

Jonathan Veitch
Pomona College Commencement 2012
May 13, 2012

Well, happy Mothers' Day. I want to begin by wishing my mother, Carol Lee, and my wife, Sarah, happy Mothers' Day. I am honored and quite moved by this award, and I want to thank the Board of Trustees, the faculty and graduates of Pomona College.

And I especially want to thank David Oxtoby, who has, from the moment of my arrival at Occidental, served as both a mentor and a friend. As you know, he's an extremely busy man, the leader of a great college, so the fact that he took the time to single me out and take me in hand means a great deal to me. Some of you may know that being David's friend can be a humbling experience, particularly if you're on a bicycle. Not long after my arrival at Occidental, he took me on a 35-mile ride near Ojai that left me gasping for air. He is a tough man to keep up with, whether on a bicycle or off, but I have been inspired by his example, and never more so than in this past year.

I bring you greetings from the Occidental Tigers. I can say with confidence: there is nothing a tiger loves more than a sagehen, for dinner or just about any meal, really. I'm sorry; I couldn't resist, and I'm sure you would have been disappointed in me if I had. As you know, Occidental and Pomona College have one of the oldest rivalries in college sports, dating back to 1895, when Occidental, I'm sorry to say, defeated Pomona 16-0 in their first football game. Pomona did win eventually, but that didn't happen until five years later when the Sagehens took the ungentlemanly step of hiring a professional football coach. Some schools will do anything for a win.

I take this honorary degree less as an honor for me than as a warm endorsement and renewal of a long-standing relationship between Pomona and Occidental. As you know, both colleges were founded in 1887. Both institutions are celebrating their 125th anniversaries this year. But longevity in of itself is less important than what these two institutions stand for and represent. Throughout their history, Pomona and Occidental have remained committed to the transformative power of a liberal arts education. And they have done so in a world that does not always understand or appreciate its value.

I was reminded of that value a few years ago when I was sent by the Christian Johnson foundation to provide some advice to three fledgling liberal arts colleges the foundation had established in Eastern Europe. Starting an institution of learning is no small matter, particularly in an area of the world that has experienced the harsh legacy of fascism and communism. When I asked one of the rectors why he was so committed to the model of a liberal arts college, he told me something that speaks volumes about the reasons we are here today. He said, "You forget that the velvet revolutions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland were started by playwrights, economists, historians, physicians and journalists who were steeped in the liberal arts tradition. That tradition kept the flame of human dignity alive under authoritarian rule. It sustained a vision of freedom and a just society that eventually led to our liberation."

I can't give any better account of the importance of the liberal arts than that. That is why institutions like Occidental and Pomona matter. And they matter just as much in sunny



Southern California as they do under the gray skies of Eastern Europe. Perhaps never more so than in a country like our own, which is so thoroughly divided and so much in need of repair. I am absolutely convinced that the education you have received at Pomona College is the very best preparation you could possibly have to address the concerns of a country that sorely needs your thoughtfulness, your deliberation, your character, and your vision.

I wish you well on this fine day, on the occasion of your graduation from this very fine institution. Thank you.

About Jonathan Veitch

Jonathan Veitch is the 15th president of Occidental College, a private liberal arts college founded in Los Angeles in 1887, the same year as Pomona College. Veitch was inaugurated as president of Occidental on July 1, 2009, where he has sought to create new partnerships with Southern California's premier cultural institutions and strengthened the College's civic engagement, arts and literacy programs. A Stanford graduate, Veitch earned his doctoral degree in the history of American civilization from Harvard and is the author of the award-winning *American Superrealism: Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (1997), among other volumes. His current research focuses on the history of U.S. higher education. He has taught in the English department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and as a professor of literature and history at The New School in New York City, where he also served terms as chair of humanities, associate provost and most recently dean of the Eugene Lang College, the university's undergraduate liberal arts division.