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.

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

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.

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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:

> *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*

> *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]."

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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-

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

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.

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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

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

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 "unequalled 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."

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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

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.

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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

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.

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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

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

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.

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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,

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

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

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.