

COMMENCEMENT BULLETIN



HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thursday, May 25, 2023



Each year, the graduating class votes for nominees for Class Speaker. The finalists, each of whom would represent the class wonderfully, are given the opportunity to present their speeches to a panel of students, staff, and faculty, who have the unenviable task of selecting the one student who will provide the commencement address to students and their guests during the Diploma Awarding Ceremony.

Our tradition is, however, that each year we publish the addresses of each finalist so that you may appreciate them all. They are in turns, poignant, provocative, inspiring, and eloquent, as you would expect from HDS students.

Enjoy!



BREANA NORRIS, MDIV '23 2023 HDS CLASS SPEAKER



Seeking words for this momentous occasion has been a daunting task.

There have been many iterations of this address over the centuries, words to speak to every tangle of history our school has endured.

Fortunately, I come from a legacy equally **persistent**. Like our UNIVERSITY, my **family's** history in this nation goes back to the beginning.

From rural Texas and Alabama, to Los Angeles, the city I call home, The Norris' and the Heflins, the Parkers and the Smiths, and ancestors who's names I will never **get** to know have **endured**.

Standing at the unlikely intersection of *these parallel histories*, I sought words for this moment. A means of tethering ourselves to *this* time. I remembered my grandmother, who knows exactly what it feels like to fumble for a foothold in time. My grandmother has dementia.

She is someone who knows vividly what we can **all** feel at times, bombarded by moments, caught up in the spins of news cycles, — our attention fragmented — and struggling to make sense of the world around us.

Today, I invite us all to follow her example.

For when she's overwhelmed, or lost and confused, we can always bring her back to us **with love**... Our love for her grounds her in any moment, at any place and time, regardless of the chaos of the world around, or within. Love grounds us. Love surpasses understanding.

The late bell hooks reminds us that if you lead with love, you cannot go wrong. In life and in her scholarship, she brought emotion and heart into the clinical halls of the academy, and urged us to lead with open hearts and minds. *Here on this day of celebration with our loved ones, I can think of no better message for this occasion.*



If you'll indulge me, I have a story to share about how I found this principle of love best embodied in a friend I made here at HDS.

I arrived here in September of 2020, the heart of pandemic. It was the time of weekly covid tests in Northwest Labs, and eking out connections in the DMs of Zoom.

It was a time when I was forced to ask WHAT is Harvard? Prestige with no people, immense buildings, crumbling cemeteries, the lengthy syllabi of my classes, a Cambridge with no community could not be Harvard.

In my second year a new era of in person-hood was ushered in, and the community WE BUILT **together** breathed life into this city and the Harvard experience. What each and every one of you did in this time, how we reached for each other, the kayaking trips, the conversations in the commons, the knitting clubs—it was in this sea of newness that I met Vandan, and began a friendship that would change my life.

Vandan was a visiting Hindu monastic student, here for one year on exchange from India as part of a new program at HDS. We had a morning class together, and he noticed I was always audibly hungry, stomach growling because I skipped breakfast to arrive on time.

Over the year we bonded over similarities, like struggling to feel comfortable in our own skin: Vandan wore his sadhak, the robes of a person in training to become a monk. In one conversation he said everyone back home dressed like him so he didn't feel his difference until arriving here.

Missing my own loved ones back home, I shared with him how my very skin could make me feel different in classrooms and on campus.

In addition to our similarities, we had our fair share of differences that cannot be overstated.

He was strictly vegetarian, I'm an omnivore with no food allergies.



Kayaking on the Charles is my favorite activity, and I only learned he couldn't swim AFTER we were in the boat together.

I was Christian. He was Hindu.

I was his first black friend. ... He was my first monastic one.

At the end of our year, like we are here to do today, we bid farewell. But this goodbye was different.

To ascend in his tradition, Vandan would enter a period of renunciation, taking vows that meant cutting off contact with the outside world, his family, and his new American friend. Only in his twenties, Vandan knew exactly what the rest of his life would look like. On this point, we could not have been more different.

I want to read a selection from the card that he wrote me to say goodbye.

"Thanks so much for everything, for a warm and welcoming attitude that made me feel at home and made my Harvard time worthwhile. I'm so very grateful and thankful for your friendship, and you'll be missed. Breana, keep me in your prayers as I seek to pursue an ambitious path of monasticism and renunciation. I'll pray for you. Take care, my dear friend. Good memories are a pleasant way to keep the person alive and with you. Thanks for those ... Farewell, Breana"

Our friendship is the most unique one I've had at HDS, and in life. I believe it could only have happened at a place like Harvard Divinity School, at *this moment* in its history.

The lesson I learned from Vandan is a Love that goes beyond a shared culture or worldview, beyond a shared corner of the world, love beyond networking, love that is the opposite of self centered interest:

People here at Harvard, maybe subconsciously, are taught to constantly network, to expect great things from the great people we meet and befriend, maybe even to anticipate how they can benefit us later.



Amongst our university's esteemed future doctors and lawyers, politicians and businesspeople, educators and engineers, we at the divinity school are often saddled with a discomfort in the ambiguity of our degree, sometimes stumped when asked **what** will you do next?

Grounded in love, I find these questions change: not what will you do after here but **HOW** will you do it? Not what, but **WHY**? Not what, but **WITH WHOM** by your side?

Once I knew our separation was coming, I tried to enjoy getting to know Vandan, and to cherish each memory we made during this time our lives crossed paths, when we left our vastly different corners of the world to share this Cambridge zip code for four seasons. Though we will never meet again - in this life - I have learned from him not to see this as the end of anything, because we both have the bonds of our experiences together, and our love for each other lives on. Like my love for my grandmother will live on, even when she no longer recognizes my face.

Love that grounds us. Love that *surpasses* understanding.

On this joyous day, surrounded by your loved ones, I hope and pray this is the kind of love that will propel you forward, through your certainties and uncertainties, through the rest of our lives. I may not know all of you, we may not see eye to eye on everything, [you might have a lunch reservation you're actively counting down towards], but I can still **love** you.

It is custom on occasions like these to take a text. This one is not from my tradition, but Vandan's. He inscribed it on the back of the card..

"In the joy of others lies our own."

So whether today is goodbye, or just goodbye for now, I pray that you go forward grounded in love and share your joy with others.

Congratulations class of 2023.



MARTHA DURKEE-NEUMAN, MDIV '23



Good afternoon. Here we are. You all look amazing. I am so happy to see you here. Congratulations, Harvard Divinity School class of 2023.

How incredible it is to find ourselves here. It is truly remarkable the circumstances that have had to intersect just right in order for this group of people to get to be here together, on this day. It is an exact alchemy of many hard decisions, a little luck, a lot of help, serendipity, perhaps divine providence, that created the right recipe for us to be here. And I am so grateful that we are.

I began Divinity School, sitting unglamorously on the floor of my best friend's living room with my laptop in my lap, in pajama pants but a button up top, clicking on a Zoom link ominously labeled

"Theories and Methods." Not knowing the faintest thing about what a theory or a method could possibly be, thinking, what am I doing. **And now here we are.**

And a lot has changed since then. We are at the end of something, which is also the beginning of something else, and the middle of quite a lot of things.

When I first came to Divinity School, I was certain everyone around me would know exactly what they came here to do. And while some of us did, I have found that, especially early on, when I asked people how they got here, they often would express some sort of surprise to have landed here at all. And we have found ourselves here, to study, to practice, to learn to be in community with one another anyways.

In one of those early Theories and Methods classes, I remember Professor Mayra Rivera said: "the place for divinity school is to be brave in describing how the world ought to be." I wrote this in the margin of my notebook with a double underline and have thought about those words on and off for the past few years.



The world as it ought to be. Not the world as it is. But the world born from our highest aspirations.

I think that is why many of us have landed here. Because either we know, or we want to know, or we're yearning to find out, how the world ought to be. And we want to write and learn and study and struggle alongside one another to make that world happen. To build the world that is to come. But it can feel like a hard thing to conceptualize, and a harder thing to do.

Last summer, I worked in Beverly, Massachusetts as a hospital chaplain, completing Clinical Pastoral Education. When I looked around at the hospital I thought, this is not the world as it ought to be. People are sick and many are suffering from reasons associated with poverty, hunger, lack of access to healthcare, and from health impacts related to climate catastrophe. The problems of our world feel enormous and sometimes un-tackable, the world of our dreams feels very far away. When I walked down the long, cold, white hospital hallways under bright fluorescent lights, I felt insufficient to face the scale of the difference

between the world I have and the world as it ought to be.

I, alone, couldn't stop the sea from rising, couldn't offer good food to every person, couldn't make sure every child breathes clean air, couldn't ensure shelter to all people.

So, what am I to do? Walking the hallway, sometimes with a prayer card but usually with nothing at all but my own small self and that not feeling like quite enough. I would think, how do I use my beliefs, my theology, what I am learning to create this world as it ought to be, to guide me in building a world in which everyone has what they need to thrive and flourish?

So, I took an inventory of what I had. I had a prayer card, I had a mask, and a backup pocket mask. I had a chapstick, safety goggles, and a snack. And I supposed, I had one of my most central guiding theologies which is that every person is endowed with inherent worth that can never be taken away. Ok, that's what I've got.

So, I stood in front of the hospital room door of my next patient, and I said to myself, whoever I find



behind this door, whatever they give me, whatever they set down with me, I will treat them with dignity. I will act toward them with love, even if I don't feel like it, I will act like it because I believe it. Because I want to live in a world in which everyone is treated with dignity. And I don't have the world yet. But I can do it anyways.

And I realized, over time, in conversation with you all, in our classes, over tea, in the hallways, that to live my values as if they create the world to come, **IS the world as it ought to be.**

You are a living embodiment of your theology, nothing less. The fabric of your life is holy scripture. The way you move in the world is sacred text. How you treat people, how you show up, how you respond to things that happen, the relationships you build **IS the world** you create. When we practice the world of our dreams together, we make it so. When we live our beliefs of the world as it ought to be, we create that world to come.

You are living hope. You are living prayer. You are living resistance. When we practice solidarity, humility and grace, we create them, where they weren't before.

I believe that the world ought to be a place where each person is treated with dignity. And it isn't that place yet. But I can be that place. I can be that world. And in doing so, in treating each person I encounter with dignity, in opening each door to a patient's room and saying, no matter what I will treat you with dignity, we are recreating and reconstituting the world as it is. With and for one another.

The world to come, my friends, is here. It is not some far off fantasy. It is you. We are not waiting for a better world to come. We are not waiting to build it. We are it.

And we cannot do it alone. Practicing this world of our dreams is only possible together. It is only possible when we build strong, genuine, deep relationships in which we can hold each other accountable and responsible for this world that we are.

This training which we have received in this place, the things we have learned and read and taught one another, how we have changed each other, it matters. It matters because it informs how we believe our world ought to be and when we act from that vision, we create it as so.



So, we are going forward from this place. I am so excited for the next part of each of your stories. I am so excited for the beautiful things that you will do and be as you move into what is ahead of you. We are leaving this place of learning, this place of education. And I am remembering to hold what I learn as it changes my being. To live what I have learned, knowing that this is reciprocity for the communities who have loved me into being. To allow what I learn to inform how I show up, is to give back.

So, as you leave here, take an inventory of what you have with you. Maybe you have chapstick and a mask and a snack. You might have a few theologies up your sleeve that inform how you believe the world ought to be.

May you be in the world a living testament to those things. May you know that how you are, how we are together, when we come together and hold ourselves to our highest aspirations for each other, is the world to come.

You are your theology come alive. And if you check your pockets, you already have everything you need. Congratulations Class of 2023. I am incredibly proud of you. Best of luck and may it be so.



SUZANNAH OMONUK, MDIV '23



The most asked question on google for the year 2022 was *What should I watch?* For many of us, this may hold little surprise, as the nature of the moment we are graduating into has prompted a new urgency for “watchfulness”. The great novelist Charles Dickens writes almost prophetically of these days which are now ours to know, saying; “*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness.*” Here at Harvard Divinity school, friends, classmates, and professors have spent the last three years engaging with the great apocalyptic stories and moments of human history. These critical junctures in time and space, which, albeit alarming, ushered in fresh intellectual inquiry - calling forth the hidden genius of artists, explorers, and inventors.

Harvard Divinity School class of 2023, when you lift your eyes out into this moment that is briefly yours and mine to inherit, what are you watching? For me, it is the unmistakable truth that we are all more connected than we thought we were, for better or for worse. In thought, manner, and action, human beings possess a degree of influence over each other. So, if a butterfly flapping its tiny wings on one edge of the globe can provoke a sleeping tsunami on the other side of the planet, what is the prevailing spirit of our peoples? Is the species tending towards harmony or disharmony? Unity or division? And which side of the battlefield are we on? Guests and graduates, rather than the usual career advice and tips for success in the workplace, today I offer to you a guide to surviving the apocalypse... (you know, *just in case!*)

First and foremost; *Watch your back.*

By this, I mean become a lifelong student of the past. Investigate the aims and motives of the decisions



you've made thus far. Do you detect any patterns or cycles embedded within your own narratives? After you have asked these questions of your own life, you can begin to ask them of your culture, of your nation, and of your world. A personal and authentic audit of one's own past is often the best way to face the uncertainty of the future. This continual practice of self and collective reflection will enable us to find our voices and communicate our ideas with authority. But after you have found your voice,

Watch your tongue.

Watch your words. All over the world chaos runs around, touching our lips with quarrel and kissing our ears with propaganda. In an era where it is tempting to devalue language by minimizing the weight of words, may we revere the potency of a story. For unlike everything we've been told, talk is actually the furthest thing from "cheap". Words can crystallize harmful thoughts such as racism or homophobia into beliefs, whose destructive potential generations to come will grapple with. Fortunately, or unfortunately - depending on how you view it, the education you

have acquired from this institution tinges your words with a level of credibility. The theories and policies you endorse will shape our future. Knowing this, let your work be guided by truth. Systems and structures that are designed without integrity in mind are systems and structures that are not designed to endure. So let the weight of the calling drive you neither to arrogance nor to fear.

And watch out for fear.

For in fear, we negate our much greater capacity for empathy. Fear is the cause of genocide, colonization, the Atlantic slave trade; cowardice of epic proportions. Rising with the dark smoke of war and concealed behind the words of a heated internet exchange, is the difficult truth that we are so deeply afraid of one another it literally hurts. When a man fears starvation, he robs bread and gold from his brother. When he fears failure, he scoffs at correction in any form. When he fears desolation, he displaces the native from his own land. So, enticing as it might be, beware also of ambition, for wherever it blooms, greed also is the shadow. There will always be more recognition to be sought, more validation to be earned, more



privileges to be acquired,
sometimes at the expense of others.
Refuse to take the bait.

Don't lower your gaze from
injustice. If you find you are tired of
watching the world burn from afar,
burn with it. Get as close to the
furnace as you possibly can. For to
burn together with those who are
burning, is to engage in true
allyship. Each flame leaping at your
chest is the branding of an

advocate, each scar on your skin -
the markings of a lover of justice.
People like you change the world!
But remember; this world building
capacity is not limited to any one
major, or course, or field of study.
The complex challenges of our
societies are ripe for inter-faith,
interdisciplinary and integrative
thinking. Out there, we are always
transforming into one another. At
the bedside of the dying, a medical
doctor becomes a theologian.
During a global pandemic, we who
bore witness became historians.
Similarly, when war is imminent, we
must all become peace mediators.

What to watch?

Every now and then, watch the
stars, those sonnets of the skies. A
night sky is a scatter of secrets,

narrating to us the very nature of
our being. And beyond that, the
men and women who
revolutionized the study of the
observable universe were those
who spent their lives watching the
stars; Galileo Galilei, John Newton,
and NASA's hidden figures. Here at
Harvard, there is much that we
learned and found together. But
Aluta Continua there is still so
much more left for us to know, to
create, to invent. And it is we, who
now gather here crowned and
gowned, who are to discover these
things. But in the meantime, watch
your favorite TV show as often as
you need to! Don't take yourself
too seriously - *yes, yes*, we all
know you are a staggering intellect,
still it is sweet on occasion to play
the fool. Watch the sunrise in
sleepy-eyed awe. Watch over the
ones you love and watch over the
ones you feel most tempted to
fear. To survive the apocalypse, we
need each other. No matter what,
nobody gets left behind.



KEVIN KITRELL ROSS, MRPL '23



To our Beloved Dean Hempton,
distinguished faculty members,
devoted staff, family, friends ,
loved ones and esteemed guests,

And to the Harvard Divinity School
Class of 2023!!!

Good Afternoon!

I am both humbled and honored to
stand to share with you my student
commencement address—
especially because I was nominated
by you, my peers.

We are all here because survived
our favorite class, "Theories and
Methods, and because we have
written thousands of words in
reflection papers and thesis and
capstones...

We've spent countless hours
reading and researching,

developing long thoughts and
coming up with "FRESH NEW
WAYS" of thinking about age-old
problems.

We are here because we read and
wrestled with, discussed and
dissected, analyzed and sought
answers to some of the greatest,
cosmological, epistemological,
ontological, philosophical,
psychological, sociological
theological, Intersectional,
hermeneutical and homiletical
questions of our time.

And we did it in the worst of times.

We did it though the world was
shut down.

We did it though we lost loves
ones.

We did it over zoom and online.

We did it while battling COVID 19
in our own bodies.

And so today, Class of 2023, I want
to say to you in the presence of
your families, friends, loved ones
and even some enemies!



Today you have the right to BE
HAPPY!

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO
CELEBRATE!

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE
UP AS MUCH SPACE AS YOU FEEL
YOU DESERVE...

You have a right to EAT, DRINK
AND BE MERRY!

Do you understand these RIGHTS as
they have been read to you?

Having shared a leg of this long
journey with you, in what has
undoubtedly been the worst of
times...

And having borne witness to the
courage, the character, the
kindness and conviction that I have
found in my many conversations
and shared experiences with you, I
am hopeful that the excellent
leadership will come from this
class.

Whether we choose to serve in the
pulpit or in the prison,
in the classroom or the courtroom,
in the media or at a monastery,
for the government or for a
community garden.

...I am convinced that our FUTURE
IS BRIGHT BECAUSE THE MORAL
ARCH of A JUST WORLD IS BEING
PLACED IN THE HANDS AND IN
THE HEARTS of a CLASS OF
people of who have proven that
"WE WHO BELIEVE IN FREEDOM
WILL NOT REST!"

I AM CONVINCED THAT OUR
FUTURE IS BRIGHT... BECAUSE
WE'RE HERE!

I almost MISSED MY MOMENT TO
BE HERE because, I took to heart
the words from a line taken , from
a poem called "The Invitation", by
Orah Mountain Dreamer...

It asks the question...

*"I want to know if you can
disappoint another to be true to
yourself. If you can bear the
accusation of betrayal and not
betray your own soul."*

24 years ago I was personally
recruited from Morehouse College
to Harvard Divinity School School
by one of my hero's, the late great
Reverend Professor Peter J.
Gomes.

After being summoned to Harvard,
I visited him in his office at the
Memorial Church, where he had big
plans for my future.



He looked at me and said to me,
*"Mr. Ross, you have a promising
future here in Cambridge. It's all
set. Don't mess it up!"*

*Imagine his horror and that of my
Dean's when they learned I
wouldn't be coming to Harvard
after Morehouse.*

You see, as a first-generation
college student, coming from the
south-side of Chicago, I got out just
before my community was ravaged
by the War on Drugs.

And I had to grow up fast!

I spent as much time at Morehouse
raising dollars for my tuition and
raising my 13-year-old brother, as I
did working to raise my G.P.A.

It was a long and difficult journey
and by the time I graduated, I
needed mental space to reacquaint
myself with what Howard Thurman
calls the "voice of the genuine."

And what Harvard calls, "VERITAS"!

Along the journey, I would
disappoint others with the choices I

made, but I was learning a very
valuable lesson that I wish to
impart with us all today.

*I was busy learning the art of
following my heart, doing what I
loved — even if I lost the approval
of others.*

*And friends, there are those who
have big plans for us, big agendas
with us in mind, and we must be
sure to use these last minutes at
Harvard to decide to always find
and follow your heart — even if it
messes up the plan!*

As Harvard graduates we will be
invited into more rooms of privilege
and power and influence and
access and we will learn the plans
that the powerful, privileged and
mighty have for the marginalized,
the disenfranchised, the
imprisoned, and the miseducated...

And no matter what their plans are,
if they don't align with , the SPIRIT
OF VERITAS in you, be willing to
*"disappoint another to be true to
yourself."*

*And like me, this may mean you
may have to MESS UP THE PLAN!*



*YOU SEE HAD I COME TO
HARVARD AT HIS TIME, I WOULD
HAVE MISSED MY TIME!*

Had I come to Harvard then,
perhaps my baby brother would be
in jail or dead rather than having
earned his degree in Cybersecurity.

Had I come to Harvard then,
perhaps my mentee, would be a
junkie rather than a US Federal
judge today.

Had I gone to Harvard then, I
wouldn't have the privilege of being
at the TODAY'S DIVINITY SCHOOL
whose new mission is to create a
just world healed of racism and at
peace.

And I would have missed out on the
opportunity to witness and
participate in the second cohort in
the history of the Master of Religion
and Public Life Program.

I would have missed the
opportunity to see the appointment
of the first black female President
of Harvard University and get a
chance to participate in RIGHTING
and RECKONING with the centuries
old, HARVARD LEGACY OF
SLAVERY!

Had I come at his time and not my

time, I would have missed Dain
Perry, a direct descendant of the
largest slave trading family in US
history, stand in Emerson Chapel
and confess, repent, and seek
forgiveness for the sins and crimes
of his ancestors.

Had to come then, I would have
MISSED

Morgan, and Mel
Emma and Ahmaad
Austin and Auds
Ebony and Elom
Jenn and Juda
Saura and Susanne
Eliza and Liza

I would have missed being here to
link arms and join the ranks of the
JUSTICE LEAGUE, THE AVENGERS
my *fellow Gladiators of Justice*
WHO KNOW ALL TOO WELL THAT
THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN
UNCHAINABLE THING!

And so we're not here to PLEASE
ANYBODY... TO SERVE
ANYBODY'S AGENDA!

WE ARE HERE IN SERVICE TO THE
CALL OF OUR SOULS AND THE
CALL OF THE TIMES...

And so my fellow graduates the
TIMES ARE CALLING US , to MESS
UP THE PLAN!



Mess up the plan, if it means,
*children aren't sleeping in cages
and being separated from their
parents!*

Mess up the plan, if it means, *lifting
the knee of hatred off of the neck of
the unarmed Black!*

Mess up the plain if it means tearing
down the walls of white supremacy
and structural racism.

Mess up the plain if it means
restoring to women the power to
have full agency over their own
bodies.

Mess up the plan if it means
Harvard students won't be
confronted with MILITARY
ASSAULT weapons, by those who
are hired to serve and protect them.

Mess up the plan, if it means,
*saving our Democracy from the
tyranny of terror!*

Mess up the plan if it means
SAVING OUR PLANET from the
frackers and the extractors and and
polluters who would poison our
only home for profit!

And know that as you do this, you
WILL BE met with opposition. You
will be met with adversity, but in
the words of my best friend, the
Reverend Eric Ovid Donaldson...

If when adversity should strike in
your life,
And you can look beyond the
setbacks and strife.
If neither sorrow nor grief can
challenge your belief,
And you can see the victory that
lies in defeat
And mistakes and errors you don't
repeat.

If you are willing to pursue your
goals and your dreams
no matter how far in the distance
they may seem.

And you refuse to relent,
No matter the trials and
tribulations sent.

And if you can see all of the beauty
that lies all around you
And you know that the and you
know that the love of God
surrounds you.
And you can love yourself,
And believe in yourself,
Then all that you ever hoped for,
And fight for, and pray for,
shall be there for the taking.
For your dreams my friends we're
always in the making.

Congratulations Class of 2023!

Go forth, dream big, follow your
hearts, mess up the plan and LEAD
WITH LOVE!