

NOTES FROM CHERYL - July 2026

This speech given at Harvard graduation just a few weeks ago by Noah Eckstein expresses the best message I could pass on to you this month! The title is "The Punchline"; the message is "Listen as if you might be wrong."

[Transcript of Noah Eckstein's May 2026 Harvard Commencement Address](#)

My life begins with something that could be the start of a joke. And it goes like this. A Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew walk into a bar. I know historically the setup is a little bit dicey, but this time this time was a little bit different. This time the Christian married the Muslim and they had a daughter. That daughter grew up Christian until she met the Jew, converted to Judaism, married the Jew, and had a son. 22 years later, that son is standing here with all of you graduating from Harvard University.

I am a proud Jew. I'm also the proud grandson of a Christian and the proud grandson of a Muslim. But that isn't a contradiction in any sense of the word. It's proof of a concept. And that concept is what I want to talk to you all about today. Because my family taught me something I think this world could really use right now, which is that the counter to division isn't necessarily agreement. It's understanding.

Our world today all the way from the global stage to right here at Harvard has been split into two sides. There are two sides to every story. Of course, only two sides. Two sides to every conflict, argument, disagreement, good and bad, give and take, right and left, progressive and conservative, capitalist and communist, oppressor and oppress, rich and poor, US and China, US and Russia, Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, Israel and Iran, US and Iran, US and Israel and Iran. All in binaries. At least they're presented to us in terms of binaries.

Here's this issue. What do you think? What side are you on? Come on. Where do you stand? Who do you stand with in my family? Well, my family wouldn't exist with that kind of approach. My grandfather's one, a Pakistani Muslim who grew up in the middle of the Indopakistani war of 1947. The other a Jewish refugee of the Holocaust, met many times over the course of their lives. As you might imagine, they disagreed on a great many things. And yet, one of the main memories I have of them growing up was seeing them sitting together at a coffee table, discussing everything under the sun.

And when they weren't in close proximity, I remember hearing their voices over the phone as they called my parents, always remembering at the end of each call to ask about the other, how they were doing, what were they up to. Of course, there are many differences that they never resolved. But still, they acknowledged each other. They cared for each other. They stayed in contact and they debated with each other. Their vast disparity in life experience, viewpoints, ideology, faith, and beliefs a point of contention, yes, but not a point of division.

And yet, somewhere in between their generation and ours, something in the conversation shifted. The debates got louder. The noise got louder. The listening stopped. It got harder. On the news, on your timeline, at the dinner table, people speaking without listening. People arguing, having already decided their own allegiances. People debating not to listen, understand, or to learn, but to win, to humiliate, to be right. And somewhere along the way, the person sitting across the table stopped being a person and became an obstacle.

Now, some would say that there are in fact people in this world for whom understanding is neither owed nor even worth the attempt. People whose very irredeemable actions or beliefs place them beyond the reach of dialogue. People who indeed have become nothing more than obstacles to the greater good. And maybe that's true. Well, my grandfathers survived the atrocities of war and worse. And they knew better than anyone that people can do monstrous

things. They also knew the most terrifying fact of all which that the peoples doing those monstrous things, they were human. Not forgivable, not necessarily redeemable, but human. Terrifyingly so. And it's precisely because of that human capacity that understanding them mattered. Dialogue still mattered. Not necessarily dialogue in the sense of extending grace or providing a platform but again understanding asking how did they get to this point? How did they reach this conclusion? Why do they believe this?

Asking these questions in this context holds a light up to the darkest parts of what it means to be human and as such we have to grapple with them. But such questions, necessary questions, important questions are not only reserved for the darkest parts of human history. If such questions of understanding, why do they believe this? If such questions of understanding matter that much at that extreme of humanity, how much more do they matter for the people sitting around you right now? For that family member at Thanksgiving that you stop bringing certain topics up around. For that person on the internet that says things from a viewpoint that seems kind of unimaginable sometimes. For that student in section that you smiled at once and said interesting point and then went back to your dorm and complained about to your roommate. Or for that one friend that you started to phase out because they said some things once that just didn't sit quite right with you. Take about 8 billion of those people, put them together and you get our world.

Many of us who come to Harvard have dreams of changing the world, of leaving an impact. But you cannot change a world that you refuse to understand, to talk to. You cannot convince someone of something if you do not understand them first. Peace through understanding can survive conflict, while peace through agreement lasts only as long as everyone keeps agreeing. In most cases, understanding is difficult. Sometimes you have to fight for it. Sometimes you have to fight yourself and your own beliefs first before you can truly achieve it. It takes effort. My grandfathers knew that. But they chose to try anyway.

So, as we all go out into an increasingly troubled world and divided world, I want to leave you all with one simple practice. Whenever you meet someone you disagree with, state your case. Yes. Stand up for what you believe in. Absolutely. But also ask the other person about their beliefs. Ask them how they got there. Place yourself in their shoes and ask why do I believe this? Listen like you might be wrong. That is not a weakness or betrayal of your own ideals. That is the hardest and most important thing you can do in a world that is constantly telling you pick a side. I told you my life begins like a joke. Well, my Muslim grandfather was buried facing Mecca. My Jewish grandfather was buried in accordance with Jewish law. My Christian grandmother was buried with the cross. In a way, the punchline never really came. There was no resolution to the setup. They were all very stubborn and they held on to their own ideals and traditions until the very end. But still they respected each other. They chose each other and at the end of the day they were proud to be of one family.

Look around you right now. Look at the people around you. The person to your right, the person to your left. You're sitting now amongst people of every belief and every background. A family that we have built over the years here at Harvard. Do we agree on everything? Ask the section kid. Will we ever agree on everything? Certainly not. The world beyond these walls, it has all the same disagreements, the same differences of opinion, the same divisions that we have. But I urge you, see the people in your class for who they are as people. Fight to understand them and their beliefs just as much as you stand up and fight for your own. And after you walk through the gates of this yard for the first time as Harvard graduates, do the same for the people of our world. Because in a time this complicated and this divided, understanding and a genuine willingness to look a little bit deeper is how those divisions start to heal. Thank you all and congratulations to the class of 26.