reports at five-year intervals.

Harvard’s plan is billed as the first of its kind among endowments. Announcing the “multiyear” undertaking, in collaboration with faculty members and outside experts, President Lawrence S. Bacow said: “With this commitment, our focus is on reducing the demand for fossil fuels, an action that is consistent with the University’s overall commitment to reduce our operational carbon footprint [on campus]... If we are successful, we will reduce the carbon footprint of our entire investment portfolio...”

Beyond its substantive aims, the new policy is the University response to that FAS advisory vote of February 4. Bacow had promised to report back to the faculty once the Corporation had reviewed its vote. Given the pandemic-driven cancellation of the April FAS meeting, he wrote a separate letter explaining the April 21 HMC announcement. Noting “our shared goal” of confronting the threat of climate change via “research, education, and institutional efforts to reduce our own use of fossil fuels,” he turned to “the role that investment policy might play—and thus, the net-zero target as the pathway toward “decarbonizing” the overall endowment portfolio.” He contrasted that with a narrower approach of “simply targeting the suppliers and producers of fossil fuels,” while acknowledging that this decision may fail to satisfy proponents of divestment. (Read more at harvardmag.com/hmc-ghg-neutralpledge-20.)

- Divestment advocates’ response. In one sense, faculty members, alumni, and students who have campaigned for divestment could declare victory. The Corporation has in effect agreed to the principle that at least one overarching nonfinancial objective (reducing GHG emissions) ought to shape endowment investment policy and its implementation—an overlay beyond earning targeted returns within acceptable levels of risk.

But the devil is in the details. In a response to Bacow, core members of the faculty divestment group declared that, “while the path is the right one, the pace is too slow. The goal of a carbon-neutral portfolio by 2050 is simply not ambitious enough”—and included some specific, interim goals for each decade in a separate document. They also continued to criticize the stance on divestment. “It is incongruous, if not counterproductive, to pursue a decarbonized portfolio while continuing to invest in the very companies that supply the carbon and... do far more to perpetuate that supply—and the demand for it—than... to reduce it.” That said, they were “greatly encouraged” by this rethinking of investment policy: “It augurs well for constructive action across the University to address the climate crisis.”

Student activists wrote that “Harvard has finally acknowledged that its investment strategy must play a role in mitigating the climate crisis,” but called the net-zero commitment “insufficient” for permitting continued investments in fossil-fuel enterprises; allowing the University “a wide margin to calculate portfolio emissions however it chooses”, and setting a “far too protracted” timeline. “As the world burns,” they concluded, “Harvard continues to defend the arsonists.” A subsequent letter, signed by student and alumni divestment advocates, the Harvard Forward candidates for Overseer, and others, endorsed by the faculty divestment group, called the University plan “radically insufficient.”

- The Overseers’ election. Alumni can weigh in on these issues directly as they vote for Overseers this summer. The pandemic has, for now, shut down Harvard Forward’s global gatherings to gather votes for its petition nominees (who advocate divestment and an array of Harvard governance reforms—read details at harvardmag.com/overseer-slates-20). In the meantime, it is posting statements of support on its website, headlined by former U.S. vice president Al Gore ’69, L.L.D. ’94, and author Bill McKibben ’82, co-founder of 350.org, which has spurred much of the campus divestment movement (and other climate-change activism) nationwide.

Not coincidentally, Harvard Forward’s organizers chose Earth Day to unveil a clone, Yale Forward, backing the candidacy of Maggie Thomas, a 2015 graduate of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, for election to that university’s corporation. (She was a climate adviser to Governor Jay Inslee and Senator Elizabeth Warren during their campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination.) Significantly, the Yale Corporation, unlike its Harvard counterpart, has some trustees elected by alumni—and is the fiduciary, decisionmaking governing board in New Haven. In that regard, of course, it plays the same role as Harvard Corporation, not the advisory and oversight responsibilities that are the province of the Board of Overseers.

Thomas and Yale Forward must gather 4,394 nominating signatures by October 1 to qualify her for the spring 2021 vote. If they succeed, both institutions’ alumni will have some say on how they wish their alma maters to address global warming.

~MARINA N. BOLOTNIKOVA and JOHN S. ROSENBERG

---

**THE UNDERGRADUATE**

**Point of No Return**

*by JULIE CHUNG ’20*

Soon after the Harvard community was upended and scattered around the world by the COVID-19 evacuation, I called my two roommates. Pre-move-out, whenever I felt like my world was falling apart, I could always depend on returning to our room in Adams. The worn wooden floors, beautiful crown molding, and fireplace made the space look reliably ancient, like an antique heirloom passed down for generations. My roommates, Sunday and Catie, and I would sip from mugs of herbal teas on those cold Cambridge nights and snuggle together on our beloved, faded floral futon. I could always count on Sunday’s perspective to ground me, or at least tame my overzealous drive to work. Catie and I often had long, philosophical discussions about the meaning of work, school, and service that left me satiated with introspection.

Even without the physical comforts of our dorm room, I was happy I could still call them from my home in California. I couldn’t wait until all of this was over so that we could all... So that we could all what? As graduating seniors, we weren’t returning to campus. We weren’t really returning to anything, since we’d been thrust peremptorily into the uncertainty of postgrad life.

In some sense, college is structured as
The class of 2020 lacked handrails. Among millions of other workers in this crisis. My parents, Los Angeles County residents were unemployed due to the coronavirus crisis. My partners, Liren Ma ’20, says, “I feel lost in a void between point A and B. It’s like I got stuck in the middle and don’t know how to get back.” But if there’s not even a “going back,” where do we go?

A few friends and I started a book club to keep in touch after we were dispersed to our different time zones and homes. First on the list, per my request: anthropologist Anna Lowen-haupt Tsing’s The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins. This patchwork of narratives traces the globalized commodity chains of matsutake, the world market’s most valuable mushroom. The stories helped us think through precarity, the defining condition of our time. “Post-industrial ruins,” including shuttered factories, economic catastrophes, and climate change, all make the present moment a ripe time for sensing precarity, Tsing writes. If we ever felt caged by too much stability, it now seems that many of us face indeterminate and troubling futures. And it also seems we are at a loss for narrative happy endings. Our “handrails of stories” about stability and progress—which “once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going”—are gone, she writes. How do we imagine living without those handrails?

Many of us lack them now. According to an April 2020 survey, more than half of Los Angeles County residents were unemployed due to the coronavirus crisis. My parents, among millions of other workers in this country, have suddenly lost their income. My sister and I delivered groceries to my grandmother a few weeks after the stay-at-home order in Los Angeles. She lives in a Section 8 apartment unit in the heart of Koreatown, where my family’s former acupuncture clinic and other small-scale business buildings were torn down and rapidly replaced by luxury apartments during the past decade. It can sometimes seem only a matter of time before her own apartment will be demolished as well.

As Tsing says, living life without handrails amid economic uncertainty can make us more attuned to precarity and risk. When discussing our postgraduate plans over the phone, my partner told me, “I probably value having a secure job more highly than I would have if not for the impending economic crisis. You don’t want to take as many risks now.” The postgraduate job market looks bleak for many seniors. On top of the difficulty of simply coping, my roommate, Sunflower, my partner, Liren Ma ’20, says, “I feel lost in a void between point A and B. It’s like I got stuck in the middle and don’t know how to get back.” But if there’s not even a “going back,” where do we go?

Of course, some of my peers will be starting jobs with six-figure salaries that they had secured after junior year. “I know people that did recruiting and still have those jobs,” my other roommate, Catie, said. But even graduates with economic security might have other risks to worry about, including sick family members and loved ones. “There’s an aura of uncertainty that unites everyone but is manifesting in different ways for different people and in different realms of life,” Catie reminded me.

Security and safety are often compelling justifications for Harvard graduates to enter careers that offer obscenely high salaries—perhaps even compelling enough to enter corporations with practices that make them uncomfortable. The decision to attend Harvard itself is often a step toward security, as in my case—a way, perhaps, to uplift my immigrant family. I understand it: when life seems so precarious, I often find myself grabbing for handrails.

But maybe there’s an alternative to those norms of security and safety that have diverted our attention from other directions. Tsing points to the matsutake to illuminate alternative paths for survival on our precarious, damaged planet. Matsutake production and commerce take her readers to unexpected places, including human-disturbed and -damaged forests in Oregon, Japan, and Yunnan. Matsutake thrive in our ruins. It is said that when Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, a matsutake mushroom was the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape. Yet matsutake survive only because of their dependence on multispecies collaborations. Rather than the lone-wolf-against-the-world model, survival is about connection, interdependence, and relationships. How can we survive together?

I can feel frivolous, sometimes even guilty, when thinking during this crisis about what lies ahead for me. My Harvard degree will always give me immense privilege when navigating the job market. I’m so lucky that I’m in good health, have enough food to eat,
Diver Georgina Milne pictures a post-pandemic return.

Georgina Milne ’21 stands straight, preparing to execute a daunting front three-and-a-half tuck. One of the country’s best collegiate divers from the three-meter springboard, she knows the seven half-rotations will take unwavering focus, tight execution, and serious core strength. Milne focuses on the little things. As she finishes her hurdle to the front of the board, she points her arms straight up—mindful of her tendency to arch them forward. She aims to leap from the sweet spot where she’ll achieve the ideal balance of spring and stability. She tightens her core and leaps into the air with her toes pointed, flying up and away from the board and down toward the water, hoping to enter with a clean puncture.

But it’s all in her head. Milne, forced off campus by coronavirus, does all this in her living room. In Concord, North Carolina, about 800 miles from Cambridge, she visualizes the dive in slow motion, imagining each grab, twist, and extension. In March, she had been preparing for the NCAA swimming and diving championship. With the meet canceled and facilities closed, her routine has changed. Instead of heading out to a pool, she spends time at the one in her head. Visualization has always been key to Milne’s training. Unlike many divers who and will likely be okay coming out of this pandemic. In late April, after months of uncertainty, I found out that I’d been accepted for one international and one domestic fellowship. I could travel to South Korea to conduct research and learn Korean, enabling me to connect with my heritage and extended family members after 18 years of separation. Or I could do community-service work in California related to food justice—issues that seem especially salient now, given the unprecedented levels of food insecurity all over the world.

But given the state of international travel, I don’t know if I’ll be able to go anywhere for the rest of the year. And my priorities are shifting. I’m sure there was a time when I thought going abroad would be the perfect way to spend the brief and exciting years immediately following graduation. While postgraduate wanderlust should carry me away from home, I can’t shake off the startling news we get every day about “essential” workers who lack proper health insurance and protective gear, and families going without food due to rising unemployment and disrupted supply chains—or my own family’s efforts to manage.

It can feel like the world is falling apart. But I do not find myself grasping in the dark to turn on the light switch—or to find the handrails. I am grasping to feel the edges, imagining a new space with contours that lead to unexpected avenues. Arundhati Roy writes: “Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to ‘normality,’ trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.”

Although it sometimes feels as though my future is falling apart, I now see that—rather than unraveling—it’s becoming a spinning vortex that’s converging into a point: a source that sucks shut my other fears about risk and uncertainty. The pandemic has cleared the smog from cars that normally chug through traffic on Los Angeles highways. It’s given the city the clearest skies we’ve seen, breathed, and smelled in decades. This is the clarity that guides my journey into life after graduation, as I continue to imagine the world that I want to live in.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Julie Chung ’20 is providing food relief to families and learning about food sovereignty in her hometown of Los Angeles.

SPRINT

Alone on Harvard’s Campus

“Most days I see no one at all,” writes Jeremy Tsai ’20 of his last few weeks on campus.

Visit: harvardmagazine.com/topic/students-on-covid-19

A Harvard Senior’s Call to the Home Front

“What can we sacrifice?” asks Lauren Spohn ’20.

harvardmag.com/covid-spochn-20

For articles written by students about their COVID-19 experiences: