

**Remarks of Harvard President Lawrence S. Bacow
Harvard Commencement 2019
May 29, 2019
As Delivered**

Thank you very much Margaret for that very generous introduction.

First let me say congratulations to our graduates. Welcome back to our alumni. Good afternoon to everyone—colleagues and friends; family members, loved ones, and our most special guest - our eminent speaker. It's a pleasure to address to you this afternoon and to offer a few reflections as I approach the end of my first year as president.

I realize, however, that I'm literally the last thing standing between you and the speech that you've all actually come to hear. So, while I cannot promise to be mesmerizingly eloquent, I can at least promise to be mercifully brief.

We gather this afternoon buoyed by the aspirations of our graduates—some 7,100 people who have distinguished themselves in nearly every field and every discipline imaginable. We welcome them into the venerable ranks of our alumni, and we send them forth into a world that is very much in need of both their minds and their hearts.

During my brief time in office, our world has reminded us daily of the necessity and the urgency of our work.

We have witnessed the coarsening of public discourse and the volatility of national and international affairs.

We've mourned when gun violence has cut futures short, and when gatherings of the faithful—Jewish, Muslim, and Christian—have ended in bloodshed.

We've continued to confront the existential threat posed by climate change, and we've reeled as extreme weather has destroyed homes and claimed lives.

And we've grown increasingly aware of the scourge of sexual harassment and sexual assault, and have struggled to consider how institutions, Harvard among them, can prevent and address behavior that threatens individuals and weakens communities.

To be sure, there is much in this world that rightly troubles us. But there's even more that gives us cause for hope.

And it's that spirit of hope – the willingness both to see the world as it is, and to consider how we can help make it better – that is in many ways the spirit that defines this university and I believe joins us all together.

Since I took office on July 1, I've seen the value of both knowledge and education at work in the world. I've seen the good being done by our faculty and our students, by our alumni, and our staff, and our friends. And I've seen expressions of compassion, and patience, and kindness, and wisdom that have moved me deeply.

I had the privilege of helping to celebrate members of our community who were recently sworn in as new United States citizens—graduates of the Harvard Bridge Program. Through their own hard work, and with the generous help of volunteer student and alumni tutors, they can now enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship – and the full sense of belonging that comes with it. It was truly and inspiring ceremony.

At a time when so many people are dispirited by the deep divisions in our country, when our politics seem so dysfunctional, our graduates are taking up the cause of public service by running for office in record numbers. The world needs them, and their willingness to serve gives me hope.

As Margaret noted, this past year I traveled to meet alumni who are helping to strengthen communities in Detroit, Dallas, and Houston; in Miami, Phoenix, and New York; in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego—in China, Japan, and England —people who are not only launching and building businesses and creating opportunity, but people who are also teaching, volunteering, advancing important legislation, working for non-profits, and serving the public good.

I've yet to meet anyone who thinks that this world that we live in is perfect. This is not a political statement. It's equally true of liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans. And if you don't think that the world that we live in is perfect, the only way it gets better is if good people work to repair it. Our students, our faculty, our staff and alumni are doing so daily, and it makes me so proud

This year I had the privilege to meet, and be moved by, not just one but two of the nation's preeminent poets—the United States Youth Poet Laureate, our own Amanda Gorman, and the United States Poet Laureate, our own, Tracy K. Smith [gesture to Tracy, who will be on stage]. I've also had the chance to marvel at artists who every day breathe life into our campus with their performances and creative work – it's amazing to see the talent that is represented on this campus and among our alumni, our faculty, and staff.

And every day I've learned more about the remarkable efforts of our faculty to improve the world:

Alison Simmons and Barbara Grosz, are making sure that the next generation of computer scientists is prepared to address the ethical questions posed by the development of new digital technologies;

Ali Malkawi and his HouseZero, which is demonstrating the possibilities of ultra-efficient design and new building technology to respond to the threat of climate change;

Sasha Kill Ewald, who's revealing how marriage and parenthood affects wages, and helping us understand why economic inequality persists across generations—and also how we might break the cycle of poverty.

I have also come to know about the work...

Of Conor Walsh, who's helping people with neurodegenerative and neuromuscular diseases walk again with soft exosuits that use the latest robotic technology to help improve movement;

Of Sara Bleich, who's helping to address the obesity epidemic by considering how changes in public policy can reduce consumption of high calorie foods and soft drinks;

Of Tony Jack, who's changing how colleges think about supporting disadvantaged students and improving their prospects not just in college but throughout life;

Of Arlene Sharpe and Gordon Freeman, who are giving hope to cancer patients by harnessing the body's own immune system to treat disease;

Of Xiaowei Zhuang, whose super-resolution imaging is enabling scientists to look inside cells with unprecedented clarity and see how molecules function and interact;

Of Andrew Crespo, who's culled massive amounts of data from our trial courts to change how we think about our system of criminal justice—and how we might improve it.

I have met faculty across our schools who are expanding religious literacy; who are exploring the role of the arts in promoting justice; who are confronting the opioid epidemic from every angle; who are working to make state and local government more effective. Their work is nothing short of inspiring.

And I've come to know students – absolutely amazing students. To the parents who are here thank you, thank you for sending these remarkable young people to us. They are nothing short of inspiring. Interacting with them is one of the great privileges of living and working on a college campus. Adele and I have had dinner with them in the Houses. We've watched them perform on the stage and on the playing fields. I've met with them during office hours and talked with them as I've gone running with them. If you spend time with our students, you cannot help but feel optimistic about our future.

This past week I had lunch with thirty graduating seniors. It was wonderful to hear how they think they have changed and matured during their four years here. I actually ask them how is your current self different from your 18-year-old self that arrived here on campus, and the stories were marvelous. And I have witnessed this process of transformation myself.

I helped to advise three of our incoming first-year undergraduates this year, and they helped me experience and understand Harvard through their eyes. To Andrew, Claire, and Karen, thank you for sharing your first year with me and for teaching me so well.

For every person I've named, for every example I've cited, there are thousands of other Harvard citizens—students and alumni, faculty and staff—who are making the world better in more ways than we could possibly imagine. That is the power of this institution—not its brand, not our buildings, not our pomp and circumstance (as wonderful and terrific as that is). This University, Harvard, is its people—their aspirations, their achievements—their diversity of background, experience and thought – their desire to see beyond themselves and their devotion to serving others.

So, yes, I am an optimist. I'm an optimist because I live and work among all of you – because I see what you do and because I know the boundless potential of what you can do. May we look to one another for inspiration in the years to come. May the expectations placed on us be exceeded only by our ability to meet them. And may Harvard continue to be a wellspring of hope for the world. It's an honor to serve you as your president.

Congratulations to our new alumni—and thank you all.