

**Address by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
President of the Republic of Liberia  
At Harvard University's 360th Commencement Ceremony  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
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**President Drew Gilpin Faust  
Members of the Harvard Board of Overseers  
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Faculty, Staff and Students;  
Fellow Honorands;  
Fellow Alumni;  
Members of the Graduating Class of 2011;  
Parents, Family and Friends;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen;  
Friends:**

***INTRODUCTION***

I am honored not only to be the 360th Commencement Speaker at my Alma Mater, but to do so in the year Harvard University, as the oldest institution of higher learning in America, celebrates 375 years of preparing minds for service and leadership. Thank you for the invitation and congratulations to Dr. Faust, the first female President of Harvard!

It is a great privilege to share in Harvard's distinguished and storied history. Harvard has produced presidents, prime ministers, a United Nations Secretary-General, leaders in business, government and the church. But more than anything, Harvard has produced the men and women on whose talent our societies become functional – the leaders who remain learners, and the learners who become leaders – in classic disciplines and religious dimensions, in modern technologies and social processes.

An event four decades ago put me on the path that has led me to where I am today. I participated, as a junior official of Liberia's Department of Treasury, in

a national development conference sponsored by our National Planning Council and a team of Harvard advisors working with Liberia. My remarks, which challenged the status quo, landed me in my first political trouble. The head of the Harvard team, recognizing, in a closed society, the potential danger I faced, facilitated the process that enabled me to become a Mason Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government. The Edward S. Mason Program provided me with the opportunity to study a diversified curriculum for a Master's Degree in Public Administration. Perhaps more importantly, in terms of preparation for leadership, the Program enabled us to learn and interact with other Fellows and classmates who represented current and potential leaders from all continents.

I readily engaged with that opening, thrilled to be among the world's best minds, yet overwhelmed by the reality of being a part of the world's most prestigious institution of learning. As a result, I did things that I should have done, like studying hard, going to the stacks to do the research for the many papers and for better knowledge of the history of my country. (I notice a few blank stares – evidence of the generation gap, so let me explain. The isolated stacks contained books, which people used to write, and other people used to read, before Google Scholar was created.)

I also did things that I should not have done, like exposing myself to frostbite when I joined students much younger than me to travel by bus to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

It is difficult to imagine arriving at all that I have achieved today, without the starting opportunity to study at Harvard. It is, therefore, for me a profound honor to be counted as an alumna. I speak with utter gratitude and humility when I salute my fellow graduates who share the rich Harvardian heritage of academic excellence and of truthful pursuits.

In preparation for this Address, I was pleasantly surprised to learn how far back Liberia's connection to Harvard goes. The establishment in 1862 of Liberia College (now the University of Liberia), the second oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa, was led and funded by the Trustees of Donations for

Education in Liberia. Simon Greenleaf, the Harvard College law professor who drafted Liberia's Independence Constitution of 1847, was the founder and President of that institution which is still in existence today.

The first Liberian graduate of Harvard did so in 1920, and since then there has been a steady trail of Liberians to Cambridge. Most of them returned home to pursue successful careers.

Thank you, Harvard, thank you President Faust, and thank you to the many Mason Program professors, dead and alive, for the compliments you paid when my papers and interventions were top rate, and for the patience you showed when I struggled with quantitative analysis.

### ***RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION IN LIBERIA***

The self-confidence, sometimes called arrogance, that comes from being a Harvard graduate can also lead one down a dangerous path. It did for me. One year after my return from Cambridge, I was at it again, in a Commencement Address at my high school Alma Mater. I questioned the government's failure to address long-standing inequalities in the society. This forced me into exile and a staff position at the World Bank. Other similar events would follow in a life in and out of country, in and out of jail, in and out of professional service. There were times when I thought death was near, and times when the burden of standing tall by one's conviction seemed only to result in failure. But through it all, my experience sends a strong message that failure is just as important as success. You cannot appreciate success if you do not know failure.

Just yesterday a student here, today I stand proud, but humble, as the first woman president of my country, Liberia, democratically elected. This has allowed me to lead the protracted processes of national transformation, change needed to address a long-standing environment characterized by such awesome challenges as: a collapsed economy, huge domestic and external debt arrears, dysfunctional institutions, ruined infrastructure and social capital,

poor regional and international relationships, all completely degraded by the scourge of civil war.

After election, I moved quickly in mobilizing our governance team, sought support from partners, and tackled the challenges. In five years, we formulated the laws and policies and strategies for growth and development. We removed the international sanctions on our primary exports; introduced and made public a cash-based budget; increased revenue by over 400 percent; and mobilized foreign direct investment worth 16 times the size of the economy when I assumed office.

We built a small professional Army and Coast Guard, moved the economy from negative growth to average annual 6 percent. We have virtually eliminated a \$4.9 billion external debt, settled a large portion of international institutional debt, and recrafted domestic arrears and suppliers' credit. Moreover, we restored electricity and pipe-borne water, lacking in the capital for two decades; reconstructed two modern universities and rural referral hospitals; constructed or reconstructed roads, bridges, schools, training institutions, local government facilities and courts throughout the country. We established and strengthened the institutional pillars of integrity; decentralized education by establishing community colleges; brought back the Peace Corps. We mobilized financial and technical resources from U.S. foundations, sororities and individuals for support of programs aimed at the education of girls, the empowerment of adolescent youth and improved working conditions for market women.

To build a nation requires unremitting tasks. Nevertheless, the challenges for sustained Liberian growth and development remain both awesome and performable. Our stability is eroded by the thousands of returnees from U.S. prisons and regional refugee camps, the bulk of whom are lacking in technical skills. Our peace is threatened by furious neighborhood tensions where we live: two of our three neighbors have either experienced, or narrowly avoided, civil war in the past year, and we patiently host their refugees, since not even a decade ago it was they who hosted so many of us.

Implementation of our economic development agenda is constrained not by funding alone, but also by slow project execution and low absorptive capacity. Plans to enhance performance in governance move slower than desired due to long-standing institutional decay and a corrupted value system of dishonesty and dependency. The development of infrastructure is hindered by the high capital cost of restoration, engendered by the lack of maintenance, and exacerbated by wanton destruction covering more than two decades of conflict.

Yet, today, we are proud that young Liberian children are back in school, preparing themselves to play a productive role in the new Liberian society. Our seven-year-olds do not hear guns and do not have to run. They can smile again.

With multivariate tasks and transformations in tow, we can say with confidence that we have moved our war-torn nation from turmoil to peace, from disaster to development, from disarray to hope. And in this we are proud to note that it was the Liberian women who fought the final battle for peace, who came, their number and conviction the only things greater than their diversity, to demonstrate for the end to our civil war, and to rededicate their ardent energies to the peaceful pursuit of progress. I am, therefore, proud to stand before you, as humbled by their resolute sacrifices, to symbolize also the aspirations and expectations of Liberian women, African women and, I dare to say, women worldwide. They will give the time, they will fight the fight, and they will gain the victory.

### ***TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA***

I stand before you today equally proud to be the first woman president of our African continent, a continent that has itself embraced the process of change and transformation. I am proud that Liberia could once again become an elevated beacon of hope in Africa, an opportunity to join a few others as a post-conflict success story. Africa must no longer be regarded as a continent of countries with corrupt big men who rule with iron fists. It is no longer the Dark Continent in continual economic free fall, wallowing in debt, poverty and disease.

When he addressed the Ghanaian Parliament in 2009, President Barack Obama reminded the people of Africa that it would no longer be the great men of the past who would transform the continent. "The future of all of our countries is in the hands of the young people – people like you," President Obama said, "brimming with talent and energy and hope, who can claim the future that so many in previous generations never realized."

All tensions being subdued in Africa today, a realizable future can be reclaimed by solid tenets of accountability. At the beginning of this year, 17 elections were scheduled across the continent. In 1989, there were three democracies in sub-Saharan Africa; by 2008, there were 23. That, to me, is progress! In the electoral process itself, there is a significant improvement from the days when violent overthrows were the default means of transition. A clear recent example stands out in West Africa. Although they did not get as much focus as post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Guinea proved exemplary where the military oversaw democratic elections, turned power over to the civilian government, and returned to the barracks. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union recognized a non-incumbent as the legitimate winner. In previous instances, African States would stubbornly back different parties in conflict. Today, African States act in concert on many substantive issues, adopting a common African position and negotiating as one. That, to me, is progress.

We are beginning to see evidence of a progressive improvement not merely in overall accountability but also in the performance of the African economy, and in the economic status of its people. The index of growth has been growing at over 5 percent over the past decade. A recent African Development Bank report measured the rise of the middle class in Africa, totaling 313 million out of 1 billion Africans. The countries experiencing exceptional growth in their middle class include Ghana, Mozambique, Mali, Tanzania, Cape Verde, Botswana, Burkina Faso, and Rwanda. This middle class is changing the face of Africa.

Instability and years of conflict in Liberia have pushed us to the bottom of this table in terms of the size of our middle class. We are, however, preparing a

development agenda that aims, through proper allocation of our natural resources, to graduate Liberia from development assistance in ten years, and to propel Liberia to a middle-income country by 2030. It will reinforce economic growth for all Liberians, and fortify both political and financial accountability.

Renaissance seems in progress as Africa charts its upward economic path. In consonance with those indicators, Liberians are taking advantage of South-South partnership as China, India and Brazil, not to mention Nigeria and Ghana, become more significant partners in our economic expansion. Their experience is closer to ours, and our cooperation going forward will be crucial. That is why we will closely observe the tenets of greater global commerce and incorporate the principles of expanded intra-African trade. That is why we will insist on higher value-added for raw material production, and we will encourage a significant transfer of technology, including engineering resources, to our incipient industries.

The futures of Liberia and Africa must remain intimately linked, if sustainable progress is ever to be realized and replicated. Meanwhile, I see optimistic signs of a continent on the upsurge, food and agriculture-based, producing, manufacturing, trading and cooperating more fully. I see an uncompromising emphasis on words like accountability, transparency and reform as elements that must adjudicate closed-door decisions concerning African governments which seek re-election. And I see the emergence of youthful and truthful leaders, ever talented, ever tackling, ever learning the pathways ahead to progress and development, especially for the disadvantaged.

I am excited about Africa's future, and more so about Liberia's future. In a few months, the Liberian people will have the opportunity to select their political leadership. This means that Liberia will know a second peaceful democratic transition in six years: this in a country that was riven by political rivalries, tribalism and civil war for two decades. It is, nonetheless, with cautious optimism that we approach this event and the future. Anxieties remain because we know that as impressive as Liberia's rebirth has been, our achievements remain fragile and reversible.

Anxieties and misgivings aside, however, I feel utterly confident that in a decades-long career in public service, I may have learned many valuable lessons which I could share with you today. In my bumpy journey, I have come to value the virtues of hope and resilience. As an actor in Liberia's history as it has unfolded over the last 40 years, I have seen these characteristics come full circle. I was there in the early nineteen seventies, a decade after the independence movement had swept across Africa. Back then the future appeared full of endless possibilities.

Then I witnessed the gradual descent into sectarian violence and divisive ethnic politics. I witnessed the country engulfed in the fires of a civil conflict that raged for almost two decades. But in my witness I have also been blessed with the opportunity to watch and participate as the nation rose out of the ashes of war to become a force for peace in West Africa. With cautious optimism, it is my hope that I will continue to lead this nation to consolidate and realize the abundant dividends of peace.

### ***GENERAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORLD***

As much as I have lived and experienced, dear graduates, what you will know and do will far exceed it. History, it seems, is speeding up. After graduation, you leave the relative security, predictability and certainty of these walls for a world full of accelerated uncertainties. Across the globe, entire societies are being transformed, new identities forged, and national stories retold. People your age across the world are becoming increasingly vocal about how they are governed and by whom. Old templates of control have been overturned as states struggle internally with issues about national character and destiny. People who, heretofore, had no say in those conversations are asserting themselves and taking a place at the table, with or without an invitation.

Ten years ago, information about the tragic events of September 11 came to us mainly through traditional media: radio, television, and... cnn.com. There was no Facebook, no YouTube, no Twitter and all the other social networking sites that my grandchildren now take for granted. In the intervening ten years,



young people like yourselves have gone on to use technology to improve the overall quality of life and created wealth. In those ten years, the world has become smaller and more connected. Ten years ago, the complex financial instruments of the day would seem quaint to the hedge funds and investment banks of today. In those ten years, our markets and economies have become more swiftly connected and rapidly adjusted.

Just six months ago, the Tunisian revolution began, leading rapidly and inexorably to fundamental change across North Africa and the Middle East. Could this have happened without digital social media, or without heightened correlation of food prices across time and space? Could this have happened just ten years ago, with the same preconditions but a different degree of connectivity? Can you imagine what the next ten years will bring? The next fifty?

In the time even before Friendster succumbed to Facebook, our world went through phases of transformation, and Harvard graduates, students, faculty, and commencement speakers have been key actors, writers, and chroniclers of those changes, quite impactful of Africa. Some like U.S. Secretary of State, George Marshall, have stood in this very yard before a graduating class such as this one to propose a massive post-World War II plan for reconstruction. This would lead to a take-off of global economic growth, rebounding Europe and abounding Asia, both of whom have been catalyzing forces behind Africa's own recent progress.

When President John F. Kennedy, another Harvard graduate, spoke to this audience in 1956 as the junior senator from Massachusetts, he pointed to two keystones for progress, namely, scholarly objectivity and technological capability. He said: "We need both the technical judgment and the disinterested viewpoint of the scholar, to prevent us from becoming imprisoned by our own slogans." In newly democratic societies, where ballots are marked with distinctive icons as well as names since many voters remain illiterate, the danger of sloganeering political populism is only greater, and can lead down the road of war, not just bad policy choices. Kennedy, of course, would go on to launch the Peace Corps which has impacted the lives of millions

throughout the world by bringing Americans across the ocean, teaching students and training teachers, and making our world a smaller place.

Ralph Ellison, speaking at the 1974 Commencement, told the graduates and alumnae: "Let us not be dismayed, let us not lose faith simply because the correctives we have set in motion, and you have set in motion, took a long time." Ellison believed that despite the challenge, the chance for national regeneration was there.

In the more recent past, Bill Gates, a famous Harvard attendee, has made our world smaller still by having all of us speak the same dialect, by connecting us electronically and opening doors that just one generation ago seemed to belong to the realm of science fiction. Today, because of him, we are closer to living in a global village.

With the election of Harvard graduate Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, the face of American politics has been altered for good. His presidency brings America another step closer to the fulfillment of the dream of another Harvard alumnus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of an America where a person's true worth would be measured by the content of character and not by the color of skin. In the sea change that his election represents, let me remind you, America, that Liberia has you beat on one score: We elected our first female president, perhaps eleven years before the United States might do so.

Today, I share more than a Harvard background with you. In a way, this is also a Commencement year for me. Just as you end one journey today and begin the next, so too do I in November. As my first term as the president of Liberia comes to an end, I will be standing for re-election. The person who claims to be the strongest opposition contender is a Harvard graduate. But I want you to know that the incumbent, who is also a Harvard graduate, is determined to win in a truly free and fair process. The relationship between Harvard and Liberia is thus secured and in good hands!

***CONCLUSION: TO THE GRADUATES***

I urge you, therefore, dear Harvard graduates, Class of 2011, to be fearless about the future. Just because something has not been done yet, doesn't mean it can't be done now. I was never deterred from running for president just because there had never been any females elected as Head of State in Africa. I had more important things to worry about. Simply because political leadership in Liberia had always been a "boys' club" didn't mean it was right, and I was not deterred. Today, an unprecedented number of women hold leadership positions, and we intend to increase that number.

As you approach your future, there will be ample opportunity to become jaded and cynical, but I urge you to resist cynicism – the world is still a beautiful place and change is possible. As I have noted here today, my path to the presidency was never straightforward or guaranteed. What with prison, death threats and exile, there were many opportunities to quit, to forget about the dream, yet I persisted. I have always maintained the conviction that my country and people are so much better than our recent history indicates. Looking back on my life, I have come to appreciate its difficult moments. I believe I am a better leader, a better person with a richer appreciation for the present because of my hopeful and resilient past.

Another caveat: the size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough. If you start off with a small dream, you may not have much left when it is fulfilled because along the way, life will task your dreams and make demands on you. I am, however, bullish about the future of our world because of you. We share one defining characteristic that prepares us to transform our world – we are, after all, all Harvard University graduates. Yes, fearlessness for the future, youthfulness of the heart, toughness for the distractions, creativeness for the complexities: these remain among the indispensable ingredients of national and global transformation. Add to that envelope the elements of robust hope and resilience, and there is no telling what we can accomplish!

Go forth with the wind behind you and embrace a future that awaits you.