

Citation for Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (Delivered by Rebecca Dobkins)
Willamette University
Salem, Oregon
May 16, 2010

President Pelton, Trustees, Graduates, and Guests: on behalf of the faculties of Willamette University, I am honored to present Sarah Blaffer Hrdy for the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

Sarah Hrdy is a gifted storyteller--the story she tells is that of the human family and our primate kin over the long stretch of our evolutionary past. She graduated summa cum laude from Radcliffe College in 1969 and earned her doctorate in Anthropology from Harvard in 1975. Throughout her career as an anthropologist, Hrdy has sought to understand the human capacity for caring for others, how this capacity came to be, and the role it plays in the development of the human experience. In her 2009 book, Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding, Hrdy argues that the emergence of cooperative child-rearing—the raising of offspring by an extended family—was essential to the development of many of the traits we have come to associate with being human: the ability to cooperate, to empathize with others, and to trust and rely on one another. Her argument challenges long-held notions that aggression, warfare, and competition played the major roles in our evolution. The book, called “mind-expanding and paradigm-shifting,” confirms Hrdy as one of the world’s most influential evolutionary scientists.

In addition to Mothers and Others, Hrdy is the author of four other books, including the award-winning Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection, which established her as a leading scientific authority on motherhood. She is currently professor emerita at the University of California-Davis. A former Guggenheim fellow, she has been elected to the California Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Together with her husband Dan, she raises walnuts on their farm in northern California where they are lovingly restoring native species habitat. Dr. Hrdy, we are grateful to you for your bold and provocative work that helps us understand who we are as a species, and why.

President Pelton, I am pleased to present Sarah Blaffer Hrdy for the honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters.