



Ups and Downs with Harvard: Affection, Justice, and Reciprocity in the University Community

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Ups and Downs with Harvard

Affection, Justice, and Reciprocity in the University Community

Helen Vendler

Although we are all assembled at this gathering because we have been 25 years at Harvard, today I am privately celebrating 53 years of attachment to Harvard, to which I first came when I was 15. (If I were to take this account back all the way, I would have to say that I am celebrating sixty-eight years at Harvard, since my parents brought me to the Arnold Arboretum from the time I was an infant.)

When I was a girl in Jamaica Plain, I used to go every Saturday to Copley Square to get books from the Boston Public Library. I learned, by bitter experience, to submit whole packets of request slips, because at least half always came back saying “Lost,” “Not on Shelf,” “At the Bindery,” or “Out to Another Borrower.” One dismal Saturday I put in 24 slips and got no books. Dismayed at having no mental food in the cupboard for a week, I denounced the inadequacy of the library at the family dinner table. “What you need,” said my father reminiscently, “is Widener.” It turned out that he had had a Harvard Library card when he was studying for the Ph.D. at Boston University (a study eventually abandoned in the wake of three children). “Maybe,” he continued, “Harvard would give me a card again.” He wrote a letter asking for a card, and since he was a Boston high school teacher, Keyes Metcalf, then librarian of Widener, gave him a card for a year. As my father’s surrogate, I used the card every Saturday so religiously that eventually, tired

of getting me piles of books, the circulation staff sent me off with a stack pass to gather them in the future for myself.

That year was the happiest of my youth. In the best of all possible worlds, the Widener stacks would be given to every voracious 15-year-old reader. When the card ran out, I was grief-stricken. But the bulletin boards I had seen showed me that there was more to Harvard than Widener, and I began to come frequently to concerts and lectures and poetry readings: I caught pneumonia at 17 in November 1950, sitting on the unheated floor of Memorial Hall while T. S. Eliot lectured in Sanders Theatre. I wanted desperately to enter Radcliffe, but it was the era of the Cold War, and the cardinal of the Boston Archdiocese was informing Roman Catholic parents that it was a mortal sin to send one's children to godless secular universities. My parents believed him, and sent me to Emmanuel College, where I was not happy. I vowed to return to Harvard some day.

My next attachment to Harvard was as a member of the office staff. When I was admitted to graduate school here, my parents were still opposed to my coming, and so I had to support myself. As soon as I had my spring admission letter, I went to Fay House, the administrative center of Radcliffe, and said, "You've let me in; now you have to give me a job so that I can afford to come." The dean of the graduate school was flabbergasted enough by this direct demand to provide me a job, and more. I was the floating substitute for anyone on vacation; I ran the switchboard; I typed academic transcripts; I entertained aspiring freshmen and their parents; I transcribed admissions interviews. I answered the phone, and, after learning to use the adding machine, made up, in double-entry form, the entire budget of Radcliffe College. I proctored exams and delivered blue books to

professors in their studies and suites, being warned before delivering blue books to Professor Arthur Darby Nock that he sometimes answered the door naked. A bit taken aback, I nonetheless went to his Eliot House suite, but saw nothing more shocking than a floor covered feet-thick with files.

My principal employer--during that first summer and the four years to follow (because I worked during term-time whenever a Fay House office needed me)--was Ruth Davenport, the registrar. She was the ideal supervisor. "This is the work that needs to be done every day; when you've finished, aside from answering the phone and attending to anyone who comes in, you may read," she said. I was very fond of Miss Davenport; when I was leaving, she gave me a book we had discussed, Adrienne Rich's first book of poetry, *A Change of World*, inscribed to me by Adrienne, whom I hadn't yet met. During my years at Fay House, I learned a great deal about good supervisors and bad, snobbish ones and democratic ones, and the experience made me sympathetic to staff and their difficulties. I literally would not be here today had I not been given a job at Harvard; and I passed the graduate Latin exam on the reading time Miss Davenport allowed me.

At some time or another, I expect, many of us have felt unwanted by Harvard. When, in my first week of graduate study, I entered the office of the chair of the English department to have my program card signed, he said, without preamble, "You know, we don't want you here, Miss Hennessy: we don't want any women here." I left trembling. (He apologized, 13 years later.) But I soon found other teachers--John Kelleher, Douglas Bush, and Reuben Brower--who sponsored me as generously as they sponsored their male students. It was, however, a strange existence I had during the four years of

graduate school: because women could not live in the Harvard graduate dormitories, could not be resident tutors in the Houses, and could not apply for Harvard fellowships, we lived a relatively impoverished and isolated life. Most of the women left. But I was happy: I had Widener again--and I still went to the lectures and concerts and plays and poetry readings. And, once I was a tutor, I had students, wonderful ones, as I still do. I met my husband at Harvard, and we went off to teach at Cornell in 1960.

By 1966 I was back in Boston, divorced and teaching at Boston University. Eventually, I was offered a professorship at Harvard--not so much because the English Department wanted to change its habit of appointing only male professors, but because, so I was told, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was threatening to withhold money from Harvard unless a good-faith effort to appoint women was put in place. But times were changing, and I was made to feel welcome when I came back. I was very happy to have Widener once more--and everything that went with it, except half of my after-tax salary, which I was handing over to Harvard for my son's tuition, room, and board. A good bargain, in the end.

Most of us here, I expect, have had some of the same ups and downs with Harvard that I have had--good and bad supervisors (or chairs, or deans); good and bad working environments (my Barker Center office, with its heating and cooling controls, has made me, for the first time in my working life, comfortable). Many of us remember fraught moments here during protests of one sort or another. I recall the minuet that went on when the students, one May, erected shanties on campus to protest apartheid. When the administration courteously asked whether the students would take them down for

commencement, the students replied, equally politely, that one of the points of the shanties was to let commencement visitors see them. The administration, with perfect good sense and continued courtesy, thereupon rerouted the commencement procession around the shanties. I was the escort, that day, of the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer, who was being awarded an honorary degree; she greeted the students in the shanties warmly and wore one of their ribbons on her gown. The glorious later moment of Nelson Mandela's release, and his visit to receive an honorary degree, made me glad to remember that the administration and the students had acted intelligently, both of them, on that commencement day. Later protests, too, have been finally courteously resolved, since a mutual respect has prevailed.

One of the aspects of Harvard we all profit from is its invigorating and changing beauty. I am grateful to have my half-century of memories of the Yard at all seasons--especially during those early years when Dutch elm disease had not yet felled the elms. There is nothing like looking up, after spending the afternoon deep in a book in the Widener reading room, and finding that snow has fallen, and dusk has come--that the spire of Memorial Church presides over a transformed scene. And there is nothing like seeing old engravings of the first college buildings, and recognizing that the fine brick presence of Massachusetts Hall is still here. When I first saw the Yard in the 1940s, I was touched by the uniform handsomeness of the young men stepping quickly across the Yard in their wool jackets and silk ties. Now the young come in both sexes, and wear many costumes--and the sight is more amusing and more democratically reassuring, if not so beautiful.

Even in the 1950s, Harvard was more diverse than, say, Princeton--but now we have truly made an effort, ably defended by President Neil Rudenstine, toward economic and racial diversity. I was touched to hear one student say to his friend, as they walked ahead of me down the stairs of Harvard Hall, "And of course I send my mother \$50 every month." Prejudice never disappears entirely; but I don't think anyone would dare now tell a student openly that he isn't wanted, as I was told 45 years ago. Some things do get better. And that includes the students: our current ones are astounding. Give them anything to do, intellectually, and they will do it. And they will do it while putting out the *Crimson* or working as part of dorm crew or getting up at unholy hours to row. They are runners and wrestlers, mail assistants and research helpers, singers and artists; and their energy makes the whole place hum. The older I get, the gladder I am to be in their vivid company.

A sociologist, seeing us all here together--librarians, secretaries, locksmiths, administrators, teachers, chefs, police, lawyers--would reflect on the variety of talents it takes to keep a university running. What would be hidden from the bird's-eye view of the spectator would be the private lives that we juggle in tandem with our Harvard work--our lives as children of our parents, parents of our children, lovers, friends, volunteers, grandparents. We couldn't do our daily work here if we weren't ourselves kept afloat by our affections. If we are lucky, two or three of our fellow workers know and sympathize with us when trouble comes, and we discover that the workplace, too, can be a place to find affection.

It should also be a place to find justice. A university ought to be a small model of a just community. When the administration keeps its word to its students and to us, it is part of that model; when we keep our word in return, we affirm the model. We want the students to leave here not only with some knowledge and a résumé, but also with the memory of the society that they have seen here. They will remember us as welcoming or hostile, just or unjust. In recognizing our years of service today, Harvard harks back to the old tradition of the feudal lord's ring giving to his faithful retainers. The university, in the idealization common to all such rituals, presumes that the society we make together today, and have made together for the past quarter-century, is a just one; in accepting the honor Harvard pays us, we signify our faith in the worth of our common work. We must go back tomorrow to the unidealized ordinary circumstances of daily life, but something of today's recognition will linger as an aftershine. Most of us, I think, will feel, as Harvard expresses its gratitude to us, our gratitude to it.

This speech, given at a 25-year recognition ceremony for faculty and staff, was originally published in *Harvard Magazine* Nov.-Dec. 2001.