

“Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places”
Phi Beta Kappa Oration
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President Eck, members of Alpha and Iota, faculty, honored graduates, this superlative moment in the lives of Harvard seniors is just cause for celebration. I have always found Harvard rituals to be particularly stylish and this one is no exception. This morning’s festivities evoke for me my own time as a Harvard student and the impact of those few years on my life, my choices, and my world view.

This hall too is a potent reminder of those years. It is grander that I remember. I recall a weathered, unpretentious interior where the chaos of registration echoed indecorously at the start of each semester. I brought momentous expectations to this building thirty years ago when I arrived to register for the very first time. The occasion of this oration gave me an opportunity to examine whether those expectations were met as I had fervently hoped. Some of you must be doing the same assessment in relation to how you began your journey here some four years ago.

There is much to take place today and in the coming days, so I would not be surprised if more than a few of you were attentive to the time. However, I feel as William Norman Birkett did when he remarked, “I do not object to people looking at their watches when I am speaking but I strongly object when they start shaking them to make certain they are still going.” I might well have vigorously shaken my own watch these past years that I have been away from Harvard because, in some ways, time seems to have stood still. I am still asking the same question that I posed when I first arrived here for my very first registration. Why am I here? The tumult of that era required me to ask that question, and my desire to play a meaningful role in addressing pressing societal problems required me to seek an answer.

My search for transcendent meaning had impelled me through the curriculum of my undergraduate college where I especially sought out courses of study that might offer definitive answers. I thought rigorousness of study would more likely yield answers to questions about the nature of existence and meaning. Finding that neither social science nor science courses revealed the insight I was seeking, I hastened to language and literature where the unapologetic representations of the self from a variety of perspectives seemed to offer me an authentic and compelling way to understand the world. A product of racial segregation, I relished the opportunity to view the world from unaccustomed and radically divergent perspectives. I read ravenously, completing the opus of first one author then another, assuming that, by capturing the essence of the whole of an author’s output, I could find answers that might otherwise elude me.

Slowly, I constructed a useful framework for understanding the human world. That structure, somewhat like this hall, was adept at harboring chaos as well as formality

and order and while it did not provide meaning in the form that I sought, it nevertheless provided me with the context and resources to expand greatly on what I understood of the world and my place in it. I could feel the girders strengthen with every subsequent trip to Memorial Hall to register for courses and my personal fortitude grew in step with my journey across world literature.

While a student at Harvard in the late sixties and early seventies, I felt myself to be in the vortex of that tumultuous time. To study literature when society appeared to be coming apart posed grave questions for me. Was it immoral to study for a PhD in French when others endured so much danger and sacrifice to advance civil rights in this country? Similar questions and doubts hounded me throughout my years in Boylston Hall. I alternated my time between meetings and rallies, my Weidener carrel, classes, and my Irving Street apartment, all the while weighing whether it was meaningful to continue my studies in so ostensibly esoteric a field. It appeared at times that this whirlwind of doubt might even cause that glorious structure to implode. In the end, it stood fast, reinforced by the very questions and willing uncertainty that I mistakenly thought endangered its existence.

The uncertainty arose from several other sources. Having come to Harvard from a small, obscure college, like most at Harvard, I felt the sting of inadequacy when I arrived. On the first day of one of my classes, wanting to get a sense of how well prepared we first year graduate students were, the professor assigned an in-class explication de texte. Returning the essays at the next class meeting, he delivered an excoriating critique of the overall dismal quality of our papers, but stunned me by singling mine out as excellent. I was not to be reassured for long. The unconcealed surprise that I saw in his eyes and heard in his voice as he returned my paper, along with his treatment of me over the course of the semester, revealed that, whatever my intelligence and potential, some of my professors would require me to prove every moment of every day, through every paper and every exam, in every in-class answer and out of class encounter that I deserved my place at Harvard. There are no words to express the impact of living in a world in which, no matter what one accomplishes, every act, circumstance and space is required to be a proving ground for ones intelligence and humanity.

In addition, the general puzzlement about my presence in a PhD program in French made me stand out in Boylston. Others were asking, “Why was I there?” One of my professors wrote to me many years later explaining that the faculty were uncertain what to do with me and uneasy about my career prospects. My youth had prepared me for their doubts.

I was born in Grapeland, Texas, a small town in East Texas near the Arkansas border. During my childhood, my parents, understanding the danger of asserting ones rights in the Jim Crow south, taught me not to lay claim to what I could not legally have. Pride and aspirations, you see, could lead to retaliation. As a consequence, there grew up in my psyche a nameless, formless space to which I consigned all of the foolishness that was an unavoidable feature of racial subordination. I learned to distinguish between who

I was and how I was defined in that fabricated space. Recognizing and accepting the existence of this difference was all-important to my survival and growth as a learner.

You are no doubt familiar with the way in which we often have to realign the image on the display of an electronic device. Without that realignment, the device becomes unresponsive. In some ways, my struggle for meaning had been a constant effort to align the spheres of my life so that authenticity and meaning could not only survive and come into increasingly sharper focus but also enable wholesome personal choices and ethical actions. Clarity was an important goal in my young life. Yet, the world I came from required me to be indirect, ambiguous, tenebrous.

Literature was a lifeline in this shadowy world. Here was a world where I could move freely among the metaphors and language without a passbook or a sideways glance. In fact, the metaphor itself was a mode of passage informing me of how to move through the turbulent real world that I was trying to understand. Here was a place where subversive identity was fearlessly shaped and safely asserted. I could speak any language, enter any door. Most important to me, in this world, value and meaning were not dictated by race.

My falling into literature took place at a time and place where an overt display of intelligence and a claim on esthetics on the part of African Americans were thought criminal. Many ridicule Stepnfetchit today, but this cruel parody of quiescent rage was effective in placating the bigotry of those who required the obscene denigration and subjugation of blacks. In the segregated schools that I attended for sixteen years before reaching Harvard, I was permitted my intelligence. Coming to Harvard meant testing myself in a new sphere where I was uncertain whether it was safe to openly claim my intelligence.

The discovery of a then - little known poet during my second year at Harvard helped resolve many of my questions about how to cope with the legacy of discrimination and the move into this wider world. At the same time, his literary imagination introduced me to a way of understanding why literature could be an unambiguously affirming means of addressing the questions of both truth and relevance that arose persistently with regard to my study of literature. Finally, encountering Aimé Césaire's work gave me a way to shrink that space where my doubts and insecurities were lodged. Aimé Césaire's Cahier d'un Retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land), was a "cri de coeur" that reflected finally what I was feeling. Reading this work struck me with decisive force.

*Il n'est point vrai que l'oeuvre de l'homme est finie
Que nous n'avons rien a faire au monde*

*..it is not true that the work of man is done
that we have no business being on earth...¹*

¹ Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry, translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, P. 76 and 77.

I came to understand that I not only deserved to be here, but I needed to be here because my presence made Harvard a better place for genuine scholarship. Furthermore, I was strong enough to withstand gale force winds and test myself rather than merely subject myself to the tests of others. These tests strengthened my capacity to handle constant questions of legitimacy and worth and I came to understand how these questions helped to develop a far more legitimate space for learning. Whatever had come before, there was need of what I was and what I could do. However, in order to make a difference, I needed to find a way to reveal to other learners more of what I brought to the learning environment. Making a difference required me to risk that innermost sphere that I had protected for so many years. Abandoning the strategy that my parents taught me to use to survive, I sought to use literature not to flee the danger from which my parents rightly protected me, but to advance the societal improvement that had become so important to me.

Many are curious about the role that Harvard played in shaping my career. To the extent that Harvard was a proving ground for my intellect and my courage, it served me well. The early years of the career that awaited me after Harvard were no less a test than what I endured here. I believe that I was better prepared for the challenges that presented themselves because I had not only constructed a proper, sturdy, adaptable and meaningful home for myself but the soundness of that structure had been tested and retested here at Harvard both in and out of the classroom.

There is an unfortunate tendency among many today to downplay the importance, rigor, and authority of arts and letters. I frequently hear from students that their parents urged them to abandon soft subjects and pursuits in favor of those more directly applicable to problem solving and significant income production. I am relieved that this dilemma resolved itself so definitively for me in my graduate years. It was literature that allowed me the intellectual and personal growth to define for myself an approach to life and a leadership style that would one day be of value to me and to society. It was literature that, in the end, was the portal to the relevance that I was seeking.

Still, many ask me why a black woman born and reared in my circumstances would choose to pursue a PhD in French. For me, the importance and appeal of French literature could not be denied. Finally, I was strong enough and free enough to choose rather than have others make the choice for me. Literature was, unlike my childhood, free and accessible and wholly mine to claim. Asserting that fact was the most defiant and defining act of my young life.

I arrived at Harvard in 1969 asking myself the question of a lifetime. Why am I here? I had been looking for meaning in all the wrong places: in comparing myself to others; in seeking to prove my fitness to others; in looking for answers only outside my own experience. Each of you has posed deep questions that will continue to guide you in the years ahead. Whether or not you can answer those questions thirty years from now may depend on how much you continue to strengthen the home that you have started to build here.

I left Harvard with some of my professors thinking that I could not find success in spite of what I had learned here. They had not the faith that the structure they had helped me begin would protect me and continue to transform my life. Perhaps they did not believe that this country would change. I did not place my trust in whether the country would change but, rather, in whether I could continue to prepare myself for the change that might come. Being at Harvard made a great difference in helping me anticipate what I could provide for whatever the world might become.

In a very short while, we will learn the outcome of the most recent court challenge to broad societal access to educational opportunities. My early life was shaped by a time when minorities were barred from these opportunities. All society was the worse for it. Whether or not the Supreme Court upholds the right of universities to use race and ethnicity as one factor among many in admitting students, our universities will inevitably oversee the development of leadership for a perpetually changing society. I am the leader I am today because Harvard put in my path a diversity of people, perspectives and disciplines that allowed me to understand better the nation and world of which I am a part. Having tested my own views against those of others different from me, I am more capable than I would otherwise have been to lead a university. No one, least of all I, expected that I would one day play such a role. But society advances, whether or not we conceive well and plan for that advancement.

Universities are at their best when they are preparing the way for change rather than obstructing it. I hope that the Supreme Court will allow universities like Brown and Harvard to continue to prepare for a future where vastly different perspectives and experiences are required to coexist. Harvard will continue to shape leaders who, I hope, will have been formed in the company of extraordinary men and women who are truly and broadly the best of their era.

I am reminded of a memorable scene from the film The Unforgiven in which a villain portrayed by the inimitable Gene Hackman in effect declares at the moment of his death, "I don't deserve to die I was building a house!"

He was right. It is, in truth, the building of the house that matters. Who can say why some prefer brass to chrome, walnut to oak, brick to stucco? For my time, for my circumstances, literature was the home I needed. It saved me from despair, sheltered me from danger, and created a means to illuminate my life. I am still building my house on the foundation that I prepared here.

I wish you the best in your lifelong pursuit of meaning and in the building of your own house.