As we start the school year together in this annual Convocation, time stretches out in front of us in an inviting fashion, like a blank canvas on which we are preparing to paint a picture. There is a sense of openness and possibility with such a new beginning. What plans will we make, what courses will we teach or take, what new ideas will we explore in our classrooms? And yet, it would be naïve not to acknowledge that we all share a certain apprehension as well, knowing how the rhythm of life changes between summer and academic year, and remembering how rapidly our schedules fill up with seeming trivia and how hard it is to keep to our resolutions at the beginning of the year to do things differently this time. What will our painting resemble once the canvas is filled at the end of the year? Will there be clear patterns recognizable, or will it be filled with random detail that has no meaning in a larger sense?

Everything that we do has its own value; every stroke we put with our brushes to the canvas has its reason. I don’t want to suggest that faculty should cancel their office hours because they are in the middle of thinking some great thought, nor that students should skip that visit to the snack bar in order to meditate on the purpose of their life. Our lives, and our canvases, are filled with these little strokes, and many of them may seem to be imposed by the framework in which we find ourselves. But we still need to open up space in our paintings and make choices about what we do.

Management consultants sometimes talk about tasks along two dimensions: importance and urgency. Let’s picture a two-by-two matrix with these labels. There are tasks that are unimportant and not urgent; we ignore or postpone these tasks (I hope). Of course, those tasks that are important and urgent we try to do right away, unless we are pathologically afraid of getting something accomplished, but such tasks tend to be relatively rare. The key question is what we do next with our time. Some analyses show that we tend to spend 90% of our time on tasks that are urgent but not important, and postpone as long as possible working on things that are important but not urgent.

I’m as guilty as anyone in this arena. When I look at a list of things I need to do, it is so easy to start with the trivial little things, because they can be done quickly and crossed off a list, and that feels satisfying. But too often the whole day can then pass, filled up with still more of these little things, while the important things that are less urgent never get done. Eventually, they sometimes turn into urgent, important problems that take a great deal of time to resolve because they have not been dealt with earlier.

There is a different point of view even on this question, of course. Steve Sample, the president of the University of Southern California, has written a book on a “contrarian” approach to management, in which one piece of advice is “Never do today what you can put off to tomorrow.” He points out, quite correctly, that certain problems end up resolving themselves, disappearing, or simply becoming less important, so that a direct frontal approach can be counterproductive, taking huge amounts of time and energy. Sometimes it is best to wait, not to jump in and tackle that important but non-urgent problem right away. Even Steve, though, would agree that this does not mean we should all just devote our time to tasks that are urgent...
but not important. We need to think strategically about how we allocate our time and our attention.

It is a truism to point out how things appear to have sped up in the modern world. Do you know the twin paradox in the theory of relativity? Two identical twins start out on earth together. Twin A (call her Anne) simply stays home on earth, while twin B (Beth) climbs into a rocket and accelerates off through the universe at close to the speed of light, turns around, and comes back to earth. After Beth arrives, she has aged less than Anne has. She is physically and metabolically younger than her sedentary twin. Sometimes it seems that we are trying to be like Beth in our lives, racing around as fast as we can in order to capture a few extra hours sometime later in which we can do what we really want to. But is that the best strategy, or should we follow Anne in going at a slower pace, savoring and appreciating what we are doing?

When Pomona alumnus and trustee Bill Keller was appointed this summer as managing editor of the New York Times, an incredibly demanding and time-consuming job, his speech to the newsroom staff was revealing. He urged them to “bring to your jobs, along with energy and talent – some experience of life – family and reflection, art and adventure, a little fun . . . we should all do a little more savoring.” It is a very American thing to schedule our time off into such small packages that it sometimes seems we never had any vacation at all. Conversations at this time of the year with faculty and students rarely seem to focus on a restful and relaxing change of pace over the summer, but rather on the work accomplished or the new skills gained. I’m all in favor of both of these, but they are not a substitute for the times when we can really get away from our jobs and our studies.

A recent essay (7/28/03) by Michael Elliott in Time Magazine talks about the difference between the United States and Europe in this regard. He points out that Europeans over recent years have “cut the hours they spend at the office or the factory”, while Americans are working overtime and then filling the weekends with what he calls “the uniquely American concept of scheduled joy.” Elliott argues that one reason for this is that “broadly speaking, Americans value stuff – SUVs, 7,000-sq.-ft. houses – more than they value time, while for Europeans it is the opposite.”

We are doing so many things, and processing so much information, that it sometimes seems difficult to separate out what is important. That is why the experiences we will share together in Pomona classrooms are so important. There are plenty of ways of transferring information – “stuff” – from one person to another. From that great invention of the late Middle Ages, the printed book, to Internet search engines, to power point presentations to an audience of a thousand at a large university, all these are ways of moving information coded in one person’s brain to another’s, and all are important. But education does not stop here. The key to a Pomona education is time: the time we take together in the classroom and outside to engage each other with new ideas, different points of view, and personal perspectives on our work. This is sacred time, and we need to make space for it in our curricula and in our lives. For those of you here who are first-year students, the four years ahead will be a very special period in your lives; fill them with exciting challenges, wonderful discussions, and new friendships.

As I conclude, let me talk for a few minutes about journeys, a subject that has been much on my mind lately with my move to Pomona College. My own journey from Chicago to Claremont
took a long time in a figurative sense, of course, but in a literal sense, I got on an airplane at
the end of June and arrived on campus just a few hours later. Although I have made such trips
many times in my life, it still was disconcerting to make such a big change in my life in such a
short time, to move from a faculty position and deanship in one institution to the presidency of
another within a few hours. Many of you present here today made similar journeys, for
example from a rural high school across the country to college in Claremont in a few hours.
Modern technology has sped up the pace of life so much that we find ourselves making such
changes faster and faster.

My family made the same journey in only a slightly slower fashion. They got our house packed
up, loaded our rabbit and a few other vital belongings in the car, and spent four days driving
across country, stopping a few times to visit family and friends, to see a few sights along the
way. Such a journey was not a leisurely one, but it did have the advantage of letting them
experience firsthand the spatial separation between one home and another. With modern
travel, space and time are too often completely mixed up. It can take as long to get from one
side of Los Angeles to the other as to fly half way across the country. I’ve always enjoyed road
trips in the car because, even at 60 miles per hour, they show the physical connection between
one place and another, and how the landscape changes not suddenly but gradually. Bicycle
riding is even better, because it takes place on a smaller distance scale.

A third journey from Chicago to Claremont was undertaken this summer along the old Route
66 by teams of students from different colleges and universities driving entirely solar powered
vehicles that they had designed and constructed themselves. In this race, each car was
permitted to drive for up to eight hours each day along a fixed route that included interstate
highways, choosing its own strategy about how fast to go. High speed drains the batteries of
the car too fast and forces a stop to recharge from sunlight; a low speed puts you behind in the
race. The winning team, from Rolla, Missouri, averaged an incredible 43 miles an hour (during
the hours of driving) and won by a margin of four hours. I had the personal pleasure of seeing
these bizarre, flat pancake-shaped vehicles covered with solar panels coast off silently from
the starting line just a mile from our home in Chicago. Then I was in California (having beaten
them by taking the airplane) when they reached the finish line down Yale Avenue here in
Claremont, just blocks from the Pomona campus.

Picturing this fleet of solar cars crossing the country this summer made me think about the
different types of journeys we all undertake. Some changes in our lives occur abruptly, like the
airplane trip that can take us from a city to a tropical wilderness in a matter of hours. But other
journeys (and often the most important ones) are planned out in advance, like the strategies
for the solar cars. They involve teamwork, with a group of many people working together to
make something happen. They also can involve risk: quite a few of the solar vehicles that
students had spent months working on never made it to the finish line, and some not even to
the starting line. But such ambitious journeys are never guaranteed from the beginning to
succeed.

Earlier this morning we celebrated the groundbreaking for the Richard C. Seaver Biology
Building. I was struck on that occasion by the way in which the College, working closely with
the Seaver family, has been taking just such an ambitious journey together over more than half
a century. The excellence of Pomona College in the sciences now, and its continued
excellence into the twenty-first century, has come in large part because of a planned vision
that gave us the finest science buildings in the country in the 1950’s and 1960’s, furnished with
state of the art equipment; that same vision is renewing our science laboratories for the years ahead.

As we begin this year together, I hope that all of us (faculty, students, staff, trustees and friends of the College) will think of the journey we are about to undertake a little like those teams of students driving their solar vehicles across the country. Let’s plan together, let’s take some risks, and let’s have fun.

Welcome to the journey!