

WELCOME

Congratulations, members of the Harvard Class of 2020.

Within the hour, you will finally take your place at the head of what Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harvard Class of 1821, called that “long winding train reaching back into eternity,” a procession of alumni who have helped to improve the lot of humanity now for close to 400 years.

I am sure you’ve imagined this moment for quite some time. But let’s face it: It’s far different than any of us could have predicted when this semester began, but there are actually some upsides to this kind of celebration. For example:

Everyone you love—and everyone who loves you—can actually attend. No tickets are required.

No scrambling for good seats in Harvard Yard early this morning. And none of you had to worry about where you were going to park on this most momentous of days.

Those loved ones who’ve once again become your housemates and your roommates get to give you a big hug literally as your degrees are conferred. And just think: You’re the first class in the 384-year-history of Harvard that can actually say that.

And I also can guarantee that there will be no rain today.

Two months of pandemic cannot be allowed to overshadow your years of hard work—your many late nights and early mornings—your countless personal pep talks (and, let’s face it, we all do them!) that turned self-doubt into self-determination.

Faced with obstacles, each of you mustered your courage, set your sights, and overcame the insurmountable. You expanded your understanding of who you are and what you can do. And you discovered the truth about yourself—a *veritas* worth pursuing if there ever was one.

But you did not get to this moment in time on your own. The people who are sitting with you today in many cases literally sacrificed so that you could be here. So I want you to take a moment and turn to them now and say “thank you.” “Thank you” for helping to make you the people that you are. “Thank you” for helping you to see this day actually come to pass. Go ahead. Take your time. Give them a big hug and a kiss—they deserve it!

To all the parents, siblings, friends and loved ones who are there with you, on behalf of all of us at Harvard, thank you for all you’ve done to help make this day possible. Thank you for entrusting these remarkable graduates to us. It’s been our privilege to teach them, to get to know them, and also to learn from them. Their future is very bright, and we are very proud of them too.

To the class of 2020, today is about you. Celebrate your achievements. Savor your successes. Rest—even for a day—upon your laurels. But only for a day because tomorrow is about everyone else.

How will you use your gifts and your Harvard education to make the world a better place for others? How will you help to ensure that others have opportunities similar to those that you’ve enjoyed? And

how will you create a future in which all people are equipped to do their best work and to be their best selves?

Humanity needs people who are willing to devote themselves to asking questions, hard questions, sometimes even uncomfortable questions—people who are willing to work hard to perfect this imperfect world that we inhabit—people who care more about others than about themselves.

You are those people. And when we gather in person sometime later to celebrate your graduation—when we have a chance to relish all the pomp and circumstance in one another’s company that we cannot do today—I will want to know how you are helping to improve the lot of humanity—where you’ve been and where you think you’re going.

Harvard, as it turns out, does not pull the long and winding train behind it. No, that long and winding train which you’ve now joined, pushes Harvard—and the entire world—into the future.

I look forward to the day when Emerson’s vision comes to life for us all – when we can all once again be together. Until then, congratulations, to members of the Class of 2020. We are so proud of each and every one of you. You have accomplished great things; you’re going to accomplish even more.

Good luck to each and every one of you—and Godspeed.