

Anthony C. Woods

“Q&A”

From an address by Anthony C. Woods

WE ALL TRAVELED different paths to Harvard. My journey began in the desert heat of Iraq. Months after graduating as a lieutenant from West Point, I took charge of 17 soldiers and led them to that war-torn country. It didn't take long for me to confirm that my three hours of Arabic language training weren't going to get me very far.

Like many of you, I had very serious questions about the legitimacy of this war. These questions grew louder on days when tedium and toil turned into chaos and tragedy.

I remember the 27th of July 2004. Earlier that day, I spoke with 24-year-old Sergeant Deforest Talbert about his two-year-old son. Three hours later, I stood next to his lifeless body and questioned why he made this sacrifice....

On the 11th of October 2005, my men and I responded to the scene of a suicide bomber who violently ended his life and the lives of 40 others at a local market. I wondered if the media would portray the victims as individuals with families like Sergeant Talbert, or would their fate be presented as a cold statistic?

Harvard is a very long way from Iraq. The army sent me to the Kennedy School in the summer of 2006, and I welcomed the break from the battlefields of the Middle East. At Harvard I found my-

self engaged in a battlefield of ideas.

Questions shifted from my personal experiences to the universal. Will we reverse the tide of global climate change? Why do we turn a blind eye to genocide and human suffering? Why don't we commit more resources to scientific research? Why are corporate boardrooms so prone to corruption? Why do we send so many of our children to crumbling schools?

I'm not afraid to admit that I felt helpless in the face of these questions....But something inspiring happened for me at Harvard. As the list of questions grew, I met more and more talented individuals from all across this University—from all around the world—who were also asking difficult questions. I soon realized that Harvard chose us because we know these questions don't have easy answers.

These reflections reminded me of the words of a member of Harvard's class of 1940. John F. Kennedy said, “No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable, and [I] believe [we] can do it again.”...

Many who came before us...looked upon the world and could have found reason to despair. But, instead of losing hope, they chose to act.

Let us remember the abolitionists. Their legacy calls on us to end slavery and human trafficking in our own time.

Let us remember the scientists. Their eradication of polio and smallpox inspires our effort to cure cancer and HIV/AIDS.

Let us remember those who ended apartheid in South Africa. Their struggle shows us how to stand up for human rights for the citizens of Tibet.

And let us also remember the students who came before us. They fought to end the war in Vietnam and hoped the United States would never again wage a war of choice.

What made all of these generations special was their ability to redefine “Q & A.” Instead of responding to questions with answers, they responded with actions. They left a legacy that calls on us to do the same—we have no choice but to follow their example. And so...fellow students of the class of 2008, I ask one final question: will you take action to respond to the challenges of our day?

Talk, Part 2: “Life Is Not a Check-list”

IN SEPARATE WAYS, in the Baccalaureate and Commencement afternoon speeches, on June 3 and June 5, respectively, President Drew Faust and *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling addressed students' drive for success and fear of failure—a fear that can divert them from fulfilling lives. (The second half of Rowling's powerfully personal speech, titled “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination,” revealed how her work at Amnesty International illuminated the human capacity for empathy.) At the end of his Class Day speech, on America's economy during his graduation year and today, Ben S. Bernanke '75, chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, touched on the same subject. Excerpts follow; complete texts and audio recordings appear at www.harvardmag.com/commencement.

“You Won't Know Till You Try”

From an address by Drew Faust

(Faust described hearing from students that they were torn by the choice many of them are making to pursue careers in finance.)

BUT MANY OF YOU are now wondering how these commitments fit with a career choice. Is it necessary to decide between remunerative work and meaningful work? If it were to be either/or, which would you choose? Is there a way to have both?

You are asking me and yourselves fundamental questions about values, about trying to reconcile potentially competing goods, about recognizing that it may not be possible to have it all. You are at a moment of transition that requires making choices. And selecting one option—a job, a career, a graduate program—means not selecting others. Every decision means loss as well as gain—possibilities for-gone as well as possibilities embraced. Your question to me is partly about that—about loss of roads not taken.

Finance, Wall Street, “recruiting” have become the symbol of this dilemma, representing a set of issues that is much broader and deeper than just one career

path. These are issues that in one way or another will at some point face you all—as you graduate from medical school and choose a specialty—family practice or dermatology, as you decide whether to use your law degree to work for a corporate firm or as a public defender, as you decide whether to stay in teaching after your two years with Teach for America. You are worried because you want to have both a meaningful life and a successful one; you know you were educated to make a difference not just for yourself, for your own comfort and satisfaction, but for the world around you. And now you have to figure out the way to make that possible....

As I have listened to you talk about the choices ahead of you, I have heard you articulate your worries about the relationship of success and happiness—perhaps,

more accurately, how to define success so that it yields and encompasses real happiness, not just money and prestige. The most remunerative choice, you fear, may not be the most meaningful and the most satisfying. But you wonder how you would ever survive as an artist or an actor or a public servant or a high-school teacher? How would you ever figure out a path by which to make your way in journalism? Would you ever find a job as an English professor after you finished who knows how many years of graduate school and dissertation writing?

The answer is: you won't know till you try. But if you don't try to do what you love—whether it is painting or biology or finance—if you don't pursue what you think will be most meaningful, you will regret it. Life is long. There is always time for Plan B. But don't begin with it.

...[W]hat is ultimately most important here is that you are asking the question—not just of me but of yourselves. You are choosing roads and at the same time challenging your own choices. You have a notion of what you want your life to be and you are not sure the road you are taking is going to get you there. This is the best news. And it is also, I hope, to some degree, our fault. Noticing your life, reflecting upon it, considering how you can live it well, wondering how you can do good: These are perhaps the most valuable things that a liberal-arts education has equipped you to do. A liberal education demands that you live self-consciously. It prepares you to seek and define the meaning inherent in all you do. It has made you an analyst and critic of yourself, a person in this way supremely equipped to take charge of your life and how it unfolds. It is in this sense that the liberal arts are liberal—as in *liberare*—to free. They empower you with the possibility of exercising agency, of discovering meaning, of making choices. The surest way to have a meaningful, happy life is to commit yourself to striving for it. Don't settle. Be prepared to change routes.

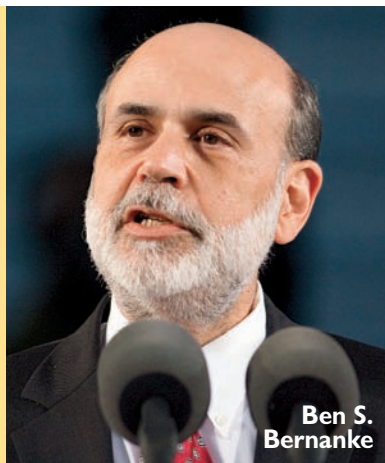
“Your Greatest Asset”

From an address by Ben S. Bernanke

I WILL CLOSE by shifting from the topic of education in general to your education specifically. Through effort, talent, and doubtless some luck, you have succeeded in acquiring an excellent education. Your education—more precisely, your ability to think critically and creatively—is your greatest asset. And unlike many assets, the more you draw on it, the faster it grows. Put it to good use.

The poor forecasting record of economists is legendary, but I will make a forecast in which I am very confident: Whatever you expect your life and work to be like 10, 20, or 30 years from now, the reality will be quite different. In looking over the thirtieth anniversary report on my own class, I was struck by the great diversity of vocations and avocations that have engaged my classmates. To be sure, the volume was full of attorneys and physicians and professors as well as architects, engineers, editors, bankers, and even a few economists. Many listed the title “vice president,” and, not a few, “president.” But the class of 1975 also includes those who listed their occupations as composer, environmental advocate, musician, playwright, rabbi, conflict-resolution coach, painter, community organizer, and essayist. And even for those of us with the more conventional job descriptions, the nature of our daily work and its relationship to the economy and society is, I am sure, very different from what we might have guessed in 1975. My point is only that you cannot predict your path. You can only try to be as prepared as possible for the opportunities, as well as the disappointments, that will come your way. For people, as for economies, adaptability and flexibility count for a great deal.

Wherever your path leads, I hope you use your considerable talents and energy in endeavors that engage and excite you and benefit not only yourselves, but also in some measure your country and your world.



“A Stripping Away of the Inessential”

From an address by J.K. Rowling

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ON THIS WONDERFUL DAY when we are gathered together to celebrate your academic success, I have decided to talk to you about the benefits of failure....

Looking back at the 21-year-old that I was at graduation, is a slightly uncomfortable experience for the 42-year-old that she has become. Half my lifetime ago, I was striking an uneasy balance between the ambition I had for myself, and what those closest to me expected of me.

I was convinced that the only thing I wanted to do, ever, was to write novels. However, my parents, both of whom came from impoverished backgrounds and neither of whom had been to college, took the view that my overactive imagination was an amusing personal quirk that would never pay a mortgage, or secure a pension....

They had hoped that I would take a voca-

tional degree; I wanted to study English Literature. A compromise was reached that in retrospect satisfied nobody, and I went up to study Modern Languages. Hardly had my parents' car rounded the corner at the end of the road than I ditched German and scuttled off down the Classics corridor.

...Of all subjects on this planet, I think they would have been hard put to name one less useful than Greek mythology when it came to securing the keys to an executive bathroom.

I would like to make it clear, in parenthesis, that I do not blame my parents for their point of view. There is an expiry date on blaming your parents for steering you in the wrong direction; the moment you are old enough to take the wheel, responsibility lies with you. What is more, I cannot criticise my parents for hoping that I would never experience poverty. They had been poor themselves, and I have since been poor, and I quite agree with them that it is not an ennobling experience. Poverty entails fear, and stress, and sometimes depression; it means a thousand petty humiliations and hardships....[P]overty itself is romanticised only by fools.

What I feared most for myself at your age was not poverty, but failure.

At your age, in spite of a distinct lack of motivation at university...I had a knack for passing examinations, and that, for years, had been the measure of success in my life and that of my peers.

Now, I am not dull enough to suppose that because you are young, gifted, and well-educated, you have never known hardship or heartbreak....I do not for a moment suppose that everyone here has enjoyed an existence of unruffled privilege and contentment.

However, the fact that you are graduating from Harvard suggests that you are not very well acquainted with failure. You might be driven by a fear of failure quite as

J.K. Rowling



much as a desire for success. Indeed, your conception of failure might not be too far from the average person's idea of success, so high have you already flown.

...[B]y any conventional measure, a mere seven years after my graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless. The fears my parents

"It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default."

had had for me, and that I had had for myself, had both come to pass....

...That period of my life was a dark one, and I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy-tale resolution....

So why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a

stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena where I believed I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realised, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter

whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.

You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default.

Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above the price of rubies.

The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity....

Given a Time-Turner, I would tell my 21-year-old self that personal happiness lies in knowing that life is not a check-list of acquisition or achievement. Your qualifications, your CV, are not your life, though you will meet many people of my age and older who confuse the two. Life is difficult, and complicated, and beyond anyone's total control, and the humility to know that will enable you to survive its vicissitudes.

