Today we mark new beginnings by gathering in solidarity; we celebrate our community and its creativity; we commit ourselves to Harvard and all it represents in a new chapter of its distinguished history. Like a congregation at a wedding, you signify by your presence a pledge of support for this marriage of a new president to a venerable institution. As our colleagues in anthropology understand so well, rituals have meanings and purposes; they are intended to arouse emotions and channel intentions. In ritual, as the poet Thomas Lynch has written, “We act out things we cannot put into words.” But now my task is in fact to put some of this ceremony into words, to capture our meanings and purposes.

Inaugural speeches are a peculiar genre. They are by definition pronouncements by individuals who don’t yet know what they’re talking about. Or, we might more charitably dub them expressions of hope unchastened by the rod of experience.

A number of inaugural veterans—both orators and auditors—have proffered advice, including unanimous agreement that my talk must be shorter than Charles William Eliot’s—which went on for an hour and a half. Often inaugural addresses contain lists—of a new president’s specific goals or programs. But lists seem too constraining when I think of what today should mean; they seem a way of limiting rather than unleashing our most ambitious imaginings, our profoundest commitments.

If this is a day to transcend the ordinary, if it is a rare moment when we gather not just as Harvard, but with a wider world of scholarship, teaching, and learning, it is a time to reflect on what Harvard and institutions like it mean in this first decade of the twenty-first century.

Yet as I considered how to talk about higher education and the future, I found myself—historian that I am—returning to the past and, in particular, to a document that I encountered in my first year in graduate school. My cousin Jack Gilpin, class of ’73, read a section of it at Memorial Church this morning. As John Winthrop sat aboard the ship Arbella in 1630, sailing across the Atlantic to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he wrote a charge to his band of settlers, a charter for their new beginnings. He offered what he considered “a compass to steer by”—a “model,” but not a set of explicit orders. Winthrop instead sought to focus his followers on the broader significance of their project, on the spirit in which they should undertake their shared work. I aim to offer such a “compass” today, one for us at Harvard, and one that I hope will have meaning for all of us who care about higher education, for we are inevitably, as Winthrop urged his settlers to be, “knitt together in this work as one.”

American higher education in 2007 is in a state of paradox—at once celebrated and assailed. A host of popular writings from the 1980s on have charged universities with teaching too little, costing too much, coddling professors and neglecting students, embracing an “illiberality” that has silenced open debate. A PBS special in 2005 described a “sea of mediocrity” that “places this nation at risk.” A report issued by the U.S. Department of Education last year warned of the “obsolescence” of higher edu-
cation as we know it and called for federal intervention in service of the national interest.

Yet universities like Harvard and its peers, those represented by so many of you here today, are beloved by alumni who donate billions of dollars each year, are sought after by students who struggle to win admission, and, in fact, are deeply revered by the American public. In a recent survey, 93 percent of respondents considered our universities “one of [the country’s] most valuable resources.” Abroad, our universities are admired and emulated; they are arguably the American institutions most respected by the rest of the world.

How do we explain these contradictions? Is American higher education in crisis and if so, what kind? What should we, as its leaders and representatives, be doing about it? This ambivalence, this curious love-hate relationship, derives in no small part from our almost unbounded expectations of our colleges and universities, expectations that are at once intensely felt and poorly understood.

From the time of its founding, the United States has tied its national identity to the power of education. We have long turned to education to prepare our citizens for the political equality fundamental to our national self-definition. In 1779, for example, Thomas Jefferson called for a national aristocracy of talent, chosen, as he put it, “without regard to wealth, birth, or other accidental condition of circumstance” and “rendered by liberal education...able to guard the sacred deposit of rights and liberties of their fellow-citizens.” As our economy has become more complex, more tied to specialized knowledge, education has become more crucial to social and economic mobility. W.E.B. Du Bois observed in 1909 that “Education and work are the levers to lift up a people.” Education makes the promise of America possible.

In the past half-century, American colleges and universities have shared in a revolution, serving as both the emblem and the engine of the expansion of equality, citizenship, and opportunity—to blacks, women, Jews, immigrants, and others who would have been subjected to quotas or excluded altogether in an earlier era. My presence here today—and indeed that of many of you here today, are beloved by alumni who donate billions of dollars each year, are sought after by students who struggle to win admission, and, in fact, are deeply revered by the American public. In a recent survey, 93 percent of respondents considered our universities “one of [the country’s] most valuable resources.” Abroad, our universities are admired and emulated; they are arguably the American institutions most respected by the rest of the world.

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The desirability and the perceived necessity of higher education have intensified the fears of many. Will I get in? Will I be able to pay? This anxiety expresses itself in both deep-seated resentment and nearly unrealizable expectations. Higher education cannot alone guarantee the mobility and equality at the heart of the American Dream. But we must fully embrace our obligation to be available and affordable. We must make sure that talented students are able to come to Harvard, that they know they are able to come, and that they know we want them here. We need to make sure that cost does not divert students from pursuing their passions and their dreams.

But American anxiety about higher education is about more than just cost. The deeper problem is a widespread lack of understanding and agreement about what universities ought to do and be. Universities are curious institutions with varied purposes that they have neither clearly articulated nor adequately justified. Resulting public confusion, at a time when higher education has come to seem an indispensable social resource, has produced a torrent of demands for greater “accountability” from colleges and universities.

Universities are indeed accountable. But we in higher education need to seize the initiative in defining what we are accountable for. We are asked to report graduation rates, graduate-school admission statistics, scores on standardized tests intended to assess the “value added” of years in college, research dollars, numbers of faculty publications. But such measures cannot themselves capture the achievements, let alone the aspirations, of universities. Many of these metrics are important to know, and they shed light on particular parts of our undertaking. But our purposes are far more ambitious and
our accountability thus far more difficult to explain.

Let me venture a definition. The essence of a university is that it is uniquely accountable to the past and to the future—not simply, or even primarily, to the present. A university is not about results in the next quarter; it is not even about what a student has become by graduation. It is about learning that molds a lifetime, learning that transmits the heritage of millennia, learning that shapes the future. A university looks both backwards and forwards in ways that must—and even ought to—conflict with a public’s immediate concerns and demands. Universities make commitments to the timeless, and these investments have yielded we cannot predict and often cannot measure. Universities are stewards of living tradition—in Widener and Houghton and our 88 other libraries, in the Fogg and the Peabody, in our departments of classics, of history, and of literature. We are uncomfortable with efforts to justify these endeavors by defining them as instrumental, as measurably useful to particular contemporary needs. Instead we pursue them in part “for their own sake,” because they define what has, over centuries, made us human, not because they can enhance our global competitiveness.

We pursue them because they offer us as individuals and as societies a depth and breadth of vision we cannot find in the inevitably myopic present. We pursue them too because just as we need food and shelter to survive, just as we need jobs and seek education to better our lot, so too we as human beings search for meaning. We strive to understand who we are, where we came from, where we are going, and why. For many people, the four years of undergraduate life offer the only interlude permitted for unfettered exploration of such fundamental questions. But the search for meaning is a never-ending quest that is always interpretive, always interrupting and redefining the status quo, always looking, never content with what is found. An answer simply yields the next question. This is in fact true of all learning, of the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities, and thus of the very core of what universities are about.

By their nature, universities nurture a culture of restlessness and even unruliness. This lies at the heart of their accountability to the future. Education, research, teaching are always about change—transforming individuals as they learn, transforming the world as our inquiries alter our understanding of it, transforming societies as we see our knowledge translated into policies—policies like those being developed at Harvard to prevent unfair lending practices, or to increase affordable housing, or avert nuclear proliferation—or translated into therapies, like those our researchers have designed to treat macular degeneration or to combat anthrax. The expansion of knowledge means change. But change is often uncomfortable, for it always encompasses loss as well as gain, disorientation as well as discovery. It has, as Machiavelli once wrote, no constituency. Yet in facing the future, universities must embrace the unsettling change that is fundamental to every advance in understanding.

We live in the midst of scientific developments as dramatic as those of any era since the seventeenth century. Our obligation to the future demands that we take our place at the forefront of those transformations. We must organize ourselves in ways that enable us fully to engage in such exploration, as we have begun to do by creating the Broad Institute, by founding cross-school departments, by launching a School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. We must overcome barriers both within and beyond Harvard that could slow or constrain such work, and we must provide the resources and the facilities—like the new science buildings in both Cambridge and Allston—to support it. Our obligation to the future makes additional demands. Universities are, uniquely, a place of philosophers as well as scientists. It is urgent that we pose the questions of ethics and meaning that will enable us to confront the human, the social, and the moral significance of our changing relationship with the natural world.

Accountability to the future requires that we leap geographic as well as intellectual boundaries. Just as we live in a time of narrowing distances between fields and disciplines, so we inhabit an increasingly transnational world, in which knowledge itself is the most powerful connector. Our lives here in Cambridge and Boston cannot be separated from the future of the rest of the earth: we share the same changing climate; we contract and spread the same diseases; we participate in the same economy.

We must recognize our accountability to the wider world, for, as John Winthrop warned in 1630, “we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

Harvard is both a source and a symbol of the ever-expanding knowledge upon which the future of the earth depends, and we must take an active and reflective role in this new geography of learning. Higher education is burgeoning around the globe in forms that are at once like and unlike our own. American universities are widely emulated, but our imitators often display limited appreciation for the principles of free inquiry and the culture of creative unruliness that defines us.

The “Veritas” in Harvard’s shield was originally intended to invoke the absolutes of divine revelation, the unassailable verities of Puritan religion. We understand it quite differently now. Truth is an aspiration, not a possession. Yet in this we—and all universities defined by the spirit of debate and free inquiry—challenge, and even threaten, those who would embrace unquestioned certainties. We must commit ourselves to the uncomfortable position of doubt, to the humility of always believing there is more to know, more to teach, more to understand.

The kinds of accountability I have described represent at once a privilege and a responsibility. We are able to live at Harvard in a world of intellectual freedom, of inspiring tradition, of extraordinary resources, because we are part of that curious and venerable organization known as a university. We need better to comprehend and advance its purposes—not simply to explain ourselves to an often critical public, but to hold ourselves to our own account. We must act not just as students and staff, historians and computer scientists, lawyers and physicians, linguists and sociolo-
gists, but as citizens of a university, with obligations to this commonwealth of the mind. We must regard ourselves as accountable to one another, for we constitute the institution that in turn defines our possibilities. Accountability to the future encompasses special accountability to our students, for they are our most important purpose and legacy. And we are responsible not just to and for this university, Harvard, at this moment, 2007, but to the very concept of the university as it has evolved over nearly a millennium.

It is not easy to convince a nation or a world to respect, much less support, institutions committed to challenging society’s fundamental assumptions. But it is our obligation to make that case: both to explain our purposes and to achieve them so well that these precious institutions survive and prosper in this new century. Harvard cannot do this alone. But all of us know that Harvard has a special role. That’s why we’re here; that’s why it means so much to us.

Last week I was given a brown manila envelope that had been entrusted to the University Archives in 1951 by James B. Conant, Harvard’s twenty-third president. He left instructions that it should be opened by the Harvard president at the outset of the next century “and not before.”

I broke the seal on the mysterious package to find a remarkable letter from my predecessor. It was addressed to “My dear Sir.” Conant wrote with a sense of imminent danger. He feared an impending World War III that would make, as he put it, “the destruction of our cities including Cambridge quite possible.” “We all wonder,” he continued, “how the free world is going to get through the next fifty years.” But as he imagined Harvard’s future, Conant shifted from foreboding to faith. If the “prophets of doom” proved wrong, if there was a Harvard president alive to read his letter, Conant was confident about what the University would be. He wrote, “You will receive this note and be in charge of a more prosperous and significant institution than the one over which I have the honor to preside… That…[Harvard] will maintain the traditions of academic freedom, of tolerance for heresy, I feel sure.” We must dedicate ourselves to making certain he continues to be right; we must share and sustain his faith.

Conant’s letter, like our gathering here, marks a dramatic intersection of the past with the future. This is a ceremony in which I pledge—with keys and seal and charter—my accountability to the traditions that his voice from the past invokes. At the same time, I affirm, in compact with all of you, my accountability to and for Harvard’s future. As in Conant’s day, we face uncertainties in a world that gives us sound reason for disquiet. But we, too, maintain an unwavering belief in the purposes and potential of this university and in all it can do to shape how the world will look another half-century from now. Let us embrace those responsibilities and possibilities; let us share them “knit together…as one”; let us take up the work joyfully, for such an assignment is a privilege beyond measure.

“We must act as citizens of a university, with obligations to this commonwealth of the mind.”