

Faculty colleagues, members of the College community, parents, family and friends, all hail the Class of 2009! On this glorious day, please join me in celebrating the truly wonderful accomplishments of this extraordinary class of women and men.

Members of the Class of 2009, you have been students here at Haverford College during an extraordinary four years, years during which the world's problems and challenges have come into sharp focus. When you started at the College back in, yes, 2005, the country was mired in war, reeling from yet another divisive election. Even while the world was becoming perceptively warmer and photographs of Mt. Kilimanjaro showed vanishing snowcaps, the impact of environmental ignorance was still being, well, ignored in positions of responsibility. So, too, those in the seats of economic power and responsibility seemed to merely blink at the self-contradictions of free-flowing cash, rating agencies that themselves profited from vast overoptimism and lack of meaningful capital investment.

And so you began your studies at the College. In some ways, it all must have seemed fairly incongruous. Here we were, a faculty and an institution chanting the mantra of deep inquiry, scholarship, integrity, community and the search for truth, in the face of a world that appeared to respond to few, if any of these values. We asked you to explore fields whose definitions you had to learn, to challenge each other about the contextual interpretation, nuance and fundamental meaning of every claim you made and even to try to create and defend new knowledge, yourselves. But meanwhile, outside the Haverbubble, the winds of world historical forces seemed to be whistling by, oblivious to reasoned discourse.

Then, somehow, roughly two years ago, as you were choosing your majors, something changed. In the face of crises mounting on all sides, we witnessed and participated in a presidential primary and election season the likes of which I had not previously seen. Now for those of you who voted for the other guy, or gal, please bear with me. Barack Obama took hold and forced the agenda, by talking directly about substantive issues from positions of principle. He did not shirk from identifying root causes, nor debating specific approaches and answers. He never confused arguing from values with oversimplification. Not that he was omniscient, nor were his words always perfectly chosen. But even when called to account as he was during the Pennsylvania primary, he rose to the occasion, finding common ground with even his critics, while sticking to his guns about the key issues of justice, economic opportunity, health and welfare.

As we know too well, the problems of the world did not dissolve simply because someone was finally paying attention. The house of cards of the bank lending industry collapsed, leaving no apparent solution at hand. But the difference was that President Obama refused to minimize or ignore either the crisis nor its radical causes. Putting a high wattage lamp on every aspect of our current circumstance, he has called on each of us, properly, to sacrifice our own short-term, short-sighted gains for the benefit of our larger communities. With continued thoughtful, detailed, persistent attention, we may yet prevent acute catastrophe while laying the groundwork for a more stable, resilient, just future.

I'm recounting these events not to laud our nation's leadership, but rather to point out that the values you have embraced, the trials you have mastered and the skills you have honed here at Haverford College are precisely those embodied by that leadership. Faithful to the Quaker principles on which this College is founded, you have searched not just for a debate to win, but for the truth. Dropped into a community of nearly 2000 strangers, you have not isolated yourselves in accidental difference, but have searched for common ground between you and your colleagues as a way to move forward.

Most of all, each of you has demonstrated true heroic virtue through your reliance on your own intellect. After all, that is what your senior thesis is all about. You identified a problem that is important to you, but about which you started out woefully ignorant. You discovered what scholarly techniques were most appropriate, became truly expert on the problem, and then proposed and tested new solutions. In a field in which you started as a novice, you literally went from zero to hero. And now that you have gone through this journey, you know that you can do it again, and again, as life throws new questions, challenges and opportunities in your path. Whether it is through teaching in elementary school classrooms, forging new discoveries in research laboratories, bridging world cultures through literature or art, responsibly rebuilding the world's economy, or indeed, forging new agendas and coalitions in national and international politics, you are ready. And the world is, visibly and audibly, ready for you.

So, armed with the power of your acute scholarly achievements, the quiet but pervasive integrity of the Honor Code, and the leadership skills borne of searching for points of common humanity in any group, you are now fully prepared to go forth to find your life's work. May you find joy at every step along the way, may you treasure the company of your friends and families, and please, come back to Haverford College often, to visit. Members of the Class of 2009, I salute you.