Dear Class of 2023,

Welcome to Harvard! We're looking forward to seeing you on campus, and we're busily planning Orientation. A centerpiece of Orientation will be a common reading, which you'll discuss in several settings once you arrive.

This year's reading is Tara Westover's *Educated*, the award-winning memoir by a young woman who grew up unschooled in the Idaho mountains and ultimately earned a PhD at Cambridge University. As you read *Educated*, you might want to reflect on the following:

**education**: Westover prompts us to ask what education can and cannot do, what it gave to her—and what it took away. These are crucial questions, and as we try to answer them we'll also have to ask what education actually is. *Educated* gives us a taxonomy of its many forms: Westover is educated by lectures, tutorials, and conversations with mentors and friends; by reading textbooks, the Bible, and John Stuart Mill; while writing a master's thesis and cramming for the ACT. These forms of education all differ from one another, and Westover further contrasts them with other ways of knowing, from her father's visions through her mother's work with herbs, to her own learning from painful experience. It's important that we keep all of this in mind, so that we have a full sense of what Westover means when she says, at the end of this book, that she has received an "education."

**identity**: At various times in her life, Westover claims various identities: as a woman, a Mormon, a daughter, a sister, a white person, an Idahoan, a student, an enemy of the federal government. *Educated* explores what these identities mean to her, and it also shows the process by which she learned that they were hers. "I never uttered the words 'I'm from Idaho,'" she says, "until I'd left it." As you read, you should think about the various identities you've claimed, how you've come to understand them, and what they mean for you.

**memoir**: Westover is telling a true story, but she's telling it with art. She had to decide which events to depict, in what order, and how to balance the perspective of the person she was when she lived through those events with the perspective of the person she is now as she reflects on them. She also had to decide when to rely on her own memories and when to present competing accounts that call those memories into question. It's important that we keep an eye out for these choices as we read, since *Educated*, like all works of art, communicates its meaning through form as much as through content.
You may find *Educated* upsetting to read. The themes Westover explores and the situations she depicts may bring up strong feelings. If this happens to you, you may want to consider reaching out to a caring person in your life, or you can seek support here. All members of the Harvard community, including you as an incoming student, are welcome to use resources such as the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, the Harvard University Counseling and Mental Health Services, and the Harvard Chaplains.

*Educated* tells the story of an individual life. It’s not representative of all people who grew up in the Idaho mountains, nor all people who didn’t attend school—and it’s certainly not representative of all people who end up going to Cambridge or earning PhDs! But the story of an individual life, when approached in a spirit of openness and respect, can tell us a great deal not only about people who are different from us, but also about ourselves. We hope that you’ll use *Educated* as an occasion to think more deeply about your own hopes and fears for your time at Harvard.

We hope you enjoy reading this powerful book, and we look forward to discussing it with you in August.

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