

## Conan O'Brien's Speech to the Harvard Class of 2000

I'd like to begin by thanking the class marshals for inviting me here today. The last time I was invited to Harvard it cost me \$110,000. So I was reluctant to show up. I'm going to start before I really begin by announcing my one goal this afternoon. I want to be half as funny as tomorrow's Commencement speaker, moral philosopher and economist Amartya Sen. That's the job. Must get more laughs than seminal wage-price theoretician. By the way, enjoy that. Bring a calculator. It's going to be a nerd fest.

Students of the Harvard class of 2000, 15 years ago I sat where you sit now. And I thought exactly what you are now thinking. What's going to happen to me? Will I find my place in the world? Am I really graduating a virgin? Still have 24 hours. Roommate's mom very hot. Swear she's checking me out. There was that Rob Lowe movie.

Being here today, on a sincere note, is very special for me. I do miss this place. I especially miss Harvard Square. Let me tell you, (you don't know this) Harvard Square is unique. Nowhere else in the world will you find a man wearing a turban and a Red Sox jacket working in a lesbian bookstore. I'm just glad my dad's working.

It's particularly sweet for me to be here today because—this is true—when I graduated I wanted very badly to be a Class Day speaker. Unfortunately, my speech was rejected. So if you'll indulge me I'd like to read a portion of that speech. This is the actual speech from 15 years ago. "Fellow students, as we sit here today listening to that classic A-ha tune which will definitely stand the test of time, I would like to make several predictions about what the future will hold. I believe that one day a simple governor from a small southern state will rise to the highest office in the land. He will lack political skill, but will lead on the sheer strength of his moral authority. I believe that justice will prevail and one day the Berlin Wall will crumble, uniting East and West Berlin forever under Communist rule. I believe that one day a high-speed network of interconnected computers will spring up worldwide, so enriching people that they will lose their interest in idle chitchat and pornography. And finally, I believe that one day I will have a television show on a major network seen by millions of people at night which I will use to reenact crimes and help catch at-large criminals." Then I had a section on the death of Wall Street, but you don't need to hear about that. The point is that although you see me as a celebrity, a member of the cultural elite, a demigod if you will, and potential husband material, I came here in the fall of 1981 and lived at Holworthy Hall as a student much like you. I was, without exaggeration—this is true—the ugliest picture in the freshman facebook. When Harvard asked me for a picture the previous summer, I thought it was for their records, so I jogged in the August heat to a passport photo office and sat for a morgue shot. To make matters worse, when the facebook came out, they put my picture right next to Catherine Oxenberg, a stunning blonde actress who was expected to join the class of '85, but decided to defer admission so she could join the cast of Dynasty. Folks, my photo would have looked bad on any page, but next to Catherine Oxenberg, I looked like a mackerel that had been in a car accident.

You see, in those days, I was 6 feet 4 inches tall and I weighed 150 pounds. True. Recently, I had some structural engineers run those numbers into a computer model, and according to the computer, I collapsed in 1987, killing hundreds in Taiwan.

After freshman year, I moved to Mather House. Mather House, incidentally, was designed by the same firm that built Hitler's bunker. In fact, if Hitler had conducted the war from Mather House, he would have shot himself a year earlier. Saved us a lot of trouble.

1985 seems like a long time ago now. When I had my Class Day, you students would have been seven years old. Seven years old! You realize what that means? Back then I could have beaten

any of you in a fight. And I mean really badly. Like no contest at all. If anyone here has a time machine, seriously, I will kick your seven-year-old butt right now.

A lot has happened in 15 years though. When you think about it, we come from completely different worlds. When I graduated in 1985, we watched movies starring Tom Cruise and listened to music by Madonna. I come from a time when we huddled around the TV set and watched the Cosby Show on NBC, never imagining that there would one day be a show called Cosby on CBS. In 1985 we drove cars with driver's-side air bags. But if you had told us that one day there would be passenger-side air bags, we'd have burned you for witchcraft.

Of course I think there is some common ground between us. I remember well the great uncertainty of this day, the anxiety. Many of you are justifiably nervous about leaving the safe, comfortable world of Harvard Yard and hurling yourself headlong into the cold, harsh world of Harvard grad school, a plum job in your father's firm, or a year abroad with a gold Amex card and then a plum job at your father's firm. Let me assure you that the knowledge you gained here at Harvard is a precious gift that will never leave you. Take it from me, your education is yours to keep forever. Why, many of you have read the Merchant of Florence, and that will inspire you when you travel to the island of Spain. Your knowledge of that problem they had with those people in Russia, or that guy in South America—you know, the guy—will be with you for the rest of your life.

There's also sadness today. A feeling of loss that you're leaving Harvard forever. Let me assure you that you never really leave Harvard. The Harvard fundraising committee will be on your ass until the day you die.

This is true. I know for a fact that right now a member of the alumni association is at the Mount Auburn Cemetery shaking down the corpse of Henry Adams. They heard he has a brass toe ring and they aim to get it. These people just raised \$2.5 billion and they only got through the Bs in the alumni directory. Here's basically how it works. Your phone rings, usually after a big meal when you're tired and most vulnerable, and a voice asks you for money. Knowing—you've read in the paper—that they just raised \$2.5 billion, you ask, "What do you need it for?" There is a long pause, and the voice on the other end of the line says, "We don't need it, we just want it." (Sinister laugh).

Let me see—by your applause—who here wrote a thesis? That's nice. A lot of hard work went into that thesis. And no one is ever going to care. I wrote a thesis—this is true, I don't lie—"Literary Progeria in the Works of Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner." Let's just say that during my discussions with Pauly Shore, it doesn't come up much. For three years after graduation I wanted to show it to everyone, and so I kept my thesis in the glove compartment of my car, so that I could show it to a policeman in case I was pulled over.

What else can you expect in the real world? Let me tell you. As you leave these gates and re-enter society, one thing is certain. Everyone out there is going to hate you. Never tell anyone in a roadside diner that you went to Harvard. In those situations, the correct response to, "Where did you go to school?" is "School? I never had much in the way of book learnin' and such." And then get in your BMW and get the hell out of there. Go.

You see, kids, you're in for a lifetime of "And you went to Harvard?" Accidentally give the wrong amount of change in a transaction, and it's "And you went to Harvard?" Ask at the hardware store how the jumper cables work, and hear "And you went to Harvard?" Forget just once that your underwear goes inside your pants, and it's "And you went to Harvard?" Get your head stuck in your niece's doll house 'cause you want to see what it's like to be a giant, and it's "Uncle Conan, you went to Harvard?"

So you really know what's in store for you after Harvard, I have to tell you what happened to me after graduation. I'm going to tell it simply, I'm going to tell it honestly, because, first of all, I think my perspective may give many of you hope, and, secondly, it's such a cool, amazing rush to be in

front of 6,000 people and just talk about yourself. It's just great. It's so cool. And I can take my time.

You see, kids, after graduating in May, I moved to Los Angeles. I got a three-week contract at a small cable show. I got a \$380-a-month apartment, a terrible dump, and I bought a 1977 Isuzu Opal, a car Isuzu only manufactured for a year because they found out that technically it's not a car. Quick tip, graduates—no four-cylinder used vehicle should have a racing stripe. So I worked on that show for about a year, feeling pretty good about myself, when one day they told me that they were letting me go. I was fired. I hadn't saved any money. So I tried to get another job in television as best I could and couldn't find one. So with nowhere else to turn—true story—I went to a temp agency and filled out a questionnaire. I made damn sure that they knew I had been to Harvard, that I had written this thesis, and that I expected the very best treatment. And so the next day I was sent to the Santa Monica branch of Wilson's House of Suede and Leather.

When you have a Harvard degree, and you are working at Wilson's House of Suede and Leather, you are haunted by the ghostly images of your classmates who chose graduate school. You see their faces everywhere—in coffee cups, in fish tanks, you think you're going crazy, and they're always laughing at you as you stack suede shirts no man in good conscience would ever wear. I tried a lot of things during this period. Acting in corporate infomercials. Serving drinks in a nonequity theater. I even took a job entertaining at a seven year-old's birthday party. In desperate need of work, I put together some sketches and scored a job at the fledgling Fox network as a writer and performer for a brainy show called the "Wilton North Report." I was finally on a network and really excited. The producer told me the show was going to revolutionize television. And, in a way it did. The show was so hated and did so badly that when four weeks later news of its cancellation was announced to the Fox affiliates, they burst into spontaneous applause.

Eventually, though, I got a big break. I had submitted along with my writing partner a batch of sketches to Saturday Night Live, and after a year and a half they read it, and they gave us a two-week tryout. The two weeks turned into two seasons, and I felt, hey, this is success, I'm successful now. Successful enough to write a TV pilot for an original sitcom. When the network decided to make it, feeling good, I left Saturday Night Live.

This TV show was going to be groundbreaking. It was going to resurrect the career of TV's Batman, Adam West. It was going to be a comedy without a laugh track or a studio audience. It was going to change all the rules. And here's what happened. When the pilot aired, it was the second-lowest-rated television show of all time. It is actually tied with a test pattern they show up in Nova Scotia.

So I was 28 and, once again, no job. I had good writing credits in New York, but I was filled with disappointment and I had no idea what I was going to do next. And that is when the Simpsons saved my life. I got a job there and started writing episodes about Springfield getting a monorail or Homer going to college. I was finally putting my Harvard education to good use—writing dialogue for a man who is so stupid that in one episode he forgot to make his own heart beat. Life was good.

And then an insane, inexplicable opportunity came my way, a chance to audition for host of the new "Late Night" show. I took the opportunity very seriously, but at the time—I have to be honest—I had the relaxed confidence of someone who knew he had no real shot, so I couldn't fear losing a great job that I could never hope to have. And I think that actually that attitude made the difference.

I will never forget being in the Simpsons recording basement that morning when the phone rang. It was for me. My car was blocking a firelane. But a week later I got another call and got the job. So this, finally, was undeniably it. The truly life-altering break that I had always dreamed of. And so I went to work. I gathered all my funny friends and poured all my years of comedy experience

into building the show over the summer. I gathered the talent, figured out the sensibility, found Max, found Andy, found my people. We debuted on September 13, 1993, and I was really happy, really happy, with our effort. I felt like I had seized the moment, that I had put my very best foot forward.

And this was what the most respected and widely read television critic, Tom Shales, wrote in the Washington Post. "O'Brien is a living collage of annoying nervous habits. He giggles and jiggles about and fiddles with his cuffs. He has dark, beady little eyes like a rabbit. He is one of the whitest white men ever. O'Brien is a switch on the guest who won't leave: he's the host who should never have come. Let the Late Show with Conan O'Brien become the late Late Show, and may the host return to whence he came." There's more, but it gets kind of mean.

Needless to say, I took a lot of criticism, some of it deserved, some of it excessive, and, to be honest with you, it hurt like you would not believe. But I'm telling you all this for a reason. I've had a lot of success. I've had a lot of failure. I've looked good. I've looked bad. I've been praised. And I've been criticized. But my mistakes have been necessary. I've dwelled on my failures today because, as graduates of Harvard, your biggest liability is your need to succeed, your need to always find yourself on the sweet side of the bell curve. Success is a lot like a bright white tuxedo. You feel terrific when you get it, but then you're desperately afraid of getting it dirty, of spoiling it. I left the cocoon of Harvard, I left the cocoon of Saturday Night Live, I left the cocoon of the Simpsons. And each time it was bruising and tumultuous. And yet every failure was freeing, and today I'm as nostalgic for the bad as I am for the good. So that's what I wish for all of you—the bad as well as the good. Fall down. Make a mess. Break something occasionally. Know that your mistakes are your own unique way of getting to where you need to be. And remember that the story is never over.

If you'll indulge me for just a second, I'd like to read a little something from just this year. "Somehow, Conan O'Brien has transformed himself into the brightest star in the late-night firmament. His comedy is the gold standard, and Conan himself is not only the quickest and most inventive wit of his generation, but quite possibly the greatest host ever." Ladies and gentlemen, class of 2000, I wrote that this morning. As proof that when all else fails, you always have delusion. I will go now to make bigger mistakes and to embarrass this fine institution even more. But let me leave you with one last thought. If you can laugh at yourself, loud and hard, every time you fall, people will think you're drunk. Thank you.