

**Memorial Service
Harvard-Radcliffe Class of 1983 25th Reunion**

WORDS OF REFLECTION

Laurie Patton, Candler Professor of Religions, Emory University

We have just read thirty one names. Names that, for some of us, evoke powerful memories of a face, a particular kind of laughter, an inexplicably bright look in the eyes. Names that, for others, evoke a person we might have met once, a figure we might have once seen moving slowly across the Yard on a cold morning, and then remembered only later when we heard of their death. Names that, for still others of us, might be only a name—a person we never met or knew, but with whom we shared this landscape, this unique pattern of light and brick and street and sky, and with whom we left these gardens of learning to take our gifts out into the world. Whether these names are familiar or distant to us, they are powerful reminders of a common humanity and now, in our early middle age, the newly remembered, and, perhaps, newly cherished, privileges of youth.

In Indian religious traditions, they call this act *namadheya*—the “giving forth of names.” For many Hindus and Buddhists, and also for many Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the name of a person calls forth their essence. It reveals both who they have been and who they are meant to be. In the words of Rupert Brooke, who honored the young dead of his generation, these names remind us that our lost classmates “had seen movement, and heard music, known slumber and waking, loved, gone proudly friended, felt the quick stir of wonder, sat alone, touched flowers and furs and cheeks.” These names remind us that we never encounter death in some general, abstract way; we know death in specific lives which have ended, the beloved faces which, some days, we cannot bear to lose, whose outlines sear into our memory like a fossil fern in a rock: precise, delicate, and enduring throughout all of our days.

But in many traditions, names also reveal something more: they reveal a dream of who someone might become—a person’s compelling, and even sacred, power. In the final story of the Middle Eastern tale of the Arabian Nights, a young man, half asleep, hears his parents utter the name of a girl—*Jawhara*—again and again. The parents say the name because she is unsuitable for him. But the young man falls in love with her, having never seen her, but only having heard her name, and goes in pursuit.

There is an ancient Indian story in which a man dreams of the name of a king, and then, in the dream, he travels to a village to discover the king who is behind the

name. He finds that the king has died, with his own name on his lips. This story teaches us that in names, we hold each others' dreams. In the Irish Christian tradition, speaking the name of a stranger is to honor the sacred in them.

We have just read thirty one names—which means we have just remembered thirty one dreams. Dreams which we might have known intimately or perhaps can only imagine: finishing a musical score, becoming a partner in a law firm, having a child, making a greenhouse, battling an illness, dying well. Whatever they might have been, we can be assured that these dreams were brilliant, colorful, and filled with life, because our friends have died so young. Today we contemplate death because of illness, or accident. But today we do not and cannot contemplate death because of old age. We have inherited the young dreams of our young friends. They are now ours to remember and to honor, and to live out with all the passion that was in them.

For, if the version of the Jewish tradition's mourners' Kaddish we read today is true, the past and the dead do indeed speak through us. While our companions can no longer use words, the force of their dreams is still strong. As the Kaddish also tells us: "Blessed is the word that cannot say the glory that shines through us, and remains to shine, flowing past distant stars on the way to forever." These names are signals of our friends' glory, the glory "that remains to shine, flowing past distant stars." And their dreams are now ours to imagine. We are all the more bound to dream our classmates' dreams for them because they were our friends, our companions along the way. They were dreams of our time. And because of this, we can imagine their dreams more vividly than we can the dreams of our parents, or even our children.

And what were the dreams of our generation? In our generation was the dream of a religious and cultural pluralism that is now flourishing, or trying to flourish, in so many unexpected places around the globe. In our generation was the dream of a world where the uncompromising pursuit of science could also be human, and humane. In our generation was the dream that love of family and love of work were not inevitably conflicting passions, for either men or women. In our generation was the dream that citizens as well as governments could enact and encourage peace between nations. In our generation was the dream that, with the right technologies, all the people of the world could feed themselves. In our generation was the dream that the interests of the environment could work in harmony with, and even be protected by, the interests of industry. And there was the dream that some diseases, which in 1983 we had only begun to name, like AIDS, could be conquered with patience and ingenuity.

We learned these dreams at Harvard, in these gardens, blessed by these unique patterns of light and brick and street and sky. With our classmates who have now left us, we imagined these dreams to be possible. Let us renew our dreams now, fired by

the passion that our companions have left us. For in some very important ways, the dead and the living speak the same dreaming language.

And perhaps these names teach us one thing more. When we were young, we only knew grief as the great exception in our lives: the shocking interruption into the hum of otherwise hopeful, bright, and busy days. But now, in our early middle age, loss has visited us far more often, and grief is more of a constant companion. As Thich Nat Han puts it, “life has left her footprints on [our] foreheads[s].” We have, like Thich Nat Han, carried the bodies of our dead brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, lovers and friends. *We are more practiced at mourning.*

And perhaps, then, we are also more practiced at finding some peace even as we mourn. We might have found peace in the Asian idea of karma, where the interconnectedness of being means that we will forever touch each other’s lives, again and again. We might have found peace in Western ideas of resurrection, in which the soul discovers itself anew after the passage into death. We might have found peace in the rhythms of the natural world, where the shapes of life are forever changing in a mysterious, still to be discovered pattern.

Wherever we have found that peace, we know that we will grieve again. But we also have learned that we carry the memories of others with us—whether it be the memory of a previous life lived, the memory of another soul, the memory of a natural pattern. And we can weave that loss, indeed all of our losses, into more purposeful, passionate lives. We can do so because we have learned that our very lives carry within them the pieces of others’ hopes and dreams. We carry with us those shining fragments, the memories of hope, that our companions have left us, even if their footsteps have ceased. We can learn better how to live with loss because, with each loss, we have a new task: *we have been asked to carry another’s dreams.*

Today, we have recited thirty one names, and we have remembered thirty one dreams. Today we carry the memories of people with whom we shared this landscape, this unique pattern of light and brick and street and sky, and with whom we left these gardens of learning to take our gifts out into the world. They have continued on a journey where we cannot follow, even as we long for them. Let us go now and honor those dreams, those young dreams of our companions, those fragments of light that “remain to shine, flowing past distant stars.”