

**President David Oxtoby**  
**Pomona College Commencement 2012**  
**May 13, 2012**

In thinking about my charge to the Class of 2012, I kept returning to the voice of someone whom we lost this year: John Payton, a member of the class of 1973 who was a Trustee of the College since 2005 and a friend from our first meeting a year earlier. Seven years ago, John was the principal speaker at Commencement, where he called on the members of the class of 2005 to recognize diversity as an indispensable democratic value in a post September 11 world.

Arriving on campus as one of only five Black students at the College, in 1964, John recognized that change needed to happen; he was centrally involved in the establishment of what we now know as the Office of Black Student Affairs and the Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies. A mathematics major at the College, he took several years off before graduating to build the Black student admissions program for all the Claremont Colleges.

After graduating, John spent a year on a prestigious Watson Fellowship in Africa, received a law degree from Harvard, and joined a major law firm where he became a leader in civil rights law. One of his most important accomplishments was to develop the strategy for the successful defense of college and university affirmative action programs in admissions in the University of Michigan Grutter and Gratz cases, including arguing the former before the Supreme Court. John then led a number of other critical civil rights cases as the head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund before his untimely passing earlier this year.

I give this biographical background not to single out one particular career trajectory as a model for all of you in the Class of 2012, but rather to talk about the qualities that enabled a Pomona graduate to shape a life that made a difference in the world. What can we all learn from his example?

The first lesson is to act passionately. Find a cause or an issue that really matters and discover a way to make a difference, perhaps on a local level or, occasionally, on a large scale. Some of you will eventually move into leadership positions that will have national or international impact, while others will be actors on a more modest scale within your workplace, your families, and your circles of friends. John Payton's commitment throughout to justice and equal rights under the law shaped his life; let your passionate commitments shape the lives of meaning that you will live.

The second lesson is to think critically. Think critically about the world around you, challenge the way things are, and imagine how they might be different. But another part is to think critically about yourself, to look at your own motives and actions and see whether they are helping to move things forward in the most constructive fashion. John Payton was an idealist, yes, but he was also a pragmatist, looking at a situation or a case and figuring out the strategy to achieve the best possible outcome given the present flawed system in which we all live. A key to his successful affirmative action strategy for the University of Michigan was to bring the armed services in to testify to the importance of diversity in their ranks, not because the armed

services were paragons of behavior but because they could help him achieve his particular pragmatic goal of winning his case.

I have recently been reading a book called *Thinking Fast and Slow* by psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics. Kahneman's work explores the central question of how our brain works and how we answer questions, make decisions, and take action. He argues that we have two systems within us. System 1 involves thinking fast: reacting instinctively to a situation or question, using rough rules of thumb based on our experiences and our intuition to make a decision. System 1 is our primary way of thinking about the world, and its quickness has evolved over time because of the need to react immediately to danger. It serves us well as a primary way of thinking, but it can also lead us into mistaken and irrational approaches.

System 2, on the other hand, helps us to think slow: analytically explore alternatives, use logic carefully, question our gut feelings, bring evidence to bear in a thoughtful fashion. Kahneman calls System 2 lazy; it takes effort to engage it. But it helps to keep us out of traps where our instinctual response from System 1 can lead us.

A classic example given by Kahneman is the "Linda problem." Consider the following description: "Linda is thirty-one years old, single, outspoken, and very bright. She majored in philosophy. As a student, she was deeply concerned with issues of discrimination and social justice, and also participated in antinuclear demonstrations." Now Kahneman asks a question that I pose to you: which is a more probable statement about Linda? First, "Linda is a bank teller," or second, "Linda is a bank teller and is active in the feminist movement." Think about this for a moment. Most of you probably immediately responded that the second description (a feminist bank teller) is more likely. The first statement, that she is simply a bank teller, seems inconsistent with our stereotype of what activist students turn into, whereas adding a detail about Linda being a feminist seems to make a more plausible story. But our instinctive System 1 reasoning is wrong, and a careful System 2 analysis will show that the set of feminist bank tellers is wholly included in the set of all bank tellers; specifying that Linda is a feminist lowers the probability.

To be effective in the world, we need to engage both our instincts and our pragmatism, to confront each situation not only by acting passionately in response to our deepest values, but also by questioning our assumptions and thinking critically about our actions and the effects they will have.

Issues of immigration law and work authorization documents have been at the forefront over the last year at Pomona College. Commencement is not a time to repeat the whole story, but we all grieve about the unfortunate outcome—the termination of the employment of 17 employees, many of them staff members of long standing at the College.

I am proud that members of this community cared enough about the personal impact of these events to question, challenge, and even protest the actions that were taken. Here, I wish to ask a few questions about choices that were made by different people around this issue, by myself, by Trustees, by members of the community: students, faculty, and staff. Were we, in each case, thinking both fast and slow? Following our instinctive judgments but also challenging our own assumptions and reflecting on the consequences of our choices? And most important, how can we ensure that such a situation of personal devastation for the seventeen most

directly affected will not happen again? What changes can we make within this College, and in the ways we make decisions and discuss difficult issues, to learn from our mistakes? And how can all of us work to change the deeply flawed laws in our country in this arena?

Passion and pragmatism, instinct and critical thinking. To make progress on the big issues that face us, we need to bring to bear both systems of our brain and, like our fellow alumnus, the late John Payton, to think fast and slow about how to further change in our world.