Women of the Year

Concluding the year in which Harvard transitioned from its first woman president to its twenty-eighth man to hold the office, the University showcased a dazzling array of female leaders during the 368th Commencement, May 28-31. Their spheres of action ranged from the pinnacle of elected office to grassroots crusades for fundamental rights: the principal speaker, German chancellor Angela Merkel; president emerita Drew Gilpin Faust, an honorary-degree recipient; a public-interest lawyer; a labor organizer; the past president of Planned Parenthood; U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith, the chief marshal; and the brave pediatrician who exposed the lead water pipes that threatened the health of the poor citizens of Flint, Michigan.

Their gender may have been irrelevant: the chance result of many Harvard tubs severally selecting apt speakers and honorands. But collectively, they and other important guests during the week conveyed a significant message about engaging in civic life, fighting for fundamental values, and—of increasing importance to the University and to that new president, Lawrence S. Bacow—modeling, and really meaning, service in some cause larger than oneself.

Much of the week was cool and gray— and perhaps a metaphor for the prevailing temperament.

Tuesday morning, the Phi Beta Kappans queued up for the annual Literary Exercises in Sanders Theatre, just in time to get moistened, to and fro. Poet Dan Chiasson, Ph.D. ’01, knowing his audience well, presented them with a new poem titled “The Math Campers.” Orator Eric Lander—faculty member, genomics pioneer, and founder and leader of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard—spoke seriously about science and knowledge. But his paean to discovery was anchored in concern about “failures of imagination,” the inability to conceive “What could possibly go right? and What could possibly go wrong?” in the very contempo-
rary realms of genetic engineering ("modified babies with new traits") and computer science/artificial intelligence/social media (enabling "some governments to become surveillance states" and the dissemination of "fake images, audios, and videos").

Other figures returned to familiar Harvard haunts as well, to raise equally weighty concerns. Fiftieth-reunioner Al Gore '69, LL.D.'94—the College's Class Day speaker on Wednesday afternoon, his third Tercentenary Theatre address—warned about climate change, his chief issue for a quarter-century. He earned cheers for advocating divestment from fossil-fuel holdings (as the Corporation and administration have declined to do; the cause is popular among students, some of whom chanted "Divest—and reinvest after earning their degrees). His larger theme was the national discourse. "Veritas—truth—is not only Harvard’s motto emblazoned on so many of these banners here today," he began. "But it is also democracy’s shield, and the right to pursue truth is the most fundamental right of them all. That right is now at risk. And as a result, freedom itself is at risk." Amplifying, he said, "Supporters of authoritarianism define loyalty to America’s core principles as treason against its new would-be sovereign." A desire for more power “explains the appeal to would-be autocrats of multiple ‘bromances’ with extreme authoritarians—at least one of whom...has been allowed to sink his teeth into America’s democratic electoral process and play with it like a chew toy.”

At the Business School, Michael R. Bloomberg, M.B.A. '66, L.L.D. '14, instructed the M.B.A.s-to-be that capitalism fared better when bosses treated their employees well, conducted themselves with...
integrity, embraced philanthropy, and, yes, showed some awareness of matters like climate change.

But the real pride of place belonged to newcomers who did not exert leadership from past positions of power or (earned) wealth. Roberta Kaplan ’88 told the Law School crowd that “As a closeted high-school student in Cleveland, Ohio, in the early 1980s; as a closeted college student here at Harvard in the mid 1980s; and as an only slightly-less-closeted law student at Columbia in the late 1980s,” it had taken personal bravery for her to acknowledge her identity—and then to take on litigating United States v. Windsor, which undid the Defense of Marriage Act. Foreshadowing

Defense of Marriage Act. Foreshadowing

Mona Hanna-Attisha

Robert A. Kaplan’s wife, Roberta Kaplan ’88, former Planned Parenthood leader, told public-health students they must choose “the path of most resistance”—not simply practicing their chosen profession, but embracing activism: “I hope that every single one of you is thinking about running for office.” Proving that successful advocacy need not depend on holding office, Mona Hanna-Attisha told the Medical and Dental School graduates Thursday afternoon that when she publicized her findings about the poisoning of Flint’s water supply (the result of a financial overseer’s decision to save money), she was “met with denials and attacks,” called “wrong” and “hysterical,” and even briefly regretted her decision to speak up. But she persevered because “Every single number in my research was a child, children that as a physician I have literally taken an oath to protect.” And Radcliffe Medalist Dolores Huerta (honored on Friday, the fairest day of the week, the weather gods’ gesture to the women of and at Harvard), proceeded against even longer odds, from a position of

Honoris Causa

Five men and four women received honorary degrees. University provost Alan M. Garber introduced the honorands in the following order, and President Lawrence S. Bacow read the citations. Fuller background on each is available at harvardmag.com/honorands-19.

Robert A. Kaplan’s wife, Roberta Kaplan ’88, former Planned Parenthood leader, told public-health students they must choose “the path of most resistance”—not simply practicing their chosen profession, but embracing activism: “I hope that every single one of you is thinking about running for office.” Proving that successful advocacy need not depend on holding office, Mona Hanna-Attisha told the Medical and Dental School graduates Thursday afternoon that when she publicized her findings about the poisoning of Flint’s water supply (the result of a financial overseer’s decision to save money), she was “met with denials and attacks,” called “wrong” and “hysterical,” and even briefly regretted her decision to speak up. But she persevered because “Every single number in my research was a child, children that as a physician I have literally taken an oath to protect.” And Radcliffe Medalist Dolores Huerta (honored on Friday, the fairest day of the week, the weather gods’ gesture to the women of and at Harvard), proceeded against even longer odds, from a position of

Ingrid Daubechies, Duke Professor of mathematics and electrical and computer engineering, Duke University, Doctor of Science. Following in Fourier’s footsteps, a brilliant mathematician enthralled by how things work; her wizardry with wavelets shows that manifold utility is the first derivative of theoretical ingenuity.

Ingrid Daubechies, Duke Professor of mathematics and electrical and computer engineering, Duke University, Doctor of Science. Following in Fourier’s footsteps, a brilliant mathematician enthralled by how things work; her wizardry with wavelets shows that manifold utility is the first derivative of theoretical ingenuity.

Emmanuel Saez, Chancellor’s Professor of tax policy and public finance, University of California, Berkeley, Doctor of Laws. An economist extraordinaire whose studies, both theoretical and empirical, elucidate telling trends and animate crucial debate; as a scholar of inequality he has few equals.

Emmanuel Saez, Chancellor’s Professor of tax policy and public finance, University of California, Berkeley, Doctor of Laws. An economist extraordinaire whose studies, both theoretical and empirical, elucidate telling trends and animate crucial debate; as a scholar of inequality he has few equals.

David Remnick, editor, The New Yorker, Doctor of Laws. Prolific in profiling politicians and pugilists, adroit in eliciting his writers’ best, intent and indefatigable in pursuit of truth, a journalist and editor whose work contains multitudes.

President Lawrence S. Bacow read the citations.

Fuller background on each is available at harvardmag.com/honorands-19.

Dame Marilyn Strathern

Emmanuel Saez, Chancellor’s Professor of tax policy and public finance, University of California, Berkeley, Doctor of Laws. An economist extraordinaire whose studies, both theoretical and empirical, elucidate telling trends and animate crucial debate; as a scholar of inequality he has few equals.

Dame Marilyn Strathern, Wyse professor of social anthropology emerita, University of Cambridge, Doctor of Laws. Intrigued by seeing how people live, inventive in subverting conventional norms, an empathetic ethnographer who crafts new lenses on the varieties and complexities of human experience.

Dame Marilyn Strathern, Wyse professor of social anthropology emerita, University of Cambridge, Doctor of Laws. Intrigued by seeing how people live, inventive in subverting conventional norms, an empathetic ethnographer who crafts new lenses on the varieties and complexities of human experience.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and secretary-elect of the Smithsonian Institution, Doctor of Laws.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and secretary-elect of the Smithsonian Institution, Doctor of Laws.

Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard president emerita, Doctor of Laws. A luminous leader of this republic of learning, an opener of doors ever true to high ideals, a scholar of the past with a will to seize the future, out of many Harvards she drew one.

Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard president emerita, Doctor of Laws. A luminous leader of this republic of learning, an opener of doors ever true to high ideals, a scholar of the past with a will to seize the future, out of many Harvards she drew one.

Angela Merkel, chancellor, Federal Republic of Germany, Doctor of Laws. Quantum chemist turned stalwart statesperson, resolute in devotion to democratic values; a wall came down and she rose up, leading her nation with strength and savvy and guiding Europe through challenge and change.

Angela Merkel, chancellor, Federal Republic of Germany, Doctor of Laws. Quantum chemist turned stalwart statesperson, resolute in devotion to democratic values; a wall came down and she rose up, leading her nation with strength and savvy and guiding Europe through challenge and change.

www.harvardmagazine.com/commencement
even lesser authority, when she co-founded the United Farm Workers of America. She works with people, she said, who "may not speak English, they may not be citizens of the United States, they might be very, very poor….But the one thing is…that the power is in our person."

Where do people find the strength to undertake the risky work of pursuing what’s right? General Mark A. Milley, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, told the ROTC cadets about the importance of character within an organized institution like the military (see page 18). And student orators Genesis Noelia De Los Santos Fragoso ’19 and Lucila Takjerad, M.P.A. ’19, galvanized the Morning Exercises throng with their personal journeys (from a Boston housing project and civil war in Algeria, respectively), abetted by family, friends, and strangers’ small acts of kindness. The messages of human diversity and humane inclusion could not have been embodied more strikingly.

Under cloudy but ideally comfortable conditions, especially for those swathed in academic duds, the honorary degrees conferred thereafter extended the metaphor—and reinforced the spectrum of issues on the University and world agendas. The exemplars recognized ranged from a stellar curator of the African-American experience and a social anthropologist who changed the understanding of gender to a leader in explaining economic inequality and a preeminent practitioner of factual journalism.

In his afternoon address, President Bacow’s first baccalaureate

They Said

“I began to let that idea of myself go”

In his baccalaureate address, President Lawrence S. Bacow addressed an anxiety many students probably felt: "After years of amassing options, you are now faced with the prospect of having to exercise them—the act of walking down one avenue and necessarily forsaking others. Making these choices can be unsettling, because for the first time in your life, you may feel as if your world is narrowing. I’m here to tell you, it’s not.” He then explained why:

After I finished my second year of law school, here at Harvard, I started a summer job at…a law firm. Now, I had spent my entire life up to that point imagining that I would become a lawyer, just like my father. I thought it was what I wanted to do, and I knew it was what my father and other people expected me to do. One afternoon that summer, I was accounting for my billable hours, filling out a time sheet that broke every hour of my weekday into six-minute increments—it is what lawyers do.

without saying, in this country, and on the rise in her own.

The day before, Juan Manuel Santos, M.C./M.P.A. ’81, NF ’88, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role as president in bringing Colombia’s horrific civil war to an end, had told his Kennedy School audience that “what seemed impossible became possible” in his country through “good will, perseverance, courage, adequate planning—yes—but above all, by recognizing each other as human beings.” Drawing on her very different life and leadership experience, Merkel told her huge audience, “Do we prioritize people as individuals with human dignity and all their many facets? Or do we see in them merely consumers, data sources, objects of surveillance? These are difficult questions. I have learned that we can find good answers even to difficult questions if we always try to view the world through the eyes of others. If we respect other people’s history, traditions, religion, and identity. If we hold fast to our inalienable values, and act in accordance with them.”

It seemed the perfect message, hard-earned, not only for the day and the place, but for these times, and the ages.