"The Music is Actually Better Than it Sounds"

Flipping through various television channels late one evening -- yes, professors sometimes actually do watch TV -- I came across a movie titled, simply, “The Faculty.”

Its terse description ran somewhat as follows: College students become increasingly preoccupied with the fear that their teachers come from another planet. I would like to put this worrisome concern to rest here and now, once and for all.

We do!

Yes, in fact, we do come from another planet and there is no reason to hide this from you. In fact, I want to issue an open invitation for you to join us on this planet --- not only during your time at Pomona, but ever afterwards.

I prefer to locate our residence, neither in outer- nor in inner-space, but in a different dimension, one in which I sincerely hope you will spend a great deal of time in the course of your journey through Pomona. A great many of you already have and already do.

Having been around a bit, lecturing and doing seminars in places as diverse as Shanghai and St. Petersburg, Cambridge, Prague and New Haven, Buenos Aires and Saõ Paulo -- and even at the Rocky Mountain Beer Distributors Convention in Arizona some years ago (the honorarium there was quite modest, but it tasted pretty good), I can tell you that Pomona offers a special opportunity for an extraordinary kind of life.

It is about a few aspects of this life that I will say some words this morning.

In his “Epistle to the Reader” that begins his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke -- the 17th century English philosopher best known for his formative contributions to our American self-image -- writes the following:

“It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge; -- which certainly had been very much more advanced in the world, if the endeavors of ingenious and industrious people had not been much cumbered with the learned and frivolous use of uncouth affected, or unintelligible terms.”

My, my, what is this all about?
On the one hand we have “ingenious and industrious people” -- in our time, all of us, I hope. On the other hand, we have “rubbish,” later referred to by Locke as “the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected or unintelligible terms.”

Oh, oh, let us hope that these do not turn out to be various bureaucratic notions, or, probably much worse, various unnecessarily abstruse academic vocabularies inflicted on you, by we, your professors.

But note that in Locke’s remarks there is another mention, and it gives reason for considerable hope. Locke refers to “under-laborours,” those whose task it is to clear the ground a little and, yes, remove some of the rubbish. In this domain, (though in many others as well) I know that we can happily meet and work together -- for, in fact, there is a significant amount of rubbish to be removed. Let me indicate just a few of its dimensions.

Consider the distinction between Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom. Unfortunately these are often confused with each other. Freedom of speech is the right to say what you wish -- a right guarantied by the First Amendment of our Constitution. Such a right is not always easily maintained in times of bitter partisan turmoil, controversy over the very nature and meaning of science, ongoing threats of terrorism, and the specter of continuing and unresolvable wars. We appear to live now in such a time.

Obviously we must work to ensure that everywhere possible, but especially in an academic community such as ours, freedom of speech is cherished and its use is put to constructive and responsive ends, even where there is deep and honest disagreement regarding what those ends should be.

Among a number of other important things, a college is a set of probing conversations. When these conversations are open and honest there will be disagreement at times. Too much polite silence is not healthy, just as an unwillingness to listen and to respond to what is being said is equally often a symptom of disease. Freedom of speech and openness of mind subject us on many occasions to a measure of noise. But a failure to tolerate such noise will make it hard for us ever to hear or to make genuine music. And for today’s purposes I would like to recommend that you view your time here at Pomona as a pathway to music.

Academic Freedom is something different than Freedom of Speech. Academic Freedom is absolutely vital to the integrity and vitality of any academic community, but it is also sometimes exceedingly dangerous. To be academically free is to pursue the truth wherever it may lead, even when it leads to uncomfortable places where all of us, professors and students, trustees and staff alike, must reexamine and sometimes relinquish and replace beliefs which we had previously cherished and held dear.

It has been said that the “truth will set us free,” but this is not the same as claiming that it will instantly make us feel better. It may do this at times, but it may also force us to reorient our thinking about the world in which we find ourselves and about the lives we may now need to lead in this world.

If this does not and cannot happen in a community such as ours at Pomona, we will have failed one another. But I firmly believe this is something we do not and will not do.
Woody Allen once said that he was not afraid of death, he just didn’t want to be there when it happened. A little unlike Woody, it is probably best for us to be just a little afraid of Truth, but to want the privilege of being there and of being a participant in it whenever we can.

Academic Freedom is a guide and support for just such occasions, and though the Truth to be found is seldom as large as Galileo or Einstein envisioned -- nor does it need a Galileo or Einstein to uncover it -- it does need people like us. Those supposedly smaller Truths -- truths we often do find in the course of college life -- can and often do genuinely change our lives. I have seen this happen to many people, people such as ourselves, over many years and in many ways.

Let me illustrate another dimension of that rubbish which Locke would want us to remove by reference to a remark made by Oscar Wilde: “Education is a wonderful thing, but we do well to remember that nothing of value can actually be taught.”

Now my quoting of this -- something I delayed doing, by the way, until after having received tenure -- may create the impression that I am trying to put us all out of work for the next nine months, if not forever. Of course I don’t mean it in this way at all. You will receive and digest much information, read many books, acquire many techniques, and develop numerous skills. But this is largely to bring you to the point where your education truly begins. And that education will involve the discovery -- sometimes sluggishly painstaking, sometimes almost magically quick -- not only of what you can do well, but of what you have come to believe is really worth doing.

Often what you do well and what you find worth doing will coincide.

But not always.

A mid-college-life crisis is not all that unusual. Its onset is often through the discovery that where your talents have been most developed is not where your heart begins to beckon. Or you find that at least temporarily you are not being beckoned anywhere at all. These are very serious moments, and a number of great people have lived through them to the other side, altogether to our benefit. In differing ways, Darwin, Freud, Luther, Tolstoy, Proust, Newton, and Confucius are among them. And there are many others.

In your academic journey you are also likely to find yourself experiencing a gap between who you are and who you find it worth your while trying to become. At stake are what values you will come to have and what ideals will guide not only your decisions, but the sacrifices you will inevitable need to make on the way to what ultimately matters to you.

In this regard I can do no better than to offer some lines from Tennessee Williams written for the drama section of the New York Times about a week before the Broadway opening of “A Streetcar Named Desire.” His article was titled, “A Streetcar Named Success.” Interestingly, you could almost say that this is all in the Pomona family, for Bill Keller, now the executive editor of the New York Times, graduated from Pomona College and is now on Pomona’s Board of Trustees.
T.S. Williams writes: “Then what is good? The obsessive interest in human affairs, plus a certain amount of compassion and moral conviction, that first made the experience of living something that must be translated into pigment or music or bodily movement or poetry or prose or anything that is dynamic or expressive -- that’s what’s good for you if you are at all serious in your aims. William Saroyan wrote a great play on this theme, that purity of heart is the one success worth having: “In the time of your life ---“live.” That time is short and it does not return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition.”

Pretty good stuff, I think. But equally enlightening -- and I now draw my remarks toward their close -- is a statement attributed to Mark Twain as he was leaving a Wagner performance at one of the Bayreuth festivals. To one of his companions he is supposed to have said, “the music is actually better than it sounds.” I believe that this turns out to be true, not only regarding Wagner’s music, but also of the educated human life itself.

While in College, as in all of life, you will hear much noise -- or so it will seem at first. Putting up with such strange sounds, however, whether as exercises of the freedom of speech or as pursuits of those truths to be found through the venture of academic freedom, is an essential part of the admission ticket to the great concert of life. I predict that as you come to discern more and more melody you will want to become a part of this concert. As this happens you are likely to seek, find, perhaps lose and find again what will be your instrument and your sound. It does take some courage and a sense of adventure. It typically unfolds in fits and starts. But the music is definitely there to be heard and to be helped along. I believe that this is what education really is about. And let me reassure you, even and especially from the start.

The music is actually better than it will sometimes sound.

Finding ways not only to accompany, but to improve and to expand it is one of life’s great opportunities. Your presence here is an extraordinary and unpredictable gift. We are very fortunate to be able to share our time and this place together.

And one more thing. Beware of anyone of who appears as a Sage on the stage. Far better are guides by your side. There are many of them here. Converse with them, enjoy them, learn from them, let them learn from you.

Welcome to Pomona.