

# Convocation Opening Remarks

## President David Oxtoby

### September 2, 2014

Welcome to the opening Convocation of the one hundred twenty eighth year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2018 and transfer and exchange students to our community, and to greet returning students, our faculty, and our staff. Eight members of the Board of Trustees join us today, including our Board Chair Jeanne Buckley, and I'd like to thank them for coming to campus on this special day.

I call your attention to the prizes and awards listed on the back of your program, as we join together to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of our students.

The purpose of today's Convocation is to celebrate beginnings and to join together to explore the goals of a Pomona education. This exploration will last throughout your years on campus and, I hope, throughout your lifetimes, since education does not end with the granting of a degree. As we begin the academic year, I'd like to share a few thoughts on the values of a liberal education, with a particular focus today on poetry.

Earlier this summer I received a note from an alumna from the class of 1937 who corresponds regularly; she is now 98 years old. Her notes range from her own educational experience on this campus 80 years ago to issues in contemporary education and the modern world; she brings optimism and hope to every topic she raises.

In this note, our alumna said, "Recently I have been searching for a brief excellent definition of 'Poetry' . . . So far, I have located no really simple set of words that describe, define 'Poetry.' Does Pomona have one?"

How wonderful to be focused on poetry at age 98! As we debate the goals of a liberal arts education, and the relevance of that education for the job market when all of you graduate four years from now, I hope we will not lose sight of one of its key purposes: to ensure that when each of you head toward 100 you will not only be reading and appreciating poetry but also asking questions about the meaning of poetry in the modern world. That appreciation of culture and questioning spirit are not easy to quantify or to use in rankings, but I hope poetry will be part of your Pomona experience.

Poetry is a thread that ties together several of my own experiences over the past year, and my own musing about liberal arts education and the mission of Pomona College as we begin a new academic year. Maybe we should develop an official Pomona College definition of poetry, as my correspondent suggests, to place alongside our mission statement. In lieu of that, I looked for how some poets have themselves defined poetry:

Percy Shelley: A mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

William Wordsworth: The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.

Carl Sandburg: An echo asking a shadow dancer to be a partner.

Marianne Moore: The art of creating imaginary gardens with real toads.

I wish I could have asked Hillary Gravendyk for her thoughts on a definition, but sadly she is no longer with us. She was an Assistant Professor of English here at Pomona College who taught students both to read and to write poetry, but she passed away last spring at the tragically young age of 35. Hillary wrote poetry in part to come to terms with her own illness, and her slim volume titled *Harm* is an eloquent meditation on life, the body, and our place in the world. It reminds us that poetry is not only about “beauty” but also about the painful and difficult parts of life. At Hillary’s memorial service here last spring, her students read from her poems and from their own work in order to try to come to terms with a death that seemed incomprehensible.

Two days ago, the *Los Angeles Times* published a special page of “opinionated poetry,” submitted by a wide variety of readers on topics from politics to culture to war. It reminded us that poetry connects to social action and it can help shape opinion and change the world. This is very much true of the poetry of our own Professor of English Claudia Rankine. In an interview last week published by the *New Yorker Magazine*, Claudia spoke about her new book, “Citizen: An American Lyric,” to be published this October, which deals profoundly with race and racism in America. In the interview she spoke of her visit to Ferguson, Missouri, and the difficult conversations she had with individuals responding to the killing of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, by a police officer. She quoted the 1938 poem by Langston Hughes that has been downloaded tens of thousands of times since Brown’s death, with its famous parenthetical line

“(America never was America to me)”, suggesting that we still have a long way to go for the “American dream” to be open to all the people in this country.

Claudia holds the Henry G. Lee Chair of Poetry at Pomona College, which honors another alumnus of the class of 1937 who served in World War II, took part in the Bataan Death March in the Philippines, and died while being transported to Japan. In the prisoner of war camp where Henry Lee was confined, he wrote poetry in a journal that was buried, found after the war, and published. For him, as for others, poetry was a way of trying to make sense of the world. Is there a deeper purpose to education than this?

In June I spent some time in Northern Ireland, attending a conference in Belfast and taking a few days of vacation in the countryside. Our country hotel was just a few miles from the birthplace of Nobel prizewinning poet Seamus Heaney in County Derry, and so my wife and I spent some time reading his poetry. His early poems describe the countryside in compelling ways that we could experience just by walking outside, but many of his later poems dealt with the “Troubles” which we learned about during our time in Belfast: the conflict between Protestant and Catholic extremists that led to years of violence. Heaney used poetry to try to come to terms with that difficult world as well, writing of bombs and guns and fear. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech he credits poetry with “making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind’s centre and its circumference” and “mak[ing] an order . . . true to the impact of external reality and . . . sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being.”

So am I urging all 450 of you to take a course in poetry? That would overwhelm our literature faculty but might be an interesting challenge for Pomona to respond to. Yes, do think about that, but what I also urge is that you spend some time looking for the poetry in all of your experience in the next four years, whether it is in the science you study or the politics you engage in or the friendships you make. And 80 years from now, when you yourselves turn 98, I hope that you will look back on your Pomona education as having prepared you, like our alumna, to ask deep questions about poetry – and about all of life.

Let me close with some words from the late Maya Angelou’s acclaimed poem “On the Pulse of Morning”:

*Lift up your eyes  
Upon this day breaking for you.  
Give birth again to the dream.*