

“This View of Life”: Graduate English Address
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When beloved Harvard professor E.O. Wilson was seven, he got a fish bone stuck in his eyeball. After that, he couldn't see things far away, so he decided to look at small things closely. Gazing into a microscope, Ed fell in love with ants. After decades studying them, he explained that every species, even an ant, represents an evolutionary journey of 3.9 billion years. That fish bone forced Ed to see the world from a new perspective.

Professor Wilson's story mirrors the phenomenon he spent his life studying: evolution. I studied evolution in lab during my Ph.D. Evolution is driven by challenges causing adaptations. Challenged with tall trees, giraffes evolved long necks. Challenged with hard seeds, birds evolved tough beaks. Through a series of environmental challenges, evolution transformed life from a wriggling RNA molecule to a diverse human society.

Outside my lab, I saw that challenges are the building blocks of not only biological adaptations, but also personal evolution.

I learned this from my grandfather, Dr. Abdul Raouf. His story began as an orphan in India, struggling for food and shelter. In hopes of a scholarship, he studied under streetlights swarming with bugs. He finally won a scholarship to Columbia University, where he earned his Ph.D. He became a teacher of children, then a principal, then a teacher of teachers.

My grandfather's mission evolved from early challenges. Education gave him freedom, so he became an educator. Hungry in childhood, he provided food for his students. Homeless in his village, he later housed people under his own roof. Dependent on scholarships, he funded scholarships for students in need.

In these ways, from so simple a beginning, my grandfather's life evolved a mission. Over 40 years, he had built schools, developed curricula, and trained teachers in Bhutan, Afghanistan, Kenya, and India. He retired as a Director of UNESCO, having educated thousands. He dedicated the last chapter of his life to educating just two: my brother and me. It was not his Ivy League degree, but his experience at the bottom of society, that propelled him.

grandfather (and Professor Wilson) teach us that our challenges may help us develop our strengths. What Professor Wilson lost in sight, he gained in vision. My grandfather, powerless in youth, spent his life empowering others.

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Fellow graduates, 2020 has gotten off to a very rough start. Illness, isolation, and insecurities weigh on all of us. Coronavirus has also unmasked deep troubles in our societies.

Facing patients who couldn't breathe, we medical students had to share ventilators and ration oxygen among them. Public health students witnessed the difficulty of mobilizing medical resources due to politics, inadequate planning, and inconsistent public education. Business students saw how brittle our economy is when confronting crisis, especially for the most vulnerable.

In times like these, we can remember that the greater the adversity, the greater the need for evolution on all scales, from the individual to the nation.

Historic times have inspired historic innovation. During the Great Plague, isolated in quarantine, Isaac Newton discovered gravity, optical physics, and calculus. After World War II, [in a Harvard Commencement speech, George Marshall announced the Marshall Plan](#), lifting millions out of poverty.

We are, once again, at a challenging moment...but let us remember that challenges inspire evolution—an evolution that Harvard graduates can direct.

We have studied law, engineering, medicine, history, divinity...this pandemic has uncovered the world's needs. How can we adapt to serve our communities and future generations? This is our opportunity to evolve ourselves from students of arts and sciences to drivers of social progress and innovation.

My grandfather told me, "Make a plan to change the world and do not rest until you achieve it." It is when we are at our lowest points that we look internally, develop our strengths, and gain the purpose that may lead us to our highest points in the future. So, graduates, let us turn this disruption into our vision, and this challenge into our evolution!