

Peter W. Stanley
Pomona College Commencement 2008
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It is a new experience for me to attend Pomona's Commencement as a degree recipient. Looking at the world from that vantage point, I am reminded of something that occurred several years ago, when Mary-Jane and I lived in the President's House. Late one night after we'd already turned off the lights on the first floor, the doorbell rang. I went down and found several students standing on the front porch. "We need to talk to you," they said. "Sure," I replied. "Call my office, and we'll make some time tomorrow." "Could we possibly do so right now, tonight" they said. They looked pretty earnest, and I was worried that they might be in some kind of trouble. So I turned on the lights, and they came in, and we sat in the big front living room, and after an awkward silence I said, "Are you OK?" "Yes," they said, "but we're worried about the future. What kind of life after college is possible for a liberal arts graduate?"

Here is what I told them.

My friends, I said, the ability to frame that sort of penetrating question speaks for itself. So be of good cheer. A liberal arts education can set you on the path to whatever role you aspire to play. But it can do something even more important than that. You are going to live in a world of constant and dramatic change. You will probably do several different kinds of work, live in a variety of different places, and cope with technologies that you can't now foresee. Along the way, a lot of the information and skills you now know will be superseded and become a wasting asset. When that happens, there are two enduring benefits of a liberal arts education that will serve you well.

One of these is the informed and empowered curiosity to be a lifelong learner: the intellectual resilience to move beyond each of the successes, each of the failures, each of the surprises one encounters in life and take on new and different challenges. I can testify that this is true. The only work for which I ever specifically prepared myself was to teach American history. When the opportunity later arose to become a dean, a foundation officer, and then a college president, it was a liberal arts education that enabled me to do the unforeseen.

The other of those enduring benefits is an intellectual and moral compass, without which resilience can be rudderless. The readings on that compass come both from one's formal studies and from the life one leads on a residential campus: Truth (which we hone through our commitment to intellectual honesty), Rigor (which we learn by pursuing subjects to their core, without compromises), Perspective (personal, historical, and cultural self-knowledge), Compassion (a concern for the well-being of others and acceptance of responsibility for the way our actions impact them), and Excellence (aiming as high as we possibly can, realizing our potential).

The combination of intellectual resilience and moral sensibility at the heart of a liberal arts education is literally life-changing. This makes all of us deeply privileged. There are countless other good, hardworking people all over the world who through no fault of their own will never have this opportunity and will never carry these benefits with them to each new chapter of their

lives. The only way to make that right is to hold this education in trust: to put it to work not only for ourselves but for others.

I'm not sure this was a hit with my visitors. They walked away into the night, muttering about the folly of disturbing old people after their bed time. But I believe what I told them, because it has been my experience of life.

Let me just add this. I presided over this ceremony for a dozen years, and it never failed to move me. But nothing can equal returning one last time as a degree recipient, in your company. Because despite the 47-year difference in our age, you and I are in this together. This is not only a celebration of what we have accomplished, but an invitation to think about new beginnings. It affirms that everything you and I have learned and done up to now has built in us the capacity to do more. It gladdens my heart to think that there are new chapters in every life, and to step off into the future with you.

Congratulations!

About Peter W. Stanley

About Peter W. Stanley: Peter Stanley served as Pomona's president from 1991 to 2003. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Harvard University and was a Frank Knox Memorial Fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge University. Prior to working at Pomona, Dr. Stanley taught American and American-East Asian History at Harvard and the University of Illinois, Chicago; served as dean of the college at Carleton College; and headed the The Ford Foundation's Education and Culture Program. Currently, Dr. Stanley is the vice president of executive search firm Isaacson, where he helps to identify and recruit leaders for colleges and art institutions.