Welcome to the opening Convocation in the one hundred twenty third year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2013 to our community, and to greet the returning students from the College, our faculty, staff, and members of the Board of Trustees. 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 education on and off campus.

This past summer, my wife Claire and I took a 13-mile hike, up about 2000 feet and backwards in time by more than 500 million years. We were in British Columbia at a beautiful spot overlooking Emerald Lake in the Canadian Rockies. Our destination was a rock quarry called the Burgess Shale, a World Heritage Site with the finest collection of fossils from the Cambrian explosion, that remarkable period of biological innovation early in the history of life on earth when varied and unusual life forms emerged from a sea of unicellular life. This year marked the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the Burgess Shale, and Pomona’s own paleontologist, Bob Gaines, was there last month for a meeting of the world’s leading fossil experts. At the site, each of us could pick up random rocks beneath our feet and see the detailed tracings of trilobites and other fossils, and we passed around examples of significant fossils stored in a locked case. The experience brought home the reality of evolution, seeing evidence in situ for some of the first multicellular organisms that arose on earth.

I was reminded of that experience a month later when I read the results of a discouraging survey of how the general public views science. On the positive side, 70% of the public feel that scientists contribute “a lot” to the wellbeing of society and a full 84% agree that the effect of science on society is “mostly positive”. But to me, the shocking number from the survey was that only 32% of the adult population of this country thinks that humans, and other living things, have evolved due to natural processes. This in the year of the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin, in which we celebrate one of the greatest discoveries of modern science! Although this survey was US centered, much of the developed and developing world population might answer in the same way.

Let me quickly acknowledge three points. First, not everyone can travel to the Burgess Shale or the Galapagos Islands to see the evidence for evolution at first hand. Second, even after visiting such iconic sites there is a huge leap of insight and understanding to connect a mass of field observations with the grand synthesis represented by the theory of evolution. And third, experts today debate exactly how evolution occurred so rapidly at some times and so slowly at others; the simple model of Darwin is constantly challenged and refined. Yet scientists have reached a consensus, confirmed by innumerable observations, that living things have evolved due to natural processes.
So where have we gone wrong with reaching the public? I would say that this is fundamentally a problem of education. Education helps us to make connections between objects that we can see with our own eyes and touch with our own hands, and other things that are less tangible: explanations, principles, theories. Education is also about communication: reaching out to others in language they can understand, whether we are talking to ten year old children or members of Congress. While the example I have given involves a scientific issue, evolution, it is equally important to communicate about core questions in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.

You, the members of the class of 2013, are about to begin your own four-year education at Pomona College. I urge you to make connections, to move from close analysis to broad-scale synthesis, to attack the big questions that require multiple perspectives to address. You will find the faculty eager to join you in this quest, in and out of the classroom.

But do not forget that you are part of a broader educational system that connects all of us, from preschool through post-graduate studies, around the country and throughout the world. Here in California, as well as in many other places, we face the tragedy of reduced spending on education just when this is the most important investment we can make: school teachers laid off as class sizes increase, university faculty placed on furlough, and students unable to find a place in the higher education system.

Earlier this summer, some one hundred high school students from schools in surrounding communities came to our campus for a program now called the Pomona College Academy for Youth Success. Our faculty and students led four weeks of serious academic work combined with the activities typical of a residential college. I visited a group that was learning to program simple robots in our Computer Science labs. Five of the graduates of the Academy are now members of the class of 2013.

This is a wonderful effort, but there is more that we can and must do. Make it your goal to make contributions to education not just on campus but off, whether through outreach activities or such simple actions as bringing your knowledge to friends and family at home. Education is the future, and we must help to ensure that it reaches all.