



ENGLISH SPEECHES

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RASHIDA JONES

CHOOSE LOVE

<https://youtu.be/A1hcdbWEE08>

Harvard, what's up?! What's up?! Graduates, faculty, class marshals, President Faust, Dean Khurana, honored guests, parents, confused tourists, friends, bored siblings and other family members, thank you so much for having me here today and Congratulations to all of you, particularly the class of 2016 and congratulations to the parents. Parents, today is a big day for you too. You have significantly lowered your chances of your kids moving back home. It could still happen though, so don't get cocky. Okay? Don't turn that room into a home gym yet. When I first got the call to be the class day speaker, I was touched and thrilled and I swelled with pride. Of course, that call came in 2011 and they only called me because they needed me to forward the request to Amy Poehler. But this year when I got the call, I had the same reaction I had when I was accepted to Harvard, "Wow! A bunch of people said no and they had to go to the waiting list". That's true. I was on the waiting list.

Nonetheless, this is a dream come true, so thank you for allowing me to be here today. I graduated from this esteemed establishment in 1997. 19 years ago, I was right where you are. I was poised to receive the highest collegiate honor in the world, so naturally I slept through my alarm and was woken up by my boyfriend's roommate. Panicked and hung over, I checked my pager, that was cutting edge back then, by the way, and as I bolted into the yard, I threw on my cap and gown like I was in a John Hughes movie and made it just in time for commencement. I wish I could say a lot has changed since then. Unfortunately, the exact same montage played out this morning, minus the cap and gown. Plus, a newly chronic knee problem, which slowed me down and obviously, I have a much nicer pager now.

Just standing here in Harvard yard, I can easily transport myself back in time. I made so many wonderful memories here on this campus that will last a lifetime, taking a quick power nap backstage at Sanders before an Opportunes jam. Catching some... Yeah. Catching some truly impressive Zs in Lamont library, falling asleep being anywhere near the science center. And then some non-sleep related memories like pre-gaming for a 90s dance at Eliot House, which at the time we just called a dance, hooking up with someone in Kirkland so I wouldn't have to walk all the way back to Currier, hooking up with someone in Dunster A entry so I wouldn't have to walk all the way back to Dunster C entry.

In short, I really took advantage of the best Harvard had to offer. By the way, I love that you guys always applaud for your houses. I wanted to test that out and see if I could say anything about any Harvard house and get applause. So let's try it out. Adams House! What's up Lowell?! The fifth best house is Winthrop! Mather house, you are an eyesore! Really? That works? Wow! That's amazing. Yeah! Students, I know that you may be sad to be leaving college and you should be, but if you are lucky, your memories will follow you forever. Even though they live all over the world, many of my closest friends are still the ones I made right here in the yard and I've been lucky enough to work with several of them. For example, Michael Schur, class



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of 97 who was a writer on *The Office*, creator of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and most important to me, creator of *Parks and Recreation*. But before all that, he was my first romantic co-star ever in the 1993, Leverett Old Library production of the not so classic play, *Love, Sex, and the IRS*.

The play opened every night with Mike and me making out on the couch. 20 years later, Mike and I have birthed a rule breaking, chestnut-haired, cunning, naive, sophisticated newborn baby sunfish nurse named Ann Perkins. The moral of the story is if you make out with someone in the Leverett Old Library, you are guaranteed at least a network sitcom. If you make out in Quincy cube, you are lucky if you have a web series in your future. An extended suggestive hug in the Currier dining hall means nothing. You get nothing for that. Believe it or not though, I didn't leave Harvard with ambitions to make it in Hollywood. No, I left Harvard to make history and I'm proud to say you are watching history being made right now. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it's true. I am the only second generation class day speaker at Harvard in the history of mankind. Thank you. Thank you. Huge accomplishment today.

As they mentioned, my father, Quincy Jones was my class day speaker in 1997. So hopefully one of you graduates out there is my illegitimate child and you will be up here speaking in 20 years. Don't laugh. It's possible. I was pretty hung over right about the time all of you were conceived. Just kidding, I don't have kids or do I? I don't. Maybe I do. No, seriously, I don't and I really don't appreciate you pressuring me about this. As I look around though, I'm reminded of not only how Harvard influenced me, but also how I influenced Harvard. I was always very outspoken politically. For example, there was an important, some would say historic moment in 1995. My sophomore year, a frozen yogurt machine was installed in Currier house. As to be expected, lives were changed. I just re-read the inspirational quote I gave the Harvard Crimson about that Froyo machine. "It provides automatic gratification", says Rashida Jones, class of 97. "All you have to do is pull down the lever".

And that my young friends, is what I'm here to tell you today. All you need to do in life... Whoa. Everything okay? That's what I'm here to tell you today. All you have to do in life is pull down the lever. I'm just kidding. Could you imagine if I gave a whole speech about Froyo? You guys would be so bummed and my illegitimate child would never get a chance to speak here in 2038 or whatever. As you embark on your real world journey and leave behind the Ivy covered cereal-stocked dorms of Harvard, I do feel it's my responsibility to tell you something meaningful, something that will not only inspire you, but also arm you with the key to unlocking future opportunities. After all, as Harvard graduates, this commencement is literally the only time anyone will be rooting for your success.

America loves an underdog and you are not underdogs. You are now the opposite of underdogs. It doesn't matter if your application was a sob story. It doesn't matter what financial and personal obstacles you've overcome. It doesn't matter if you are the first person in your family to graduate college and your grandma is crying right now, tears of joy, tears of the American promise, tears of generations who sacrifice and lived and worked and died so that you could stand here and accept a diploma and fulfill a century's worth of dreams. No one cares, because now you are Harvard graduates. Yes, you are over dogs. Get used to it.

Anytime someone asks you where you went to school and you answer Harvard, they are going to say, "Oh, Harvard. Okay, I get it. You are smart. Stop bragging". Everyone is just going to assume that you went to



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college with Malia Obama even though you just missed her. So by the way, start practicing your lies right now about how you were her classmate. "Oh, Malia? Yeah, we were really close. We took Ec 10 together, which is a very intimate class, and I remember saying to Malia, I bet you learned a thing or two about economics at the white house. We had a good laugh, Malia and I. She is great". Yet as you head out into the world with this insane head start, you are still going to need advice. because you are idiots. I'm sorry. It's true. I didn't know it either at 21, but it's true. If it weren't true, why wouldn't you have chosen to go to Stanford where the weather is sick and it's right next door to Silicon Valley? And you could've just used your student population as beta testers for some awesome new app and then sold it right there. It's just a car ride away.

Not only did you not pick the right school, you actually chose to graduate from it. No one successful graduates from Harvard. As mentioned, Matt Damon, William Randolph Hearst, Bonnie Raitt, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, dropouts. Can you name anyone cool who did graduate from Harvard? No, I looked it up. There is not a single example of a successful person that graduated from Harvard. But Rashida, you may ask, what about you? Sure, fine. I'm doing alright. But Zuckerberg is doing real alright. He is killing it. Just because you made the stupid mistake of graduating from Harvard doesn't mean you can't fix it. You are young. You have time. You are thinking, "I'm only 21. Let me enjoy my life a little". Sure. Enjoy your life, but just remember that 17000 vape hits later, 20 years will have passed and you will be asking yourself giant questions about work/life balance, priorities and passion, meaning and direction. You will be both empowered and constrained by the choices you make and the ones you don't make the minute you walk out of this yard.

My self-imposed job today is to spare you from the midlife crisis that is silently and patiently waiting for you in your 40s. This may not sound like a pressing issue today as you prepare to enter into the land of adult responsibility, but every move you make from now on is creating the map, the foundation on which you build upon for your whole life. It's crucial that you start thinking about how you are going to avoid getting your first tattoo at 45. Before you blaze over, I would like to offer three simple pieces of advice. One, don't count on the system, two, protect your instinct to care and three, choose love.

One, don't count on the system. You are here. You did it. You are graduating from Harvard. After four years of determination and studying your nuts off, you finally crossed the finish line. You got here because you are a rule follower and that's great. You trusted in the system and the system rewarded you. You did all the right things. You were the star of your high school. You got the grades. You were in all the extracurricular activities. You charmed the teachers and you duped the Harvard admissions team by greatly exaggerating how much you learned on your three-day volunteer trip to Haiti. I know this because I'm just like you. I told my parents when I was four that I wanted to go to Harvard.

I recognized that on the path to getting there, there were concrete linear steps to be executed and I loved the inherent structure in that. I respected authority. I trusted in the system. I really liked those walk and don't walk signs. I believed that I would always find wise, experienced people at the helm of well-run and fair enterprises and that these people would exercise power and distribute opportunities with thoughtfulness and nobility and that I couldn't possibly understand the complexities of their process. There would always be a collective that would know more than I, and even if I didn't have empirical proof that I should trust in them fully and wholly, I just had to because that's just the way things worked.



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After graduating, I spent the next 10 years enjoying a decent amount of success as an actress. I could support myself, which in an overcrowded un-meritocratic system like Hollywood is a big accomplishment. Fast forward to 2007, where I found myself in a bit of a rut. I had just come off a great year-long stint guest starring on *The Office*, my biggest break to date, but once again, I was back to pounding the pavement, auditioning for movies and TV and with the threat of an upcoming writer's strike, there wasn't a ton of production, so there wasn't a ton of auditions. The stuff I was going in on for was the wife, the sassy best friend, the girlfriend, you know, your run of the mill, two dimensional supporting female parts.

As the dry spell continued, I found myself increasingly demoralized and frustrated. I had always wanted to write, but felt too daunted by the task and being surrounded by talented professional writer friends didn't really help. It felt silly to start down a new path in my 30s, but I channeled my frustrated, unemployed energy and with my best friend Will McCormick, we sat down every day for six months until we had completed a movie script. It was called *Celeste and Jesse Forever* and we sold it in a bidding war to Fox Atomic, which is a subsidiary of Fox. They wanted to make the movie per \$16 million. We did it! It was the greatest accomplishment of my life. I circumvented the system. And then the system changed. A month later, Fox Atomic folded and then began a two year journey of watching my script go down with the whole business of major studios making smaller films, the ones that are neither big budget franchise nor tiny independents.

We sold our script again to another company and they folded six months later. We sold it to another company, they folded. Then yet another film financing company who wanted to make it, folded. We were shutting down companies all over town. Finally, we realized that with the old system crumbling, we had to find another way. We now had a very short window that was slowly closing. If I couldn't find financing and start filming in a month, I would lose my actors, my crew, my director, and probably my mind. I had called in every favor from everyone I knew. I had put everything on the line, so we said, screw it. Let's just make this movie however we can. We got lucky and found an investor. Thank you forever Lee Nelson, and made the movie for \$840,000. Now, that might sound like a lot of money. I mean \$840,000 is almost a year of Harvard tuition, but in the film business, it's peanuts.

We sold the film at Sundance, had some pretty nice reviews and got an Independent Spirit award nomination for writing, launching my writing and producing career felt like a milestone, but more importantly, I overcame my own compulsion to work within the system. Even after 40 years, I have a hard time accepting that the people in charge are not always the most competent. Now I'm a realist. I worked for myself. If I hit a wall, I look for ways outside the system to get things done. The hard fact is this, the real world doesn't reward rule followers the way the educational world does and the real world is not always merit-based. The institutions and organizations we yield to and trust in to support our success, whether they be employers or government are flawed. They have objectives that will most likely conflict with our own.

I'm not suggesting you should act on your own self-interest, but be on guard, be agnostic. Don't just follow the rules and assume everything works out because it has happened that way in the past. Just because they have been doing it a long time does not mean it's right. In fact, historical precedents and traditions are often brimming with injustice and racism and sexism. Yes, Hasty Pudding Theatricals, I'm talking to you. I think it's time to break tradition and let girls in your show, right? It's time.



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Speaking of change at Harvard, there have been a lot of wonderful advances even since the time I graduated. Back then, Harvard had not even had a woman as president, and a black Jewish female class day speaker is with you today. So that's a little more history. I also understand that the final clubs are now facing pressure to admit women, including the notorious Porcellian club. The rumor we always heard was that The Porcellian would give \$1 million to any alumnus who wasn't already a millionaire by age 40. That's awesome if it's true. So if they start admitting women, let's see, what's 79% of a million? Anybody know? No, Okay. But back to you, in addition to other benefits, unlearning your rule following instincts will allow you to get to know yourself in a real way.

For the last four years, your identity has been wrapped up in this institution. Look how proud you made the people around you, but what about you? Outside of what's expected from you, what path do you really want to take in life? What are you prepared to tolerate to realize that path? Or are you waiting for someone else to define that path for you? As a fellow rule follower, I can also tell you that it's very painful when the things you believe in start to show their cracks and their imperfections. No job or employer or mentor will ever be the answer you want them to be. I spent my younger years hoping and praying that someone would give me a break, that someone more successful and knowledgeable than I would show me the way and save me from making mistakes. But everyone is dealing with their own flaws and egos.

Don't get me wrong, I've been lucky enough to work with some tremendously talented, humble and hardworking people, but none of them has had the answer for me. Here's the simple truth. You are the only one who could create the life you want and you may have to break some rules to do that. Now, I'm not suggesting that you drop out of society, liquidate your bar mitzvah money and take up kite surfing and Hawaii. I mean, do that if you want, because it sounds kind of awesome. I'm only saying this, you are the only one who can create a system that's going to work for you and that needs to start right now.

Number two, protect your instinct to care. Now I'm going to speak for 85 minutes about your instincts. I'm just kidding. This is going to be short. I'm not going to tell you to be the best or dream big or get rich, because A, it's not the eighties and B, I'm a little bit bored with the American dream of wanting to be rich or being rich and gloating about it publicly, even on a campaign trail. Seriously, what is going on? It's officially embarrassing so I'm here to challenge you with a different kind of responsibility.

A couple of years ago, in expressing concern about the worldwide policies towards the ongoing refugee crisis, Pope Francis coined the phrase the globalization of indifference. Indifference is an insidious and toxic state of mind. For your information, there are 60 million displaced or internally displaced refugees worldwide. That's 60 million people who can't return to their home. We shouldn't be indifferent about that. Unfortunately, the world you have inherited is beaten down and polarized and fraught with conflict. We as humans are not great at learning from our collective mistakes, but it's nothing we can't recover from. It will take a generation of compassion and empathy and action to make it happen, and that's where you come in.

Having compassionate focus is becoming increasingly more difficult in the information age because there is a lot of information. It's hard to care about something for very long because before you know it, there is an even newer breaking news story or the ding of an email or Facebook notification begging for you to care about it. Changing focus quickly is now a required survival skill. The good thing about the internet is that



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everyone has a voice. Yay! The bad thing about the internet is that everybody has a voice, boo! There is space carved out for the whole spectrum. There are disenfranchised marginal groups who finally have a platform to talk about the injustice they have endured, but also the hateful, the anonymous and the uninformed, and unfortunately those voices are loud. In the face of all that noise, it's harder than ever to stay committed to do the things you really care about, but don't be distracted. Do not be dissuaded. Do not be discouraged. Keep caring.

It's not enough to talk amongst your friends about the problems you see in the world. Now is the time to be vocal. Now is the time to be loud, louder than the loudest troll on the internet. And if that's not in your nature, too bad, get louder. We need it right now. As a college educated, worldly, young person, you are obligated to be loud, to rise above the fear-mongering and bigotry and misinformation to make yourself heard through all the noise and you can be heard. It's possible. The way to really be heard is to do even more than you say. People tend to find it a little annoying for celebrities to be vocal about politics and I get it. I know I'm an actress; I'm not a world leader. The line of reasoning is these bright shiny objects get more air time, not because they are more informed or they are any smarter, but just because they played some badass hero in a movie and they think they know everything.

I've often been told by trolls to stick to acting or to shut up because I'm a stupid celebrity, but you know what? I don't care. I don't care. There is too much to fight for. The equality and respect that people before us have fought for and the laws put in place to protect these things are at risk of slipping away. Young unarmed black men are being killed in record numbers. States are passing laws that are systematically stripping away women's reproductive rights. A presidential candidate is encouraging his supporters to be violent and racist and wants to ensure that there are no gun free zones in this country. While we are distracted with pretty Instagram shots of coffee and celebrity breakups, our freedoms are at risk of slipping away. And to me, this issue is more important than smiling pretty and talking about how much fun I had on a movie set.

I am aware of this could make me unlikable. I'm aware that being political could open me up to criticism. And look, every one of us wants to be liked. It sucks to have people say awful things about you. I mean, no human is immune to that except maybe Donald Trump. I'm not sure he is human, so we will see. All this to say, care about what matters to you and don't let complacency or feeling overwhelmed or the haters distract you from this. It's too important. As my dear friend who I've never met before, DJ Khalid says, "They don't want you to win, so you have to win". By caring, that's what he means when he says win. He wants you to care. I want you to care. Whatever, you know what I mean. Protect your instinct to care. Choose love.

My dad has given me some remarkable advice over the years. Actually, just a couple of hours ago, he said something profound. He said, "Honey, in your speech today, make sure you mention my remarkable advice". He has told me you can't get an A if you are afraid of getting an F. He has told me to approach work with humility and grace because I'm really just a conduit for a higher power. He has told me to live every day like it's your last and day you will be right, a piece of advice that becomes scarily more meaningful to me the older I get. But maybe the best advice he has ever given me is to live in love and not fear. It sounded like a parental platitude when I first heard it, but then I started to apply that paradigm to every decision I made. All of a sudden, I was asking myself where my decision-making was coming from. Was I scared to disappoint



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people? Was I scared to fail? Was I scared I wasn't up to the task or was I excited and nervous about the unknown? Did I picture myself possibly pushing past what I thought my limitations were?

We have to consciously choose love because it's scary. Choosing love is not always the easiest answer and it doesn't always put you on the clearest path. Choosing love is inexorably tied to taking risk. What this actually means to you, I can't ever know because it's different for everyone. What you love is so personal, what inspires you, what makes you tick. So I can only say when big decisions pop up, get quiet, real quiet and listen. Turn off your phone, turn off your computer and listen to your true heart. Hear the thing that makes you feel sick with excitement and scares you because you know you will learn and do that thing.

So just to review, because I think maybe some of you are hung over or maybe have been asleep for a little bit. Here is what's going to stave off your midlife crisis. One, don't count on the system, count on yourself. Two, protect your instincts and do it loudly. Three, choose love even if it's scary some time. There is still plenty of reason to be optimistic about your future. The world you are inheriting has less violence, longer life expectancy, more available education, more ways to stay in touch with the people you love, more good television shows and more flavors of gum than ever before in the history of the world.

But there is still so much work to be done by you and it's totally possible, but it's not enough to talk about it. Question everything. Yes, absolutely. But then figure out how to change it. You must act. Stay curious, stay empathetic, stay fearless. Become a loud and fervent participant in your world. To the members of the graduating class of 2016 and the dropouts who are too successful to be here with us today, I guess what I'm really getting at goes back to this, pull down that lever. Get your Froyo, graduates. Thank you very much.