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By:
J.K. Rowling

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Bill Kerwin

I enjoyed and admire Rowling’s speech to Harvard graduates (class of 2008). If it is not quite the equal of the greatest commencement addresses of this century—David Foster Wallace at Kenyon (2005), George Saunders at Syracuse (2013)—it is still memorable. It speaks to the nature of its audience, gives good advice both on how to profit from adversity and also how to discern what is valuable, and—as a bonus—it illustrates its points with revealing glimpses into the heart of one of the most successful

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Rowling breaks the ice with these practically life-long Harry Potter fans (seven years old when the first book came out) with jokes about Gryffindor and gay wizards, but she soon begins to speak of fear of failure, making it clear she realizes these particular Potter fans are very privileged Potter fans indeed. "The fact that you are graduating from Harvard suggests that you are not very well-acquainted with failure. You might be driven by a fear of failure quite as much as a desire for success. Indeed, your conception of failure might not be too far from the average person's idea of success, so high have you already flown."

She assures these graduates "perhaps too accustomed to success" that failure is inevitable. "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default." She uses herself, in pre-Potter days, as an example: a divorced, jobless, single mother, "as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless." But the failure she experienced was worth it, for it brought self-knowledge. "You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won." It was valuable to her "because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me." The work that mattered of course was writing, and she still, even after all the failure, "had an old typewriter and a big idea."

From here she passes on to her second subject, the importance of the imagination. Surprisingly, she hasn't much to say about wizardry in particular or even story-telling in general, but instead speaks briefly of technological and social innovation before concentrating on imagination's great gift: "the power that enables us to empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared." So that her listeners may empathize, Rowling shares with them a few stories from one of her earliest jobs as a worker for Amnesty International. She tells of meeting torture victims and other political prisoners, heroically risking much to speak out against the crimes of their governments.

After her praise of empathy, she begins her conclusion with the following words:

Kai

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This genius woman. J. K. Rowling you're my favourite author. You forever will be.