

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,

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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-

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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.