

# Conan O'Brien Commencement Speech Harvard 2000 (excerpts)

3:55 Min.

"I'd like to thank the Class Marshals for inviting me here today. The last time I was invited to Harvard it cost me \$110,000, so you'll forgive me if I'm a bit suspicious. ... Students of the Harvard Class of 2000, fifteen 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? ...

... I remember well the great uncertainty of this day. 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 at your father's firm, or a year abroad with a gold Amex card and then a plum job in your father's firm. ...

But to 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 you my story because, first of all, my perspective may give many of you hope, and, secondly, it's an *amazing* rush to stand in front of six thousand people and talk about yourself.

After graduating in May, I moved to Los Angeles and got a three-week contract at a small cable show. I worked at that show for over a year, feeling pretty good about myself, when one day they told me they were letting me go. I was fired and, I hadn't saved a lot of money. I tried to get another job in television but I couldn't find one. So, with nowhere else to turn, I went to a temp agency and filled out a questionnaire... 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're 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, and they're always laughing at you as you stack suede shirts no man, in good conscience, would ever wear....

Eventually, though, I got a huge 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 gave us a two week tryout. The two weeks turned into two seasons and I felt successful.

Successful enough to write a TV pilot for an original sitcom and, when the network decided to make it, I left *Saturday Night Live*. This TV show was going to be groundbreaking... And here's what happened: When the pilot aired it was the second lowest-rated television show of all time. It's tied with a test pattern they show in Nova Scotia.

So, I was 28 and, once again, I had no job. I had good writing credits in New York, but I was filled with disappointment and didn't know what to do next. I started smelling suede on my fingertips. And that's when *The Simpsons* saved me. I got a job there and ... I was finally putting my Harvard education to good use, writing dialogue for a man who's 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 seriously but, at the same time, I had the relaxed confidence of someone who knew he had no real shot...a week later I got the job.

So, this was undeniably it: the truly life-altering break I had always dreamed of. And, I went to work. ... We debuted on September 13, 1993 and I was happy with our effort. I felt like I had seized the moment and put my very best foot forward. And this is 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 titters, jiggles about and fiddles with his cuffs. He had dark, beady little eyes like a rabbit. ... O'Brien is a switch on the guest who won't leave: he's the host who should never have come...."

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 it hurt like you wouldn't believe. But I'm telling you all this for a reason. I've had a lot of success and I've had a lot of failure. I've looked good and I've looked bad. I've been praised and I've been criticized. But my mistakes have been necessary. Except for Wilson's House of Suede and Leather. That was just stupid.

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. Because 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 in any way. 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. And remember that the story is never over.

Thank you.