

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in Appleton Chapel. We're excited for our Senior Talks. And today, our speaker will be Ray Shang, who will be graduating soon and representing the Adams House today. Thank you for being here. All who are able, please stand for our responsive reading, which is found in your black Psalter in front of you, and we'll be reading Psalm 80, "Hear, O thou Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a sheep: shew thyself also, thou that sittest upon the cherubims."

All:

"Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasses: stir up thy strength, and come, and help us."

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

"Turn us again, O God: shew the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole."

All:

"O Lord God of hosts: how long wilt thou be angry with thy people that prayeth?"

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

"Thou feedest them with the bread of tears: and giveth them plenteousness of tears to drink."

All:

"Thou hast made us a very strife unto our neighbours: and our enemies laugh us to scorn."

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

"Turn us again, thou God of hosts: shew the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole."

All:

"Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it."

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

"Turn thee again, thou God of hosts, look down from heaven: behold, and visit this vine."

All:

"Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts: shew the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole."

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

You may be seated.

Ray Shan:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Ray Shan:

Today's inspired text is by the late David Foster Wallace, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

Hi, everyone. My name is Ray. I am a graduating senior residing in Adams House, and I sincerely thank everyone for being here today and for this chance to say something. I spent my time in college exploring mathematics. And now that my time here is concluding, I'd like to share with you all just three aspects of this journey. The first is the beginning, the second is the biggest challenge, and the third is the end.

Let me start with the beginning. The beginning of my journey into mathematics really starts before college, in the last two months of high school, almost exactly four years ago. This was during the time when the COVID pandemic first started. And instead of enjoying the April showers and May flowers under the sweet piece of knowing that I had gotten into Harvard and hard work had paid off, instead I was alone. Don't get me wrong, there was some initial excitement that my hard work had paid off, but in being alone, I was forced to reckon with the truth. And the truth with that, I was just not very happy. I think somehow the high school years had caught up to me.

In high school, I always tried to do what I liked, but I often felt very alienated from my labor. Even when you love something, grades and admissions can be powerful incentives that can create separation between you and what you love. Anyways, in those COVID times, my solace ended up being math somehow. I wound up picking up some textbooks and obsessively worked through them for those four months of the pandemic, and it became my piece. To this day, I still think fondly of a book titled Linear Algebra Done Right. It was this book that made me realize that mathematics can have morality, and so I started my journey into mathematics.

This brings me to my second reflection, which was my biggest challenge. My biggest challenge was to understand algebraic geometry. I don't want to say any particular details about the math, but instead, let me just describe to you all my experience learning it. My journey of learning algebraic geometry often felt like learning a new language but having literally no clue what any of the words truly meant. For example, I may have recently learned the word chair, and I can even define it as a typically four-legged thing that someone sits on, and maybe I could even write a basic sentence with the word chair.

For example, "That chair is blue." But the thing is, is that I had never experienced sitting before, nor had I ever seen a chair in my life. Not to mention, I could define for you that blue is a range of numbers on a spectrum, but I had never seen blue either. So the question is, what do I truly understand about a blue chair if I have never seen a chair nor the color blue? I think the German philosopher Immanuel Kant put it best, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." This has been my most important challenge of college, and it continues to challenge me to this day to have contentful thoughts.

Anyway, now that I have mentioned the beginning and the challenge, I like to mention the third reflection, which is the end. How does my pursuit of math in college conclude? The conclusion is this. I was not accepted to a single graduate school that I applied to this year, but I have to say, for the most part, I'm quite happy. There's a story of a mathematician I like that I like to share. His name is Jean

Leray, a French mathematician who was held prisoner of war during World War II. In captivity, he developed sheaf theory quite far, and now I often see his footprints in algebraic geometry.

I like this story of Leray because, though he may have been physically contained, Leray was perhaps one of the freest of people in those moments of discovery. Through sheer mental contemplation, he bears his weight beyond space and time. More importantly, I think Leray's story points to this, that there is a fundamental dignity to the human experience, that there is a certain richness and a certain cognitive and experiential feature of humanness that is contained by nothing except that which contains all, namely death and time. So when I think back on these past four years, I cannot help but think of Jean Leray.

While I'm of course very lucky to not be a prisoner of war, certainly I, like everyone else, am pushed and pulled by entities and agendas that I never asked to be a part of. But in mathematics, there's a sense in which I feel that I'm free, free to toil, to struggle, and to build this cathedral within myself that nobody else can truly see or validate, but the joy and the peace is mine and mine only. And in the clearest of days, I see that that is all that I need. Thank you.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

All who are able, please rise for prayer. Let us pray. Creator, Redeemer, we are thankful for the seniors you've brought to this place called Harvard. Thankful for all that they will do in this world. May you surround them evermore, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Now, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, saying...

All:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy 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 into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Now, let us sing together hymn number 300, Teach Me, My God and King, found in your hymnal.

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

As we leave this place, but never away from your presence, may you go forth sounding the trumpet till around to celebrate the glories of this day. Go in peace.

Congregation:

[inaudible 00:17:44]

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