

Baccalaureate 2021

[Organ music]

Stephanie Paulsell:

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Stephanie Paulsell, the Interim Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church and it's my pleasure to welcome you to the Harvard College Baccalaureate. I'm especially glad to welcome you, class of 2021 and the family and friends who have supported you along the way and are celebrating with you this week. If we were on campus, we'd be crowded now into the Memorial Church. It would be a grand occasion, everyone processing in their robes, a trumpet fanfare to welcome President Bacow, a choir in the balcony. This baccalaureate will be different, but I hope that it offers you and your community of family and friends a few quiet moments of reflection in the midst of celebrations that I hope are full of joy wherever you are in the world.

Baccalaureate is one of Harvard's oldest public occasions. It bears within it traditions passed down through the generations, and it has also changed as the university has changed. In the 17th and 18th centuries, baccalaureate speakers were drawn mainly from the ranks of ministers and divinity professors. In the 19th century however, seniors in the college began extending an invitation each year to the president of Harvard to address them during the baccalaureate service. That tradition has continued and today at your invitation, president Lawrence S. Bacow is here to speak with you.

Baccalaureate has also evolved to reflect the rich diversity of religious and spiritual traditions represented in each graduating class. Religious diversity is a vibrant, irreplaceable dimension of Harvard's diversity and the baccalaureate service includes readings, prayers, and blessings from many of the religious communities that are a crucial part of the life of our campus. Today we'll hear prayers from Imam Khalil Abdur-Rashid, Muslim chaplain to the university and Rabbi Jonah Steinberg, Executive Director of the Harvard Hillel and President of the Harvard Chaplains. Buddhist chaplain, Lama Migmar Tseten will offer a reading. Members of the class of 2021 will read meaningful texts from their traditions. Adelle Goldenberg and Nkazi Nchinda will offer a reading from the humanist tradition, Jaspreet Kaur from the Sikh tradition, and Joseph Anthony Barisas from the Christian tradition. At the end of the service, six members of the class of 2021 will offer blessings. Aidan Luke Stoddart and Alden Emory Jackson Fossett from the Christian tradition, Rebecca Thrope from the Jewish tradition, Bilal Wurie from the Muslim tradition, Jonathan Cook from the Bahai tradition, and Pranti Parikh from the Hindu tradition.

Many thanks to these students and chaplains for sharing the wisdom of their communities with us today. The service also features anthems by two alumni of Harvard College. What is Good was composed by Carson Cooman, class of 2004, and Veritas, a Celebration of the Centuries was composed by Chung Han Michael Chang, class of 2019. Chang's anthem contains a bit of Psalm 78, which has been sung in some form in Harvard baccalaureates since at least 1806. The anthems are taken from the archive of the Harvard Commencement Choir directed by Andrew G. Clark and the Harvard University Choir directed by Edward Elwyn Jones. David von Behren, the Assistant University Organist and Choir Master recorded the prelude and postlude for today's service. Again, a warm welcome to you, members of the class of 2021 and to your families and friends and to all who are listening today. And now please

welcome Imam Dr. Khalil Abdur-Rashid, Muslim chaplain to the university who will offer an opening prayer.

Iman Dr. Khalil Abdur-Rashid:

In the name of one God, the source of loving mercy, the giver of merciful love, oh divine one, all praise belongs to you and all thanks is due to you. We are humbled and honored to be gathered here today under your blessed gaze, enveloped in your loving mercy and well pleased with what you have destined for us. We seek your help alone, in establishing a better world and in upholding the trust that you have placed in us.

Enable this class to pave the way to what is most pleasing to you. Grant their spirits encouragement and enlightenment to know you. Allow them to cultivate new meanings of love, fellowship, creativity, peace, and leadership. Bestow upon them decisions that are pleasing to you. Gift them motivations that bend their actions towards the arc of justice and righteousness.

Guide their families and ignoble their legacies. Bless this institution to continue to be a standard-bearer and leader for all who grace its lands, halls and corridors. Fill us all with the might and courage to represent your teachings and to lead where none before us could. Make us producers of love, consumers of character, architects of justice, pursuers of righteousness. Fill us with joy and compassion, hope and light, inner-beauty and guidance, conviction and sincerity. Bless us all now and tomorrow, forever. Amen.

Adelle Goldenberg:

Be yourself; especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune, but do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born on fatigue and loneliness.

Nkazi Nchinda:

Beyond the whole some discipline, be gentle with yourselves. You are a child of the universe; no less than the trees and the stars. You have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt, the universe is unfolding as it should; therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive him to be and whatever your labors and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul.

Jaspreet Kaur

I begin with a Sikh greeting. [Foreign language]. I'm going to recite a composition from the that is attributed to the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. This Shabad is a call to action; to stand up against injustice and fight for human rights. [Foreign language].

Now, I'll translate the Shabad into English. Grant me the spoon, oh God, from your greatness. May I never refrain from righteous acts. May I fight without fear, in all of life's battles. I'm courageously claim victory. May your teachings guide my intentions and may my highest ambition be to sing your praises.

When the time comes for this mortal life to end, may I die fighting for righteousness with limitless courage.

(Singing).

Joseph Anthony Barisas:

A reading from the Holy Gospel, according to John. [Foreign language]. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him, was not anything that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of man. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for testimony; to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light but became to bear witness to light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home and his own people received him not, but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God. And the word became flesh and walked among us, full of grace and truth. We have beheld his glory; glory as of the only son from the Father.

Migmar Tseten:

I am Lama Migmar, the Harvard Buddhist chaplain, and I'm going to recite a Tibetan Buddhist prayer and blessing, which is called The Four Limitless. These Four Limitless are loving, kindness, compassion, joy, and wisdom of peace. So first, I will recite in Tibetan. [Foreign language].

The English translation. May all sentient beings possess happiness and the causes of happiness. May all sentient beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. May all sentient beings never be separate from the joy, free from suffering. May all sentient beings remain in the equanimity, free of attachment and aversion.

Jonah Steinberg:

"Behold, I forge a covenant," says the Divine in the book of Exodus. "In the sight of all your people I will make marvels such as never have been done in all the Earth nor in any nation. And all the people in whose midst you are, will see the work of the eternal one that I will do with you, that his tremendous." you have beheld a universe of wondrous possibilities in this University. And perhaps more than any Harvard generation, outside times of war, you have felt the larger world and its happenings insist upon and require your attention, your decision, and your action.

So as we pray that you retain a lingering vision of all you have envisioned in the heart of Harvard, we can pray too that while a scattering pandemic and dividing politics may fade, a sense of urgency and consequence may remain; and for the good, for you can be that good; providing comfort, increasing understanding, creating togetherness, forging new possibilities. Humility and reverence have their place, but let us pray that you also be audacious because this world needs your daring.

So be generous in sharing with this all-too-often broken world, broadly and blessedly, what is in your hearts. In your doing so, another scripture may be fulfilled. You shall go forth in joy and be accompanied by peace. The mountains and the hills will give a joyous shout before you and all the trees of the field will applaud.

(Singing)

Lawrence S. Bacow:

Good afternoon, members of the class of 2021, soon-to-be alumni of Harvard College. The role of the Harvard president in the Baccalaureate service is to impart wisdom as you complete that last step in a long, and sometimes difficult journey towards the receipt of your bachelor's degree. Had this been a typical year, you would have concluded this track alongside one another, completing sections and labs, psets and papers, capstones and theses, dominating athletic opponents on the playing fields and wowing adoring audiences on the stage, commiserating in celebrating in places and spaces across our campus.

But as we all know, this has been anything but a typical year. I need not paint a more detailed picture of what could have been or even what should have been, and I will not offer you any bromides. The reality is that some of you have lost loved ones and have been unable to mourn them surrounded by family and friends. Some of you has struggled physically and mentally, financially and socially as the pandemic has unfolded. And all of you, all of you have been deprived of the simple joy of being together and of experiencing your senior year as a class.

Every day since March 10, 2020, has reminded you that life, in the abstract and in the concrete, is both tenuous and uncertain. Every day has challenged and tested you, has created uncertainty and unease, has brought forth doubt and in some cases, even disaffection. Every day has given you a chance to give in, to throw in the towel, yet here you are. Despite what the past 379 days have served up, you've endured. You've fulfilled your requirements, completed your work, and finished what you started.

On our campus, across the country, and literally, around the world, you've adapted to unexpected circumstances. You've created a community and embraced community; not the ones you imagined when you entered Harvard, but the ones you needed when the world changed on all of us, almost overnight. And that is something to celebrate; something to acknowledge and to cheer.

Challenge in life is a given. For some generations it's sort of doled out in fits and starts, and for other generations it's heaped upon them in an instant. As I'm sure is obvious to all of you, you fall easily into the latter category. I suspect because you've had to overcome so much during the past 379 days that you've probably grown in unexpected ways. How many of you have reconsidered what truly matters to you? How many of you have tossed aside your prior neat and tidy five-year plans? How many of you have become bolder and stronger, willing to stand up for equality and justice, eager to defend the truth?

I think that one day you will look back on these days and realize that your steps toward your degree we're really leaps and bounds towards figuring out who you really are. Very few classes in the history of Harvard have been tested as you have been and I await eagerly, actually, even impatiently, to see what

you're going to make of your future. I could not be prouder of each and every one of you for what you have endured over the past 15 months.

In the meantime, since it is my job at the ceremony to impart wisdom, let me do so in the form of three imperatives. First, do not hesitate to connect. Before the pandemic it was easy to discount the value of almost everyday, casual interactions that we take for granted. Now, an otherwise mundane experience of meeting a stranger's eye and sharing a smile, is something that we readily embrace. In some ways it's a miracle unto itself. Take time to see other people, to really see them; to understand how they see you and how they see the world. Remember that decency and kindness are not isolated incidents but conscious decisions on your part.

Second, please don't hesitate to love. You've formed a relationships with one another that will see you through a lifetime. Find ways to stay connected so that you can support one another during all of life's passages, whether it's finding life partners or celebrating the arrival of children, or heralding career successes, or contending with setbacks. And yes, I guarantee you there will be setbacks. Everything ahead of you will be improved by the company of people who knew you when you were just beginning to figure out who you really are.

Third, do not hesitate to live. There are people who would gladly tell you what you should do next, but please be wary of paths that you know are not your own. Be willing to change direction and to see where an idea leads you. Remain open to serendipity and please, please recognize opportunity when it walks up and hits you in the face because I guarantee you, it will.

Those of you who've been listening carefully will know that my imperatives have one thing in common, other people. As you contemplate what comes next, please be grateful. Look back and identify the teachers who most challenged you; who most inspired you. Take the time to tell them what you remember about being in their classrooms or even on their Zoom screens. Your gratitude is a gift to them and you should give it liberally; not just to your teachers, but to all those who made your success possible.

There are countless others who also made your time here a bit more pleasant, a bit more interesting, a bit more rewarding; coaches, proctors, tutors, and countless staff members, who came to work in the midst of a global pandemic; in many cases, at some risk to themselves, so that you could complete your Harvard education. When you have the opportunity, please take the time to thank them as well.

In a year of being apart, we've learned that togetherness cannot be achieved fully, through a screen or a microphone, or a speaker. We've gained a deeper appreciation for unmediated communication. There are many ways to express the sentiment, but I actually can't beat Alexander Graham Bell's first utterance on the telephone, which incidentally, also occurred on March 10th, but in 1876. What did he say? "Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you."

When humanity ultimately, has this pandemic in the rearview mirror, I want to see you too. I want to shake your hands and hear the stories you will one day, tell your grandchildren, about your extraordinary senior year, but most of all, most of all, I want to watch you march into Tercentenary Theater; reveling in the pomp and circumstance that should have been yours later this week. And I want

to thank you in person for facing adversity this past year with remarkable grace, goodwill, and grit. Until then, enjoy your last moments as undergraduates and savor all that you've gained in wisdom, knowledge, friendship, and yes, self-understanding over these past four years. Best of luck to each and every one of you and Godspeed.

(Singing)

Aidan Luke Stoddart:

At graduation, we celebrate something which we have earned, but I want us to remember that we cannot earn everything. As Jesus the Christ taught through the witness of her life, the most important kind of mercy cannot be earned but only received as a gift. In that spirit, I pray that God, the Holy One, may teach us to give and to receive that most important kind of mercy; mercy which is a gift; radical and gratuitous and undeserved. Amen.

Rebecca Thrope:

[Foreign language] Blessed are you, our God; sovereign of all, who has kept us alive, sustained us and brought us to this season. This is the prayer often recited in Jewish tradition at moments of transition or of extreme wonder. I would argue that God has not only sustained us from some remote place, but also from right here, within ourselves and touching one another, as we sit in this vulnerable, liminal place of graduation. My blessing for us is that we can find wonder in this moment and bless the sustenance that we continue to provide for one another in this season.

Bilal Wurie:

[Foreign language] And say, my Lord, grant that when I enter, I enter with truth and when I depart, I depart with truth. And grant me by your grace, an authoritative support.

Jonathan Cook:

This passage is from the writings of Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i faith. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.

Alden Emory Jackson Fossett:

Merciful, gracious, abundant and eternal God, we give you thanks for bringing us in safety, to this day of celebration, remembrance, and joy. May we forever seek your light in the world's deep darkness. In biograde luminescence, be strengthened in heart to serve one another in sacred love. Until we meet again, peace, be still. How good and pleasant it is when we live together in unity. Amen.

Pranti Parikh:

The following is a blessing, sourced from several different Hindu texts; most prominently, the [foreign language]. Its message is short, simple, and incredibly timely. [Foreign language] May every living being be happy. May every living being be free from illness. May every living being see that, which is good in the world and may none partake in suffering.

[Organ music]