

On Puddles

I write these notes on Sunday afternoon, the day before the first day of classes. It is raining cats and dogs, the first heavy downpours since early August, and deep puddles have formed in the grasses of Harvard Yard. As I held the door to University Hall open so one of my freshman advisees could get into my office, I watched two young women, freshmen also I'm sure, cavort and revel in the rain, jumping, diving, splashing, and rolling about wildly in the puddles. Tomorrow they will be listening to lectures on Shakespeare or linear algebra or voting patterns --- and on Tuesday maybe even to my own lecture on automata theory.

This is my first fall as Dean, but the thirty-first since I first set foot in Harvard Yard. Four of those I spent as an undergraduate, three away from Cambridge, then three as a graduate student, and the last twenty-one as a professor. The boundless energy, enthusiasm, and variety of interests of our undergraduates have for years been a dominant source of interest, pride, and joy for me. To me there is nothing so pleasing as to find by chance some Saturday that a student who has come to me for academic advice, or who has been enrolled in one of my courses, is also a piano soloist at a concert or a defenseman at a football game or in the chorus of a Gilbert and Sullivan production or an organizer at a political rally. These students are making the most of their Harvard education.

I am now roughly a generation removed from my own experience in Harvard College, yet I recognize in the students I meet many of the same experiences I had. As an undergraduate I dabbled --- enjoyably but with very little distinction --- in the theatre and in lacrosse. Though I barely could tell a hummingbird from an ostrich, I wound up leading an undergraduate birdwatching club, where I got to know friends with whom I had nothing else in common then but still see on visits to faraway parts today. I also bounced around academically, felt myself outclassed in the field I first intended to pursue and tried three different concentrations before discovering, completely by accident, a field that I loved.

As Dean I will work to make our extracurricular and academic programs as open and accessible as possible. I hope that as parents you will help me persuade your children to be themselves as open as possible to the opportunities Harvard presents, and to be willing to take some risks and to do some things less than perfectly for the experience gained by trying. Sometimes, when a puddle unexpectedly appears, the best thing to do is to jump into it.