

# Foreword

HOWARD GARDNER, among many others, has noted the enormous power of stories as tools for social change. While data is often useful for justifying and informing social change, great leaders motivate and guide that change not by providing information, but by telling stories that resonate, inform, activate, and inspire.

This book has wonderful stories. But what makes this an important book is not that these stories are good, or even inspiring. What makes this an important book is that these stories are *powerful*—they have the power to change us, and our culture. To my mind, a story is powerful only when it provokes me to revisit the stories I tell about my past, and having revisited those stories, to revise the stories I tell about my future. This book does both. Let me revisit a story from my own past in light of the themes gathered here.

I can still remember the first time I saw Harold Krents. I was an awestruck freshman at Harvard College, walking anxiously across the Yard toward my very first class. I wasn't paying much attention to anyone along the way, but one student passed me who was too remarkable to escape my notice: he was blind. That student was Harold Krents (or just "Krents," as everyone would later call him).

I was dumbfounded.

Silhouetted behind Krents was Harvard's Widener Library, the largest university library in the world, the centerpiece of Harvard's power and prestige. Widener intimidated me, as it was meant to, with its huge marble pillars, long and wide steps, and 9 million books. I had never been inside. As I passed Krents, with Widener in the background, I imagined all those books and couldn't picture how Krents was going to read any of them. I was confused and perturbed: "How did *he* get here?"

Like many freshmen at Harvard, I was worried about how *I* got here. I had come from a farming community in Maine where my rural high school offered no preparation for college-level work. Few students from my class went on to college, and only a handful in the entire history of my high school had gone out of state. No one had ever even applied to an Ivy League school. Many students with my background, the dean later told us, felt that we were imposters, glitches in the cumbersome admissions process, and that we had gotten to Harvard only by mistake.

But Krents seemed like a bigger mistake. He couldn't even walk to class unaided (he tightly clasped the arm of one of his roommates), and of those 9 million books, not one of them could he read independently. I still cringe as I remember my reaction on that first day: here, finally, was one student who was less likely to succeed at Harvard than I was. I was relieved, even jubilant.

But I was wrong. Our paths diverged at Harvard. I flunked my first exam outright, and my first three papers were "ungraded" because they were "not up to the level" of earning a grade at all, even a low one. I improved slowly over the four years but was never a distinguished student and graduated without much notice (except my parents', of course). Krents, on the other hand, was a star. He graduated with honors and went on immediately to Harvard Law School, and then to Oxford University. Soon he was a White House Fellow, among many, many other honors. I was jealous, of course, and still perplexed.

After reading this book, I found myself compelled to look back at my years with Krents (I never actually knew him, by the way, but everyone knew who he was), enlightened by the themes and vivid stories that are now rewiring my memory. In fact, I felt so much need to revisit the story of Krents that I found myself reading parts of his autobiography (more on that in a moment) and his obituary. There is too much to revisit here, but let me highlight several themes.

1. Krents was *extraordinary*. His path was extraordinary even to the outside, "real" world. Within two years of his graduation there was a Broadway play based on his early life called *Butterflies Are Free*, followed by a Hollywood film starring Goldie Hawn as his love interest, no less. An autobiography (still in print) came soon after. But

one of the powerful themes of this book is that our culture advances when what was once extraordinary becomes ordinary. All of the students in this book are impressive, to be sure, but what is also extraordinary is how much more ordinary their journeys are. That is the surest sign that our culture, and the environment in which these students are educated, is growing up.

2. Krents was *unique*. Another important theme in this book is that everyone's journey is unique. Individuals with disabilities, even individuals with the same disabilities, are strikingly differentiated. No two of these individuals got to Harvard in exactly the same way. Krents's autobiography reaffirms this point; his journey shared some elements with each of the students in this book, but had many differences as well. By bringing many stories together, however, this book is able to highlight some common patterns that are well worth noting. In that light, consider Krents's obituary in the *New York Times*. It summarized how he got to Harvard thusly: "his understanding parents, their encouragement of his fierce independence and the number of activities in which he was able to take part." That will sound familiar to any reader of this book.
3. Krents was the *problem*. The stories in this book are very hopeful in their revisionist view of disability. During Krents's undergraduate years, he was clearly *the problem*. Widener and its books were imposing, unbroken, and unchanging. Krents was disabled, broken, and forced to adapt. There was no concept of universal design and, as a result, only a very few of the students in this book could have used its resources (the library was not even remotely accessible). Knowing that, most of the students profiled here would not have applied to Harvard. In this contemporary collection, however, the stories reveal a changing landscape of expectations and abilities. Almost all of Harvard's books are available electronically, and everyone reads its journals online. Because of these changes, its resources are more democratic, more universal—available to any one, any time of the day. Widener itself now seems hopelessly disabled, a relic; it is the problem. All of the students in this collection have better access to knowledge than they would have had in its heyday. And Harvard is a better university for it. Students with disabilities, as usual, have led the way.

There is much that still needs to change, both at Harvard and in our culture. The stories gathered here, and the commentaries provided, will be important to guide those changes. But I wanted to tell Krents's story to open this book because I wanted to emphasize that the stories that we need now, and that are provided here in this book, are *different* stories. The future must be one in which there are fewer extraordinary stories about the heroism of individual students who overcame huge obstacles to do ordinary things. What we need now are stories about "ordinary" students who do extraordinary things. But there must be a greatly more inclusive vision of who is ordinary, and who can do extraordinary things. We will need fewer unique stories like *Butterflies Are Free*, and many, many more "ordinary" stories about butterflies that are free. This book is the right start.

—David H. Rose  
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