

**“Remember to Grow”**  
Lowell House: Student Speeches  
Harvard University  
February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011  
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Good evening. My name is Jason Shah. Many of you probably know me as the anti-social senior who practically lives in Lowell Dining Hall for days at a time in front of my computer. While explaining that could warrant its own five minutes, I’m here for another reason tonight.

Two week ago, I went for a walk to clear my head. My J Term plans working with a hot Silicon Valley startup weren’t working out as planned, I was crashing on an uncomfortable couch in a stranger’s apartment with their cats, and I just wasn’t happy. But something was different. I felt challenged, and I felt like I was having new experiences. I felt like I was growing for once.

It took this experience for me to realize, I had stopped growing -- personally, of course. I felt like I had stagnated. The first three years of college forced me to mature a lot and still find happiness every day. Learning to live away from home. Realizing that loyalty in friendship is not always reciprocal, and that when it is, you do anything for that friend, before you’re even asked. Affirming that everyone – regardless of title, legacy, or even achievements – is just another person who brushes his or her teeth and has insecurities like everyone else. Realizing that prestige, a large signing bonus, and the promise of ‘great exit opportunities’ are actually signs along the wrong path for a college grad, and that deciding what to do in life should come from within, not from circumstances or the opportunities that happen to be available to you.

My general outlook on life had stayed about the same for a while now. Some conversations felt like déjà vu. This was more than the all-familiar ‘Hey how are you?’, ‘Doing well. Yourself?’ ‘Good.’ that we do every day. Every conversation felt that banal to me.

Many of us say that we came to Harvard to develop into these impressive people we will be upon graduation. We ask job interviewers about personal development and feedback, impressed that a partner will spare 20 minutes a month to tell us that our PowerPoint decks need to be more “crisp”. There is the expectation that simply being present at a place like Harvard, McKinsey, or even a hot startup, that one will learn and grow. And after graduation, many of us will justify the horrible hours and menial work as ‘paying dues’, and reminding ourselves that we’re “learning and growing a lot.”

But growth is not passive; it is active. It isn’t about just ‘being’ somewhere. I had to remember to grow and not become complacent. In my first days at this company, I was asked to get cars washed and run errands. What had I possibly learned in my four years at Harvard if I couldn’t even assert myself in an environment and earn the respect of my peers? Had I learned anything? After this long walk, much of my time there was just about saying no. Saying no to work I wasn’t meant to be doing, so I could work on the project that I needed to do while I was there. It meant having a vision of what I wanted to get out of my time and refusing anything short of what my time should have been like, at the risk of being told no, creating tension, or being fired with no other place to go work or couch to sleep on.

I realized that I had to create opportunities for myself to grow. Simply being forced to assert myself, or figuring out how to diplomatically deal with the cats in the apartment, were simple experiences but they were different than the Harvard routine. And the simple fact that the experience was different than what I was used to made all the difference.

And it's not that I had stopped growing, or that any of us do. Somehow we have this notion that with age and maturity comes perfection and infallibility but it's never the case. We're always liable to screw up whether we're eight or eighty. But we do have periods with very steep learning curves and then plateaus and then we continually mature. Indeed, steep growth turns to step growth. And after achieving this initial maturity, every thing seems to come in step-growths, far more incremental than the first 20, or for some, 30 years, of life.

And the challenge seems to be, as we plateau, or find ourselves cruising along in the same place for a long time, recognizing that we have stagnated and taking action that puts us in the position to learn, grow, and evolve. Some times it's hearing yourself say the same thing in conversation; other times it takes a missed opportunity, to see that we need to grow. And so tonight, I encourage you all, with all of the awesome things you are doing, amidst all your meetings and events, change things up, practice what you've learned, and always remember to grow.

Thank you.

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This speech was delivered on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 to friends, classmates, and advisers in Lowell House as part of a new initiative inspired by Morning Prayers at Memorial Church (Harvard University). It can be viewed online at:

Lowell House Website -

<http://lowell.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k69091&pageid=icb.page405557>

Vimeo.com (Video Provider) -

<http://vimeo.com/19773398>

My Personal Website -

<http://jasonshah.org/media/lowellspeech.html>.

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