time to undertake a transformation that is unprecedented and that is occurring in a world where many nations and communities are moving in precisely the opposite direction – that is, toward societies which are ever more tightly and narrowly defined in terms of their group characteristics. If Harvard enrolls a student from Saudi Arabia, and if he or she rooms near a student from Israel, should we expect that the two newcomers will immediately understand and trust one another, simply because they have crossed the Atlantic and landed in Weld Hall? Or if an African American student rooms in his first year with a white student, should we assume that each of them will forget all they may have heard or read about one another’s race – or about the Civil War and so many other events in our history? They *might* do so, but we should certainly not count on the fact. Examples could be multiplied, including those that involve the attitudes of some men toward women, or some women toward men.

Our experiment is a new one – hardly two or three decades old – and it is taking place in a nation that is itself deeply troubled by unresolved issues concerning race, equity, and educational

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opportunity. We will need more time to accomplish what we would all like to achieve. Some people will be understandably impatient for more rapid change; others will point out correctly how much has already taken place. My own view is frankly evolutionary. We are unlikely to reach solutions – or, more precisely, resolutions – easily or immediately. Indeed, it is not obvious – in an untried experiment of this kind – what our realistic expectations can be. But we know there are no alternatives that are either more humane, or more in accord with the realities of our world. Our experiment in diversity must be pressed forward with energy and conviction, in a manner that preserves the fundamental strength and fabric of this great but also very human university. We are and must remain a living organism, something essentially different from a mere organization.

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Let me now conclude by suggesting some of the principles and ideas for action that may be able to guide us as we look to the future.

First, we will need help and strong support in order to maintain an unwavering commitment to the goals we have set ourselves: to sustain the highest possible quality in education and research at Harvard, and to promote – simultaneously – the greatest degree of openness and of inclusiveness within our institution. I have concentrated in this talk on issues of diversity, but I have not done so because of any lack of full commitment to academic and related forms of excellence. Diversity is in itself not an absolute value, and it cannot be dissociated from other values that are fundamental to a university: free inquiry, intensive research and scholarship, integrity of mind and thought, devoted teaching and passionate learning. At bottom, the goals of diversity and quality are deeply interrelated and need to be addressed together.

I have insisted that we must press forward with our experiment in diversity, essentially because I believe that our students must in the future live and function as effective leaders in an increasingly

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heterogeneous and internationalized world. Diversity is important, therefore, not as an abstract ideal, but as an essential educational goal related to the nature and texture of our actual lives. It enables us to create within the university an environment in which students can encounter – under propitious conditions – some of the most important issues and forms of knowledge critical to their own and to their world's future.

Next, if we are to preserve our commitment both to the highest quality, and to the greatest degree of openness, we must stand utterly firm on the issue of freedom of speech. We will not tolerate the direct harassment of individuals; but free expression in all the many forms that are honored in our society must be protected, and will be protected in this university.

Next, while reaffirming our determination to protect the right of free expression, we must also bear in mind the primary – but not exclusive – purposes of such freedom in a university setting. Our chief concern, after all, is the process of learning and the discovery of important truths. If we care about such learning, then we will want to understand not only abstract ideas, but also the people who articulate different ideas and perspectives. Consequently, the ways in which we talk with one another – the tone of voice we use, the extent to which we listen as well as speak – will often be as important as what we actually say. If we cannot be courteous, civil, respectful, and sympathetic in our behavior – as well as incisive, assertive, and sometimes contentious – then we will surely have failed to realize one of the most important purposes of an education in the liberal arts. If we cannot be fundamentally humane in the use of our intellect and knowledge – and in our relations with other people – then the full, unfettered exercise of all our precious freedoms will yield something immeasurably less rich and enlightening than it should.

Last of all, we will need a more determined commitment from administrators, faculty, and staff – as well as students – to invest time in getting to know one another better, in humanizing our daily lives, and in structuring more carefully the ways that we work

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together. We will have to learn to anticipate the complicated problems that can come from living together in a diverse university, to manage and respond to difficult issues more effectively, and to understand their implications more fully. We will need more conscious planning and coordination, informed by frank discussion.

Meanwhile, the simple but challenging task of thinking more considerably about our day-to-day human relationships is crucial. In E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End*, two phrases recur as leitmotifs throughout the book. The novel tells of very different kinds of people – from widely divergent backgrounds and social classes – who come into great conflict and then manage to reknit their lives because of the considerable pain they have endured together. The motto that characterizes the episodes of conflict in the novel is the repeated phrase “telegrams and anger”: “anger” because the protagonists are given to furious outbursts when they shout but rarely listen; “telegrams” because they tend to vent their fury by firing off intemperate messages into the void.

The novel's other motto has to do with finding ways to bridge the chasms and gaps in our relationships with others. Doing so is far from easy, because the gaps can be enormous. Over and over again, people in the book are asked to take fuller account of the harsh problems that others are facing, to imagine themselves in one another's predicament in order to experience things from a completely different point of view.

For this to happen, however, much more is needed than mere intellect or reason. A special kind of human imagination and a sympathetic disposition toward others are essential. Some courage is also necessary, because imaginative leaps of this kind always involve yielding – if only provisionally – some part of our own ideas and feelings in order to see things as others do.

Forster continually urges his characters to reach out and make that imaginative leap: “Only connect,” he tells them. The process will never be entirely smooth or complete. Hard lessons will have to be learned time and again. Disturbing incidents will recur,

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because our tendency to treat others insensitively is at least as strong as our desire to treat them with understanding and affection. But real learning can nonetheless deepen; free inquiry and free expression can flourish; and the fruits of diversity can be harvested, if those of us in our universities – and in our larger society – can make the essential imaginative leaps that alone will enable us to “connect.”

¹ James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, No. 10 (1787).