Respecting the Future

Excerpted from the Senior English Address, by Eric Bradley Hart '03

I doubt that I was the first farm boy accepted to Harvard University, but when I arrived in Cambridge you certainly could have fooled me. Fresh off the tractor, with a farmer’s tan and a head full of Republican idealism, I fancied myself quite the moral authority. My ideological heroes occupied a wide range of the political spectrum, one that included both Rush Limbaugh and Ronald Reagan. I was all for intellectual diversity, so long as I was always right, and the Right was never wrong. It was shocking to discover that Harvard in its infinite wisdom had admitted another 1,599 individuals who were afflicted with this same moral infallibility. During my first semester, I found no shortage of people willing to lock horns with me. I believed that argument was the highest form of poetry, and viewed moderator as merely a refuge for the unrighteous. I was in good company.

College life, especially at an institution like Harvard, is remarkably adept at forcing people to pick sides. [D]iscourse on college campuses is often reduced to a form of polemical dodge ball. Students hurl arguments at each other. After being nailed a few times, I started to rethink some of my previously intractable positions. Maybe conservatism doesn’t have a monopoly on truth. Maybe homosexuality is not a choice—and if it is, maybe I don’t get to make it for other people. Maybe I needed to rethink the way in which I treated the opinions of others. Myself a former member of the NRA, I had been wielding my opinions like a 10-year-old who had just found his dad’s gun.

But opinions change. People change. Conformist pre-meds can become lifelong counter-culturalists just as readily as firebrand college activists can become Harvard professors. But as people, we are not merely the sum of our political opinions. Our personal value is not determined at the ballot box, nor are we justified in condemning one another simply because we attend different rallies. Elasticity of opinion is surely one of humanity’s greatest virtues. But while our opinions may change, our value as human beings does not.

Too often at Harvard, this is forgotten. In our student publications and on our House open lists, we see Arab activists callously branded anti-Semitic terrorists, and organized Christians vilified as homophobic bigots. This accomplishes nothing. It seems rather our duty, both as educated members of society and as decent people, to respect our differences by maintaining civility in public discourse... We are often told as children, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” As we all know the attempt to silence a Harvard student is futile, perhaps we should strive to achieve the first condition of that precept. If we cannot conserve oxygen, we should at least preserve civility.

As we enter into what Harvard president Charles Eliot first called the “real world,” our obligation to civility only increases. These last four years will shape… the environment in which our future unfolds. We are challenged to make that environment one that is driven by discourse, not denunciation, and one that is built on respect, not contempt.

Despite my own conversion to moderation, I still occasionally listen to Rush Limbaugh—although I no longer take notes. In one of his more thoughtful moments he said, “Being stuck is a position few of us like. We want something new, but we cannot let go of the old—old ideas, habits, beliefs, even thoughts.” We can al ways find a bit of Veritas, even in the places we might not expect it. No one’s opinions are immune to change... By honoring a code of civility and respect for the shared humanity of even those with whom we fundamentally disagree, we preserve the hope for understanding, and the possibility for change.

Auden and the Little Things

Excerpted from the Graduate English Address, by Elizabeth Lea du Pont Carpenter, M.B.A. ’03

We must love one another or die.

This line appears near the end of W.H. Auden’s poem “September First, 1939.” Perhaps you’ve heard it by now; it was widely circulated in the wake of September Eleventh, 2001. It was alarmingly prescient: even though Auden was writing in response to Germany’s march into Poland, his words would apply some 60 Septembers later.

We must love one another or die.

Auden did not say, “We will take no prisoners.” He did not say, “Victory shall be swift.” He did not even say, “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Auden was not primarily concerned with nationalism or allegiance or well-drawn battle lines; he was concerned with taking artistic risks. And he did. There’s an Auden for almost every occasion; there’s even an Auden for this year’s class of ’03, a class that in my case began, and now ends, its time here talking about war. It’s called “Musée des Beaux Arts,” and it starts like this:

About suffering they were never wrong
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...

Why is this our poem? Because, said another way, Auden saw that little things always occur with “big” things as their cine-
matic backdrops. little things are things like theses, final papers, and wireless cards that fail. little things are our answers to questions like “who’s dating whom?” “who got which offer?” and, “do blondes have more fun?” i saw my class find meaning in little things—in revenue variance and balance sheets and how and why interest compounds. that meaning was the blessing we shared here....academic life is rigorous. and in the rigor of its little things we found the best release of all.

rigor. and love.

i remember introducing two friends in my section—one israeli, the other half-pakistani, half-german. their subsequent bond is just one star in an unending constellation that illustrates the trick of this extraordinary place: understanding the art of what’s called “networking,” but what, in its finer incarnations, is simply “loving one another.” loving one another happens naturally in this pressure-cooked paradise. we reach out here because we have to, because we can, and because there can be few places in the world where, when you’re sad, you can lean on both a navy seal and a catholic priest.

rigor. love. and language.

a classmate of mine has been in hospital recovering from a car crash. he’s here today, and he knows his poets, and i worry that he’s frowning on my choice of auden—“too english, too predictable.” “but he does know my point: words can comfort us. words can change us. and it is poets who best express the fact that knowledge is not confined by library walls, and disciplines are not split neatly by departments—or by rivers. the heart of a poet can be coupled with the mind of a businessman. this is truth. this is veritas.

and this is why poetry’s as pertinent to us as mastering spreadsheets, speaking fluent french, or deconstructing philosophical discourse. the precious thing about poems is that, like discounted cash flows, their “solutions” rest on our assumptions. the poem simply points out the possibility of interpretation; we as readers pursue those possibilities as we wish.

rigor. love. language. and choice.

not long after he’d written “september first, 1939,” auden decided that—in fact—it was “trash.” on re-reading that astonishing line—we must love one another or die—he said, “well that’s a damned lie! we must die anyway.” and so, later anthologies omitted the work. but new critics took new looks, reassessed the poem’s value, and chose to give it back. why? because it has meaning for us, and not even its author can take that away: we must love one another or die is what remains.

on undergraduate education

excerpted from the commencement address by president lawrence h. summers

i plan to focus my remarks today on harvard college, as we embark on the most comprehensive examination of undergraduate education in a generation.

there is no more important priority for the university than renewing undergraduate education. no more important priority for a number of reasons:

• because harvard college lies at the center of the university, whose strength depends on the strength of the college.

• because no organization—certainly not one as creative as harvard college—should go more than a generation without reassessment and renewal.

• because much has changed since the last time undergraduate education was examined and restructured. when the core curriculum was debated in the 1970s, the defining division in the world was between communism and capitalism, and the calculator had only recently replaced the slide rule.

• because whatever we do to educate our undergraduates, we cannot do it for reasons of inertia or even tradition. our educational philosophy must reflect the forward-looking judgment of today’s faculty and students.

above all, renewing the harvard college experience is important because there is little that defines a society so directly as the ideas and values of those who hold positions of leadership. and those ideas and values are shaped in no small part by the education our leaders receive in and out of the classroom.

four times in the last 100 years or so the university has embarked on similar projects of renewal—in the eras of presidents eliot, lowell, conant, and bok. each of these redefinitions had far-reaching implications not just for the university but for higher education and society more generally. i believe the same will be true for the project on which we are now embarked.

we begin this consideration of undergraduate education from a position of strength. we have an outstanding faculty by any measure, and each of our classes comprises a remarkable group of young people drawn from across the nation, and increasingly, from around the world....

notwithstanding our demonstrable strengths, we have room for improvement. amidst the hundreds of pages of letters that poured in from students, faculty, and alumni in response to [faculty of arts and sciences] dean [william c.] kirby’s outreach, several issues were cited frequently:

• concern over the lack of direct engagement between senior faculty and undergraduate students;

• the uneven quality of advising;

• the sharp divide between curricular