Welcome to the opening Convocation in the 121st year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2011 to our community, and to greet the returning students from the College, our faculty, staff, and members of the Board of Trustees, led by Board Chair Stewart Smith of the Class of 1968. It is also a pleasure to recognize Pomona’s seventh President, David Alexander, and his wife Catharine.

The purpose of today’s Convocation is to celebrate beginnings and to join together to explore the goals of a Pomona education. For those of you entering as first-year students, this exploration will last through your four years on campus and, I hope, throughout your lifetimes, since education does not end with the granting of a degree. I would like to begin today’s program with a few remarks about making a mark on the world and the legacy, both good and bad, that we leave behind.

On my summer reading list this year was a book that I found profoundly unsettling, a tough and uncompromising study called *The World Without Us* by Alan Weisman. The author asks the provocative question: What would happen if all the humans on earth disappeared suddenly? The book is an extended speculative essay, though based on real science and on actual observations, about the effect of humankind on the planet and how the species around would evolve in our absence. For example, an examination of the area around Chernobyl in the Ukraine shows how plants and animals rebounded in an area where all humans abruptly departed in 1986, while another section describes a resort community in Cyprus abandoned during the civil war on that island and how over time it is being reclaimed by nature.

One of the central questions that Weisman explores is what the true impact of humanity is on our surroundings. The engineering marvels of our civilization will prove surprisingly fragile, in his view, once human attention to their maintenance is withdrawn. New York subways would flood within days if the pumps that keep them dry were no longer turned on, roads would buckle as plants pushed through them, and steel skyscrapers would collapse through rust. He imagines Manhattan covered by mature forests within 500 years.

What traces of humanity would remain for a future archaeologist to discover, having landed on Earth from outer space? For solid chemical reasons, bronze sculpture would endure, as would ceramics, so these are the materials of choice for all of you budding artists who want to leave your mark on the world. But so would plastics of every type. Even many so called biodegradable plastics mostly break down into smaller and smaller pieces, but retain their chemical identity. To me, a particular disturbing observation cited in the book was a study in the Pacific Ocean north of Hawaii in which the total mass of tiny particles of plastic in surface waters of the open ocean exceeded the mass of plankton in the same volume of water by a factor of six. The hope for eliminating such huge amounts of waste is that in the future some microorganism will evolve that can metabolize plastic and break it down.

This is a fascinating book, and I encourage you to read it, especially as you become engaged in the critical issue of sustainability. But I have described it at some length also to open up a conversation on the subject of: What is our legacy, both as individuals and as members of the
Pomona College community? What will you have accomplished after four years on this campus, and what difference will you have made 50 years from now? Of course each of you could design and produce some plastic object that would stay around for thousands of years. Or, as Weisman points out, you could go off to Hollywood and create a TV show whose signal would propagate out through the universe, just waiting for an observer to detect and study your work; that is one way to remain “immortal.”

But more profoundly, can we have an effect on the world not by leaving an indestructible object behind, but by making choices that matter? As you, the members of the class of 2011, begin your four-year education at Pomona College I hope you will ask how you can educate yourselves to make a difference in the world. Take advantage of your time here to learn deeply about a subject that you are passionate about, as well as broadly about a range of subjects you may feel less confident in, so that in four years you have truly stretched your mind in new directions. Get involved in campus activities, work cooperatively with other students to make a difference here in Claremont, so that when you graduate you can make a difference in the world outside.

You enjoy a privilege granted to only a small fraction of the people on this planet, namely the opportunity to receive an excellent education in a supportive residential college community. Take advantage of that opportunity so that when you leave this campus in four years you can truly say that you are following the words of instruction inscribed on the gates of the College: “Bear your added riches in trust for [hu]mankind.”