"We Must Cross Over"

In his Commencement address, President Summers reviewed his priorities. A detailed report on his tenure will appear in the next issue.

Today, I speak from this podium a final time as your president. As I depart, I want to thank all of you—students, faculty, alumni, and staff—with whom I have been privileged to work over these past years. Some of us have had our disagreements, but I know that which unites us transcends that which divides us. I leave with a full heart, grateful for the opportunity I have had to lead this remarkable institution.

Since I delivered my inaugural address, 56 months ago, I have learned an enormous amount—about higher education, about leadership, and also about myself. Some things look different to me than they did five years ago. And yet the convictions I expressed as I entered Harvard’s presidency I feel with even more urgency these five years later. It is the urgency, and the possibility, of all Harvard can accomplish in the next years that I want to focus on this afternoon....

Among universities, Harvard stands out. With its great tradition, its iconic reputation, its remarkable network of 300,000 alumni, its unmatched capacity to attract brilliant students and faculty, its scope for physical expansion in Allston and beyond, Harvard has never had as much potential as it does now....

And yet, great and proud institutions, like great and proud nations at their peak, must surmount a very real risk: that the very strength of their traditions will lead to caution, to an inward focus on prerogative and to a complacency that lets the world pass them by.

And so I say to you that our University today is at an inflection point in its history. At such a moment, there is temptation to elevate comfort and consensus over progress and clear direction, but this would be a mistake....We can spur great deeds that history will mark decades and even centuries from now. If Harvard can find the courage to change itself, it can change the world....

Yes, I have these last years been a man in a hurry. My urgency boils down to this: For an institution like ours to make the great contributions the world rightly expects of us, we cannot rest complacent on this, the more comfortable side of innovation; on this, the more familiar side of the lectern; or, even, on this, the reassuringly red-brick side of the river.

Harvard must—we must—cross over:
Cross over from old disciplines to new;
Cross over from old structures of governance to new;
Cross over from outdated lectures to new, active modes of learning:
Cross over from the confines of Harvard Square and put down new, ambitious stakes, in Allston and beyond.

We owe it to those who come after us to become for this city, this region, this nation, and this world a center of human improvement....

I am honored to have served as your president during the early days of what I hope—and believe—will be Harvard’s greatest epoch. I have loved my work here, and I am sad to leave it. There was much more I wanted, felt inspired, to do. I know, as you do, that there are many within this community who have the wisdom, the love of Harvard, the spirit of service, and the energy that will be necessary to mount the collective efforts that this moment in history demands.

I bid you farewell with faith that even after 370 years, with the courage to change, Harvard’s greatest contributions lie in its future.

A Call to Service

Near the start of his address, journalist Jim Lehrer, who collects bus memorabilia, gave a splendid rendition of a Trailways boarding call, which can be heard at www.harvardmagazine.com. Then he got serious.

I believe we should consider adopting some form of national service. No, not a return to the military draft, something entirely different, and completely new for us. National service in its fullest meaning.

My reasons have to do mostly with what I see as an urgent need to address the growing state of disconnection we have in our country today. But it is based also on my personal experiences which flow directly from something...I did on my graduation day 50 years ago....

I went with my parents from the commencement ceremony to a building on campus and I raised my right hand and was sworn in as a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. I spent the next three years as an infantry officer, mostly in the Far East.

It was between the Korean and Vietnam Wars. I saw no combat, fired no rounds in anger, had none fired at me, had no roadside bombs kill fellow Marines of mine. I was spared events that might have triggered losing control, going over the top of civilized behavior into angry barbarism, as has been charged against a group of Marines these days in Iraq....

My travels up till then had been restricted pretty much to central Kansas, eastern Oklahoma, and south Texas. My mode of transport was mostly on Trailways buses. But as a Marine I took my first plane ride, to Washington, D.C., and then...to essentially the world.

My friends and acquaintances up till then had been mostly people who looked, talked, and thought like me. But now I was eating, drinking, sleeping, sweating, and running up and down hills with, and listening to and
depending on, people who had little in common with me....

I learned that there was more to the world than me and my kind. There was more to my life than me, me, and me....

I am grateful my country forced me to serve my country. Not for my country's sake, but for my own. My three years of service connected me to the rest of the world, the world outside myself, and the connection has been permanent.

The experience also left me with a firm conviction that beyond the benefits to individuals, connecting and connections are essential for our democratic society to work.

And speaking now as a journalist...I have never seen us more disconnected from each other than we are right now....

Our racial, cultural, and religious differences, always our great strength, have become an instrument in our great disconnection. Our growing economic differences...are feeding this. Our politics at the moment actually seem to be encouraging it, and our otherwise terrible explosion in new media outlets for information and debate are helping facilitate it.

I believe what we need is a new, hard real-world dose of shared experience. We had one after 9/11, and it drifted away. We had one after Katrina, and it went away. We have yet to even have one on Iraq....

How many of you know someone personally who has served or is now serving in Iraq? How many of you know a person or a relative of a person who has been killed or wounded in Iraq? Raise your hand if our being at war in Iraq has had any direct effect on your life at all.

What's left, I believe, for us all, the issues of the war in Iraq aside, [is] how do we connect ourselves and then stay connected to the other Americans—who do serve in the military and elsewhere in our name, on our behalf—without having to sustain a tremendous man-made or natural disaster?

I would submit one way is service itself. Service in all of its many forms. Service that can mean the Peace Corps, a teacher corps, a conservation corps, a police corps, a hospital-aid corps, a tutor corps, a Big Brother/Big Sister corps, a coping corps, a pick-up-the-trash corps, as well as the Marine Corps.

I do not have a specific 10- or 12-point proposal to put on the table....But I do have some framing questions for the discussion.

In order to be fair, should it be mandatory? No exemptions, no permanent deferments, everyone eventually serves?

Should it apply across the board: men, women, all physical and intellectual sizes and abilities included? What should be the age parameters? Should there be a way to involve not just the young? Should it be constructed around choices, each individual choosing the form of service, military or specific civilian, he or she wishes?

Should it be developed in partnership with private and corporate resources as well as governmental? Should it be tied to a G.I. Bill-type program? Service earns education, home, and other benefits—in addition to the benefits of connection, and of the soul.

I know some will argue that such a program would cost too much. I would only ask, compared to what?

Others would argue that for it to really work politically, it must be voluntary....

I'll leave the politics of national service to someone else.

But voluntary service is what we have now. The result...may be cheaper, but it's also causing a serious heightening of our differences and our disconnections. And definitely not just as it involves the military.

My guess is that all of you in this room—alums, students, parents, whoever—have an interest in volunteer public service and that you have no doubt already done some of it and will always continue to do so....

But volunteer service...is not an equal-opportunity operation. Nonmilitary volunteerism is pretty well confined to the well-educated and the well-off.

The majority of Americans are simply not in a financial position to delay careers, to take no-pay internships, to take off a year or two, or even a few weeks or even a long weekend to do good, to help people rebuild their homes in New Orleans or Indonesia, do tutoring of low-income kids in Los Angeles or Des Moines, find food and shelter for the devastated of Darfur or Biloxi.

So we have a rather stark division among us. The most fortunate volunteer for the nonmilitary, the less fortunate volunteer for the military. And those in between, the vast majority of Americans, do neither because they can't afford to.

I know for a fact I would not have voluntarily gone into the Marine Corps 50 years ago. I would have gone directly from my commencement ceremony to a job...to my job that I already had as a newspaper reporter, which is what I did three years later after my service.

Trust me, I was a much better reporter then because of how I spent those intervening three years. And a much better person....

The bottom line for me on this is simply this: whatever the ultimate conclusion, I believe passionately that we would all benefit from a full and frank discussion of our mutual responsibilities to serve. Of the joys and satisfactions that come from such service. From lifting ourselves away from our own needs just for a while to pay attention to those of others, and of trying to find a way that involves every one of us.

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Full texts of these and other Commencement speeches, and video of principal presentations, are available at www.harvardmagazine.com.