

Alayna Jenkins:

Hello everyone. My name is Alayna Jenkins. I'm from St. Charles, Missouri, and I'm honored to be the Senior Representative for Quincy House. For my reading today, I will actually be doing a simple quote by a famous Jewish healer named Baal Shem Tov. And the quote is as follows: "Let me fall if I must fall. The one I will become will catch me." Again, it's, "Let me Fall if I must fall. The one I will become will catch me."

When I had opened my acceptance letter to Harvard, I could not help but cry. I had hoped for this moment for so long. Coming from a small town where no one went to Harvard, it felt like a pipeline dream. But while I was excited for the year ahead, I had opened my letter from a screen back home in Missouri. I did not yet know that it would foreshadow a pandemic where I'd be looking at screens for a year, connecting with Harvard from a fall afar.

The pandemic was my first fall, a year of hardship, one where life was falling apart, filled with death, despair, and loneliness. And then from then on, my life would fall like dominoes, one thing after another going wrong. In fact, during my time at Harvard, I had lost two family members and had three separate personal emergency room visits. These were just some of the many challenges that I had faced while being here.

And it was ironic, because at Harvard I was so afraid to fall. As a Black woman, at times, I felt that there was no room for error, that I must keep it together. After all, we associate falling as bad, a downward trend. But one of the main things I learned from Harvard in life is that falling is inevitable.

And another thing I learned is that my story is not one of uniqueness. As many people here, as part of the Harvard community, we all have been faced with falls. We have all fallen over the last four years, specifically my class, as we have been pegged by hardship. We've been faced with a crisis after crisis, a pandemic, a racial reckoning. And there's just been so many things that we've had to overcome over the years. And so while we've fallen time and time again, we've also made our mark as a class of resilience.

And I just also want to point out that falling is necessary and a part of the Harvard experience, that as we graduate from Harvard, we carry the knowledge and experiences that we've gained along the way. And for me, I think falling represents the transformative experience that the college invokes, because we're able to reflect on the lessons that we've learned and we've been able to use them as a guide to move forward in life.

As a part of my time here, I now know a quote by Nelson Mandela, which says, "Do not judge me by my successes, but judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." Graduating from Harvard is a lifelong dream. It's a degree. It's considered a success. But nobody knows how many times I fell to get to this point.

Now, again, I know that falling is necessary, but I also think that falling lies in Harvard's motto of Veritas, meaning truth, which also, in my mind, hints at the idea of falling. Falling allows us to pursue our own truth, our truth within ourselves. As Grammy award-winning singer Haley Williams once said, "Sometimes it's really good to fall, because then you really know where you stand." And I feel like this speaks to the mission of Veritas, because we're finally able to discover more truths within ourself. And at this moment, I'm able to find a clearer understanding of myself. And also, I think it's allowed me to speak my truth here today.

So with these last years of hardship, with these last years of many falls, I just want to leave with letting you know that we must not be afraid or dread falling, because in the literal sense, when we fall and hit the ground and we just lay there, the only way to look is up. So let me fall if I must fall. The one I will become will catch me.

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