

Harvard Sermon—Class of '65 Memorial service

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William Saum

As we gather for our 45th Reunion, I want to invite you to take a brief step even further back than the graduation we celebrate, to 50 years ago right now. In October of 1960, most of us were seniors in high school. Some were looking forward to the dream of a lifetime; others of us hadn't even figured out where to apply. That world was so different that we didn't know whether a Roman Catholic could be elected President of the United States even if he had graduated from Harvard. College admissions statistics were not yet front page news. We all were at a point of the first of two major decisions in our lives: Where would we go to college? The second decision was still a few years away: What would we do with the rest of our lives—the next 50 or 60 years? But we were certain that if we made that first decision correctly, the rest would work out fine.

So we ended up here. It was a drastically different time –and we could spend hours discussing that quaint world and just how different it was. I offer just two small examples. First, Dell was about comic books and computers had science fiction names like Univac. And second, when the poet Allen Ginsberg spoke at a Lowell House event and introduced poet Peter Orlovsky as his “wife”, what sounded like beatnik weirdness in 1964 is now legal in several states. Graduation from Harvard was our goal and intention in that simpler time, before Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg made it fashionable, prestigious, and profitable to be a Harvard dropout.

We've spent much of our lives straddling unusual boundaries. We were either the first baby boomers (according to Strauss and Howe) or the last of the previous “silent” generation. It depends on whose book you read. We were products of the sixties, but with some undeniable baggage (and fond memories) from the fifties. There may have been a few free spirits or flower children among us, but remember we were still wearing ties to breakfast. We've seen lots of firsts: that first Catholic president then and the first African-American president now; the first man on the moon and the first woman president of Harvard. We've also seen more than a few lasts, like rotary telephones, transistor radios, and new graduates from a place called Radcliffe. We've watched Bob Dylan grow old and wonder

how we've aged. And we've said good-bye to Elvis, two Beatles, and a significant percentage of our retirement savings.

Now here we are, still on a boundary. Are we the first of the boomers to enter retirement, thereby wrecking Social Security and Medicare, or are we the last to escape before those younger folks have to figure it out? According to the class report we are divided among the retired, the still working, and the semi-retired, and none of us has enough time to do everything we want to do.

But at this age we all look at our lives and we ponder certain questions. We consider the various roads not taken. What if...we had chosen graduate school and the academic life instead of law school or business school or medical school? Would that book have gotten written or that nutty invention been perfected? We are still asking hard questions: some that we've been struggling with since we graduated and some that are new to this stage of life. We look back and wonder about certain compromises, or were those strategic decisions—and is there any difference? We've gone along sometimes, stood in the way at others, and spent much of lives doing both. We've lived our lives with conflicting loyalties—to family, profession, ideals, ambition, harsh reality, dreamy fantasy. We've done mission statements, goals and objectives, strategic plans, long range, short range and intermediate range work plans. Some of them have worked, and some haven't, at least not yet. So do we stay in the game, get out, or begin playing a new game?

We're at this new point in our lives, still testing boundaries while confronting new restrictions that come with age. Twenty years ago at our 25th Reunion, I talked about our idealism as students and the way that idealism had been challenged and, perhaps toughened over the intervening quarter of a century. Now two decades on we are at a new place. No longer the stewards of power and influence, we are still nourished by hopes and ideals tempered by a certain mature peace. We may be recognized as distinguished elders, hopelessly old fashioned, or be granted what a friend of mine used to call “eccentricity credit”.

Our time this morning is called a memorial service and a service of thanksgiving. The memorial is obvious and the list is longer than ever before. We are deeply aware of our own creaturehood, our mortality, our own vulnerability. That list includes two of my roommates, and I missed our last reunion in 2005 when I suffered a stroke that reshaped my plans., not just for that reunion, but for the rest of my life. So we gather to remember our friends and colleagues. We toll the bells, raise a glass, and tell the stories that comfort, delight and nourish us. And we give thanks. Those friends from 45 to 50 years ago helped shape and form us. They opened new doors for us, shared their newly acquired knowledge and enthusiasm, sparked an idea, supported our excitement, took us home to meet

family and friends, set us up. They were a significant and powerful force in shaping who we are today. I'm sure someone smarter than I has quantified it in some way, but I am convinced that much of who each of us is at 67 or so, was built in those years between 1961 and 1965 by our friends who are gone—and by the men and women in the pews around you as well as those at home thinking about us.

The memorial is essential and deeply felt, but the thanksgiving exceeds that. Our days in this place were an enormous gift. The friends, teachers, experiences and opportunities could fill a book—and have filled our lives. We have so many more reasons to be grateful. We are privileged to be able to take these moments this morning to sit among one another on a beautiful autumn day to sing and pray and express our gratitude for spouses and children and grandchildren; for cozy hometowns and world wide travel; for careers and hobbies; for hope and experience and ideals; for stories we've lived and for stories that are still being written.

The ideals of the graduates of 1965 and the stewardship of the reunioners of 1990 are now the hopeful wisdom of 2010. There are so many ways to use that precious gift, from playing with grandchildren to travelling the world to resting peacefully in a hammock to—and it's not too late—to saving the world.

At this moment in our lives I offer you the words from a man you may remember from the middle of the last century:, Dag Hammarskjöld, a man who died tragically in a plane crash, just about the time we gathered for freshman orientation here. That great diplomat and peacemaker said, “For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, Yes.” That doesn't mean that life has been an uninterrupted picnic, knocking off one triumph after another. We have known heartbreak, tragedy, loss, defeat, and more disappointments than we can number. But, here we are—seasoned, toughened, experienced. So “for all that has been” no matter how painful, “thanks”. For all that will be, with the grace of a loving God, family, friends, medicine, and the hope and ideals that sustain us, Yes. Or to use slang of more recent vintage, we can say with confidence and support of those friends and family, Bring it on.