Improvisation and the Art of the Possible
Baccalaureate address to the Harvard Class of 2009
President Drew Faust
AS DELIVERED

Greetings Class of 2009.

It is a privilege to have these moments with you before you launch into the frenzy of Commencement and into the next stage of your lives.

Last year was my first Harvard baccalaureate, and I marveled at the thought I was standing in a pulpit dressed in the garb of a Puritan minister. At the time I said that I thought the very idea of this would have prompted the likes of Increase and Cotton Mather into the first Mather Lather. They might even have renewed calls for the extirpation of witches.

Perhaps some of you feel similarly astonished to be arrayed in academic gowns, on the verge of being officially welcomed on Thursday into the ancient company of educated men and women.

But here we all are, with our curious customs and our curious costumes, and I am expected to offer just a few indispensable and unforgettable words of wisdom that will send you on your way. Now I emphasize "only a few," since in keeping with other reductions, I've cut my remarks by 30 percent.

Class of 2009, you have had quite a time.

You arrived on the heels of Hurricane Katrina and now you depart in the wake of an economic storm that has changed the nation and changed the world.

And you have seen Harvard change.

You have had three presidents—only a few Harvard grads can claim that honor. And you got all those presidents at a bargain rate as you benefited from changed financial-aid policies.

You've watched the gestation of a new curriculum—the emergence of Gen Ed and the lingering demise of the Core—and the appearance of new courses and programs like the joint degree

with the New England Conservatory, the introduction of Life Sciences I, and the creation of PRISE.

You've welcomed new student spaces like the Lamont Café and the Queen's Head Pub and the Women's Center.

You have won two Rhodes Scholarships, four Marshalls, and two Olympic medals; one of you has written a play that's so good it is getting widespread professional attention; another has founded a non-profit to bring electricity to rural Africa, and another is the youngest crossword puzzle creator to have been published in the *New York Times Magazine*. I could go on and on.

And you have been lucky:

The football team has given you a victory over Yale to celebrate three years out of four.

And you have also escaped any threat to your right to a hot breakfast.

You are a historic class, 2009, because you have been seniors in this historic year—one that began with a power outage in the Yard and soon became momentous beyond imagining: the year of Obama; the year of financial failures unseen since the Great Depression; the year of imminent pandemic—you're all coughing away, it's making me nervous; the year the world became something very different from anything we ever expected.

And this unexpected past has led to a more uncertain future, for everyone, and quite immediately for you. That is why I want to take the next few minutes to talk to you *not* about the pursuit of excellence, which you all are already very good at, but about the uses of uncertainty, which may be less familiar ground.

Last year—it now seems eons ago—I spoke to the class of 2008 about why so many of them expressed uneasiness as they headed off to Wall Street—what they often described to me as less a choice than a default mode. As one student put it, "It's the choice for those who see real choice as too risky." This year, the world has changed that *for* you. Your choices are different and you see them differently. And you are thinking not only about your own

futures but about the future of others and of the world. This is evident in the unprecedented 14 percent of you who applied to Teach for America—nearly a 50 percent increase. I hope you are very proud of that.

And while we would never have wished for some of the events of this year, at least some of you find silver linings in its clouds. The upheaval, one of you said, has been "liberating, and lucky for me." He was abandoning Wall Street for teaching. Another said, "a good excuse to do what I'm really passionate about."

Now some of you, of course, will still find your calling in the financial industry, and it needs fresh eyes and strong constitutions. But for some of you, it's as if you are allowed to have your mid-life crisis in advance. It may not seem like a gift now, but it is. Instead of waking up when you are 45 suddenly wondering what your life means, you get to try something adventurous and uncertain while you are still young and resilient. Fixing climate change, for example, or ending malaria or AIDS, or becoming a painter or a dancer or a novelist. It brings to mind that line of

Gimli's in *Return of the King*: "Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?"

Professor Daniel Gilbert reported in an op-ed in the *Times* two weeks ago that it is actually not the prospect of a more modest future that makes us *un*happy. It's an *uncertain* future. As he put it, "What you don't know makes you nervous." But we do not need to become uncertainty's victims. We must claim its uses. Uncertainty demands new things from us: not just going through the motions, in default mode, but improvising our way to new solutions.

Improvisation. Joan Didion, a writer who has been charting our responses to change since the 1960s, has a memorable passage describing how her husband said they'd begun a trip to Paris in the right spirit. She wrote, "He meant doing things not because we were expected to do them or had always done them or should do them but because we wanted to do them. He meant wanting. He meant living."

She was referring to life as a kind of improvisation: that magical crossroads of rigor and ease, of structure and freedom, of reason

and intuition. What she calls being prepared to "go with the change." Uncertainty, in other words, makes us feel alive. As jazz great Charlie Parker put it, "Master your instrument, master the music, and then forget all that …and just play."

If you find yourself doing this, it's partly our fault. Because improvisation—which comes from the Latin "not foreseen"—is what a liberal-arts education has prepared you to do. We have resisted the notion of training you for a particular vocation—even as numbers of you traveled down Mass. Ave. in search of accounting at MIT. We have insisted that the best education is one that cultivates habits of mind, an analytic spirit, a capacity to judge and to question, that will equip you to adapt to any circumstance or take any vocational direction. When did such principles better suit circumstances than now? "Not foreseen" about sums it up; improvisation is certainly the appropriate order of the day, and you know intimately what it is.

Think about how uncertainty lies at the heart of so many intellectual fields.

In physics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has upended the classical conception of matter—where there were particles with well-defined properties, governed by universal laws of causation. We have accepted that there is no such final description of reality, but only what physicist David Bohm calls "the unending development of new forms of insight"—whether through string theory or neuroscience.

Medicine is another fundamentally uncertain, dilemma-ridden field, demanding creative choices and decisive action. At its best, as Harvard Medical School professor Atul Gawande tells us, it is a kind of carefully informed innovation. He advises those of you who want to go into medicine or public health to be "positive deviants," be people who ask "unscripted questions" and embrace change.

And what are the arts but rigorously prepared-for improvisation? Someone once called jazz the "sound of surprise." Whether you've been in theater or base your film scripts on extended improvisations, you understand, as film director Mike Leigh puts it, that improvisational moments are highly structured and deeply

researched, yet at the same time, to quote him, a "spontaneous…exploration of the unknown" when the actors finally improvise their parts. "All art," he says, "is a synthesis of improvisation and order."

And you also know by now that improvisation is collaborative. You might remember that Stephen Colbert came to campus during your sophomore year. He has described the basic rules of improv to a group of new graduates this way: you "go onstage…with no script," and say "yes [to] what the other improviser initiates on stage…and they [say 'yes'] back….[It is] more of a mutual discovery than a solo adventure." It requires actors, Mike Leigh says, who are confident "in the best sense." Not, he goes on, "overwhelmingly confident, but relaxed, cool, together, focused, open, intelligent, and [with] a sense of humor." This, after all, dear graduates, is you. At least we hope so.

So here is the rub. The world needs good improvisers. President Obama has called this moment in our history "a season of renewal and reinvention." It's also an affirmation of just how much education matters, of how much you, as educated citizens, matter.

If we look back at the year, when the world shifted, we can remember how that affirmation came to us. How we gathered in Tercentenary Theater on that freezing day in October to declare our commitment to fight global warming. How so many of you became involved in the presidential campaigns, debated their merits, and poured onto the streets until past midnight after the election. How you've taken up causes from the rights of the undocumented, to the equitable treatment of our lowest-wage workers, to healthcare reform. How so many of you have volunteered for every kind of public service—from teaching civics in the Cambridge schools, to rebuilding churches in Georgia during spring break, to combating AIDS in Botswana.

This sense of possibility is something I recognize. At my college graduation—which occurred in another historic year—1968—my class believed we that would do nothing less than end racism, poverty, and war. The only question in our minds was whether we could do it all by the time of our fifth reunion. Columnist Frank Rich, as a senior at Harvard in 1971, described in the *Crimson* this ether of wild aspiration—how his Harvard classmates thought that

by the time of their commencement. “the war would be over… racial peace and harmony would be a fact of American life, [and] the Beatles would make another tour of the United States.” I watched that sense of possibility grow in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and then I watched it erode, as later graduates retreated into the private sphere, into adults making the best life they could for themselves. And we didn’t get the Beatles back, either. That bright world of larger purpose, it seemed, was lost.

But you have been given that world back, the world of the possible, in a way that hasn’t been true since my generation. You didn’t ask for this responsibility. It’s difficult, and it’s filled with contradictions and confusion and seeming impossibility. But remember that improvising in face of change is exactly what your liberal-arts education has prepared you to do. The opportunity to renew our commitments and remap our lives is a privilege given only to some generations. And this time it’s not just a possibility. It’s a necessity.

And so, as you go, I challenge you to fully inhabit this chance; to discover within it your own meaning; to recreate the values that

will enable us not to get in this mess again. You have more tools for communicating than any generation in history. When I was your age and wanted to mobilize people, I went door to door; you reach thousands in an instant through blogs and social networking websites.

The Office of Career Services says that in spite of all you face, you are feeling "resilient and optimistic." What a pleasure it is to wish you a marvelous future. Keep mastering your instruments. Keep mastering the music. Keep saying "yes" to your fellow improvisers. And come back from time to time and let us know of your progress. There is no group to whom I would rather entrust this task. Because as Paul Simon once put it, "Improvisation is too good to leave to chance."

Thank you.