

**“The Keys and the Canvas”: Undergraduate English Address**  
**Michael J. Phillips**

Freshman year, when I was launched into another universe, my only grounding point was the gravitational pull of a question: will Harvard change me? That question mingled with heartfelt gifts and departing words from my parents. My mom placed a set of keys around my neck. Each key was engraved with a word: “believe,” “fearless,” and “inspire.” My dad said, “I have always imagined life for you like a canvas, and I hoped to provide one big enough for you to imagine new possibilities. I am proud to see Harvard become your canvas!” Minutes later, I walked into my dorm room. On my desk, I found a list of alumni who held the keys to that room before me. The first name I read was Henry David Thoreau: the prophetic essayist and abolitionist. It was a glimpse into the greatness of what this surreal world was capable of. “Maybe” I thought “it just might change me for the better.”

Perhaps you had a similar experience on move-in day, but the chronicle of what we could become pre-dates that moment. When the Class of 2020 was still scattered across the world, our first connection came from a story that we heard. From TV punchlines to political institutions, the name “Harvard” reverberated across the canyons of culture with an infinite echo. It permeated the boundaries of class, creed, country, and continent. Like kids reading a bedtime story, we inserted ourselves into this narrative arc of a galaxy of greatness. In 2016, we converted our dreams into essays and traded them for tickets to the new frontier. We landed on campus eager to perform our own superhuman feats: from pulling all-nighters in Lamont basement to breaking the laws of the universe with grade inflation. The more we progressed, the more we pursued. Freshman year, we spent our energy writing viscerally scribbled applications to social orgs. Sophomore year, we exchanged our space suits for business suits to rush to networking events. Yet with every superhuman attempt shortcomings were revealed. By junior year, many of us remained agitated by the persistent presence of imposter syndrome. It felt like the incessant pain of a paper cut. The place we imagined as kids, a place defined by the pursuit of passion, became troubled by the fear of rejection. A community of collaboration converted to one of crippling comparison. Suddenly, our aspirations to pursue progress were limited by our desperation to preserve status.

We began to believe that our purpose lay in our importance, and we forfeited our power. We saw our galaxy of greatness stripped of the light of possibility, subdued by the darkness of self-doubt. At that confusing juncture, many were asking themselves “Is this all I came to Harvard to become?” What if we opened the door to a different reality? What if we already have the keys? The first key from my mom said “believe”: Could she have been asking us to believe that we never came to Harvard to acquire accolades; that success is second-rate to souls saved and lives made better? The second key said “fearless.” Did she know that the path to purpose might be unpopular, and if we clung to that fear of rejection, we would fail to offer the world what was ours to give? The third key said “inspire.” Might she have understood that if we didn’t become leaders of sacrifice, we would become leaders of selfishness but we would be leaders either way? When my dad said “Harvard is our canvas” was he not giving us the confidence to

emerge from the College, the Kennedy School, the Business School, the Divinity School, the Design School, the Law School, the Medical School, the Education School, the Dental School, the Extension School painting portraits with our presence as a community of artists, not imitators, of key makers, not gatekeepers? As I stand here today, my answer to all these questions is a resounding “yes.” If yours is too, then we can leave our galaxy of greatness and land back on Earth with such an unyielding collision that the paradigms of broken systems and mediocre standards splatter like gas and dust in a supernova.

In the midst of a historic global pandemic, this message carries more weight than it ever has before: use our powers for good, that by those deeds we might demonstrate that our gifts are not a solemn path to importance but a promise for another person. Harvard will change you. Let it continue to change you. Let it make you keenly sensitive to injustice. Let it make you more empathetic to struggle. Let it embolden you to make change. Let it make you all of these things because to become anything else would be to forfeit any meaning in being a Harvard graduate. We were fortunate to fly high enough that we might grab the moral arc of the universe itself. May we bend it in the right direction.