

Rakesh Khurana:

(Singing) Good morning.

Crowd:

Good morning.

Rakesh Khurana:

The start of the academic year always fills me with awe. Meeting first year students, who've left their homes for the first time and watching them embrace new freedoms as well as new structures allows me to see our community with fresh eyes, to appreciate that intricate balance of life on campus between what we expect, orientation, concentration requirements, house rules, and the unexpected joys, those that punctuate our meticulously planned journeys. These moments of serendipity, as I said in last May's class day speech, are every bit as important as the structured experiences of university life.

From my vantage point, the lifeblood of our campus, both in our structured experiences and in our freer moments, is conversation. On the one hand, every event from convocation, to orientation, to mandatory house meetings, to the academic fair, to the student organization fair offers opportunity for conversation and catalyzes conversation. Last week, our first year students had an opportunity to interact with faculty and upper level students from our 50 concentrations. Then later in the week, outside Tercentenary Theater, hundreds of student organizations welcomed interested potential members. In addition, our numerous sports teams, intramural activities, performance groups, social activities, and civic involvements have begun sparking conversations in every corner of the college.

But well beyond the structured events, our campus is alive with conversation every day as students live and work together, make new friendships and renew old ones. Even that most solitary of events, writing, is an attempt to speak to others. When you describe to others what you are thinking, what it means to be you, you learn about yourself and the world around you. With the thousands of people now returning to campus, I love listening to the buzz of the conversations on all sorts of topics after the relative quiet of the summer. Annenberg becomes an overlapping cacophony of voices as people engage in the Harvard introduction of name, dorm, where you're from, masses of our returning students are hugging their old friends in their houses, discussions of Crimson editorials and articles as students evaluate how closely Harvard's aspirations hue to our reality. Seniors sharing that they can't believe how fast their Harvard experience is going by, whispered conversations in Lamont, people inside and outside of classrooms, shaping and sharing knowledge. Every day, these conversations in all their forms are happening among people from diverse backgrounds, academic interests, geographies, ethnicities, religious traditions, political dispositions, tastes and predilections.

Harvard is a different place than it was 100 years ago. It's a different place than it was even 20 years ago. The conversations are different, the ideas are different, and yet what remains constant is the value and the structure of the conversation. The constant interplay between young and old, among students, with peers, among students, with faculty, between the past and the present, a dialogue that our culture is having about itself, about its past and about its future. Universities are in so many ways held together by conversation. I might go so far as to say that conversation is not just one attribute of universities, but perhaps the defining attribute. They provide a space for what otherwise could only be found by traveling, namely, encounters with the unfamiliar. When we talk to those with different experiences, we ask questions and we rethink what is familiar from books, to music, to art, to history, to even ourselves. Our ability to converse is both a cause and an effect of wider freedom.

And so as we embark on this new year, it's fitting to have a conversation about conversations. I've been thinking a lot recently about how we can strengthen our commitment here at Harvard to having civil and open conversations that challenge us. I've talked to faculty and students who have expressed worry about sharing their thoughts, and that their questions will be judged before they are understood. When any exchange, the tossing of ideas and the refining of ideas is foreclosed or frozen, when the questions are not allowed, because we are told there is only one truth, that it is complete and cannot be questioned, the whole educational project is threatened. Its essence is fossilized. Rather than having a museum, we risk becoming one. Of all the challenges higher education now faces from the outside, we must also acknowledge this important challenge from within. We need conversation. We need it to realize our full humanity, to discover who we are, to create new knowledge, to question ourselves and our received wisdom.

For me, Harvard has been and must be a place where every member of our community can find a voice, a place where we discover what we believe rather than believing what we are simply told. And where we're lucky to live in a world where our beliefs can be challenged, celebrated, and we are given the opportunity to evolve and change. I look so forward to another year of conversation at this wonderful awe-inspiring place.

Elizabeth Propst:

The Lord's prayer. Lord, we give particular thanks this morning for the new students who have joined our community and for each and every person who is doing their part to welcome them into our community for deans, faculty, residential, academic, for professors, TFs, TAs, proctors, tutors, for the staff of Harvard Dining Services, maintenance workers, librarians, security guards, upperclassmen, for each and every person who is doing their part to welcome these young and new people into our community and into our conversations. Amen.

Crowd:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise, embody your spirit for the lord's prayer. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not to temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Crowd:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our closing hymn for the splendor of creation, number 351, in your Crimson hymnal. (Singing).

Christ has no hands in this world but yours, no voice but yours, may our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love today and all days. Amen.

Crowd:

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Amen.