“Changed Times”

This was a year of “changed times,” President Drew Faust acknowledged in her Commencement afternoon address. She had explored the theme two days earlier at seniors’ Baccalaureate service, talking about how “the world became something very different from anything we ever expected”—economically, politically, and in other ways. Lois Beckett ’09 expressed the prevailing anxieties particularly vividly in her Senior English Address during the Morning Exercises, excerpted below.

How then to proceed? Faust, an historian, and physicist-turned-public-servant Steven Chu offered two strikingly similar answers late in their afternoon speeches, excerpted here. Faust emphasized the importance of sustaining access to education and maintaining scientific research, and then brought up inquiry of other kinds. Chu reviewed the science of climate change and necessary policy responses, before turning to the broader human context.

In another vein, at the Phi Beta Kappa Literary Exercises on June 2, poet Albert Goldbarth read “Voyage,” on intellectual aspiration (inspired by Charles Darwin), and then a saucier new verse, meant to bring his audience back to earth. And at Harvard Medical School’s Class Day, a graduate/novelist found humor in healthcare.

“This Shaking Keeps Us Steady”

An address by Lois Beckett ’09

As we assemble here today…it’s hard to imagine that an earthquake might ever shake these stately buildings. The ground of Harvard feels like steady ground.

Freshman year, though, my friend from California would walk past these columns and towers and worry about earthquakes. I saw him looking up at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. “That’s crazy,” he said. He had never seen a church steeple made of stone.

That was the first time it hit me: some people live in places where they can’t trust the ground they walk on—where they might wake up any morning with their beds shaking and their books tumbling from the shelves.

I wanted to tell my friend, “Dude—you’re in New England. The ground—it’s under control.”

I thought he should see these buildings as I saw them—the guardians of knowledge, historic and secure.

Turns out, the science of seismology got its start right here, in 1755, when Professor John Winthrop was awakened one morning by the “vehement agitation” of his bed. An earthquake had toppled the chimneys of Boston and broken the weather vane on Faneuil Hall. All the church steeples tilted to the side. Winthrop, professor of “natural philosophy,” decided to measure where the bricks from his chimney had landed and calculate their velocity. The next week, he gave a lecture on the subject in the college chapel.

“The causes of earthquakes are incessantly at work,” he told his listeners. “It may seem rather a wonder that we have no more earthquakes, rather than that we have so many.”

New England: maybe not so safe.

Today is a day of celebration, a day to rejoice in what we have accomplished…

But today is also a day of uncertainty…for everyone. Young or old, this year it has felt sometimes as if what we knew were falling down all around us.

The class of 2009 is graduating amidst a global financial crisis that few people—even at Harvard—saw coming. We’ve watched the collapse of the financial system ripple outwards, hitting the most vulnerable, leaving no place untouched. There are more problems, less money to address them…

Sooner than most graduates, we’ve faced the realization that the world is unsteady, that so little of what we thought we could count on is guaranteed.

That’s what my friend from California understood already. He came from a place where they…think about what happens if you make a steeple of stones and they all come tumbling down.

There weren’t enough people, over the last years, who looked at America’s financial system and said, “Whoa, guys—are we sure this is structurally sound?”

It’s not easy to be the person who asks that question. But if none of us ask, we see where we end up.

We Harvard kids are good at working within systems of power…Many of us graduating today will continue to live as we’ve lived in college: overworked, underslept, running on caffeine and the buzz of accomplishment. As we race against our deadlines—piling brick atop brick—we’ll have few incentives to question what we’re building. Speaking truth to power isn’t easy—especially when power is giving you a paycheck. That’s true whether you work for an investment bank, or a charity, or a university.

But we are building our futures on shaky ground. We can’t forget that.

Sometimes it feels like a struggle just to keep doing what we’re doing every day. But that’s not enough. We have to take responsibility for the systems in which we live and work—however difficult these
systems are to understand, whatever risks we have to take to critique them. Hardest of all is finding the courage to do this—to make the effort and build something right—knowing that it might not last. That no building is earthquake proof.

This is the kind of courage Theodore Roethke describes in his poem “The Waking.” It’s a poem I turn to when I’m not feeling so brave. Roethke writes:

God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there, And learn by going where I have to go. This shaking keeps me steady. I should know. What falls away is always. And is near.

As we go out today, on the many paths of our future, I have no advice, just these words, part prophecy, part prayer. This shaking keeps us steady. What falls away is always, and is near.

“Producers of Doubt”

From the afternoon address by Drew Faust

Universities serve as society’s critics and conscience. We are meant to be producers not just of knowledge but of doubt—of understanding rooted in skepticism and constant questioning, not in the unchallenged sway of accepted wisdom. More than perhaps any other institution in our society, universities are about the long view and about the critical perspectives that derive from not being owned exclusively by the present.

For nearly four centuries now, Harvard has looked beyond the immediately useful, relevant, and comfortable to cast current assumptions into the crucible of other places and other times. Universities are so often judged by their measurable utility—by their contributions to economic growth and competitiveness. We can make a powerful case with such arguments...But such contributions are only a part of what universities do and mean. We need universities for much less immediate and instrumental ends.

I worry that we as universities have not done all we could and should to ask the deep and unsettling questions necessary to the integrity of any society. As the world indulged in a bubble of false prosperity and materialism, should we—in our research, teaching, and writing—have done more to expose the patterns of risk and denial inherent in widespread economic and financial choices? Should our values have posed a firmer counterweight and challenge to excess and irresponsibility, to short-term thinking with long-term consequences?

The privilege of academic freedom carries the obligation to speak the truth even when it is difficult or unpopular. So in the end, it comes back to veritas—the commitment to use knowledge and research to penetrate delusion, cant, prejudice, self-interest. That truth may come in the form of scientific insights freed from ideology and politics. It may come in the interpretive work of humanists who show us how to read and think critically and offer us the perspective of other places, other tongues, and other times. It may come through the uniquely revisionary force of the arts—which enable us to understand ourselves and the world through changed eyes and ears. It may come through placing questions of ethics and responsibility at the core of our professional school programs...

The enhancement of our role as critics and doubters must come as well through the education of our undergraduates, where we seek, in the words of the new General Education program, “to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar...to disorient young people and to help

“If You Love Rats”

Stephen Bergman ’66, M.D. ’73, writing as Samuel Shem, published a novel, The House of God, in 1978—a biting comedy about the lives of medical interns, among whom it remains immensely popular. It has not always been so kindly received within the medical hierarchy. So it was a surprise that Bergman, who spent decades on the Medical School faculty, teaching psychiatrists-in-training at McLean Hospital, was named the school’s Class Day speaker. This excerpt is from his introduction.

In rough economic times like these, perhaps we should offer a prayer of thanksgiving—how thankful we are that you are not graduating from business school. Healthcare is a glorious profession. It is so broad that each of you will find a job. If you love people and hate rats and molecules, you can be a clinician. If you love rats and molecules and are not so hot with people, a researcher. If neither, and you like travel to exotic places to help millions of people, public health or politics. And if, like me, you are a Jewish doctor who can’t stand the sight of blood, there’s always psychiatry.