Let me begin with extending a heartfelt welcome to the class of 2016. As I stand before you today, I wonder about the journeys you have taken to arrive here at this moment in time and in your lives. You may have just crossed town, the state, maybe the country, a border, or an ocean. Think back for a moment on the journeys you, your parents, grandparents or great-grandparents took to get you to this point. You see, we are constantly journeying even when it seems like we are here to stay a while. How we see our location depends on the perspective we have. It may be that arrivals and sojourns are always part of a longer journey we take as we move through our lives.

My Gujarati and Kutchhi grandparents journeyed from northwest India across the Indian Ocean to Kenya. How many generations before that did the family convert from being Hindus to adopting Islam? Or were they among the Muslims migrating centuries ago from Iran to India who over generations acculturated to their new home? Whether Muslims or Hindus, the memory of that migratory encounter is preserved in the devotional hymns called *ginans* still sung today alongside recitations of the Qur’ān. In the *ginans*, concepts familiar to Hindus and to Muslims are brought together to create something familiar and new at the same time.[1] As my Muslim spiritual forebears made their way from Iran to India, they took on the idiom of their new land, transforming as they transformed. They connected two religious traditions, the Indic with the Biblical, for Islam sees itself as a continuation of the Biblical, and through this interaction, resonances between two separate traditions were found to hold the tensions of the two traditions together in a fine balance.

A generation later, my parents, fearful that Idi Amin’s xenophobic expulsion of Asians from Uganda would spill over to Kenya, crossed yet another ocean, the Atlantic, to make a home in Canada. Then, it was my turn to journey. Having completed my college education at McGill University in Montréal, I crossed the North American continent from east to west to land here at Pomona College. How does a second-generation immigrant Asian Muslim girl child born in a village on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya, a third world country, earn the privilege of teaching at one of the top ten liberal arts colleges in the most powerful country in the world? United Nations reports will tell you that “in many [developing] countries available indicators show that the girl child is discriminated against from the earliest stages of life, through her childhood and into adulthood…. As a result, fewer girls than boys survive into adulthood.”[2]

In my case, four factors were critical.

First was moral and institutional leadership. My community’s spiritual leaders, the third and the fourth Aga Khans, insisted on education for girls, and founded schools in East Africa and other regions of the world open to children of all races and any creed.
Second was a solid education and work ethic. The education system that Kenyans inherited from their former British colonial masters meant that while I learned very little of African history, for in their view, Africa did not have a history until they arrived, it did mean that I learned what has become the world’s lingua franca, English, in a rigorous educational system.

The third was individual acts of resistance and courage, as shown by my mother when my grandfather insisted I be married at the end of high school in keeping with his patriarchal understanding of the world. Quietly commenting that “these days boys prefer educated girls,” with a shaking heart, she put me on a plane to England, and eventually, I joined them in Canada, where I earned a doctorate in religious studies.

Finally, the fourth factor was the dedication of the teachers I encountered at every step of my journey, who instructed, inspired, cajoled, tested, guided, and encouraged, while opening up interesting and exciting areas of knowledge. I narrate all this to show you that the story on the ground is always more complicated than reports would indicate, and further, that a person’s successes are rarely what they did on their own and much more about the decisions and actions of countless others who acted with generosity, insight, courage, and perseverance, as well as material and mental investment.

The first of these qualities, moral and institutional leadership characterize the birth of Pomona College. President Oxtoby has already noted that we are marking the 125 anniversary of the founding of the College. Here you see fruits of the vision of a small group of people who were inspired to lend their moral and fiscal wealth to establishing a system of colleges similar to Oxford and Cambridge that would impart a world-class education rooted in solid values. You will also find here the dedication of teachers, administrators and staff, who will take you on journeys as varied as the history of Africa that began long before colonization and its disastrous consequences, or around the Indian Ocean to see the interconnected histories found there. You will travel inside to the workings of the mind and the brain as you take courses in neuroscience and linguistics and cognitive science, and to the realm of unfamiliar sounds as you struggle with Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish. You might fly with birds as you figure out patterns of avian migration. You’ll journey along the world’s waterways examining the global politics surrounding water. If you stop to listen, you might hear about the struggles and triumphs of those who crossed our southern border as you enjoy local produce at the dining halls or marvel at the ways our gardeners have reduced our water usage. You’ll navigate the maze of meeting gen ed and foreign language and major/minor requirements through endless trips to the Registrar’s cyber space. And you will definitely need to get into a Zipcar or some other mode of transportation to visit the Machine Project.

However, while Pomona College will make every effort to provide you with a solid education, the other factors I mentioned, a solid work ethic, and individual acts of resistance and courage, depend on you. The question I have for you: are you here to get a degree, which you must, or also here to get an education? Your journey has brought you this far, and now you embark on a journey that will take you a little less than four years. Acquiring an education is a journey, not a sojourn, even though you may feel you are not actually traveling. Knowledge is always in process, like a journey. Your journey is going to require discipline and hard work, yes, and promises, if you go along with an open mind and heart, to take you to spaces and places that are not only marvelous to behold as you explore the sublime relationships found in mathematics and enter the intricacies of particle physics, or mine through vast data sets of
labor statistics, but which will also open up to you the challenges that face your generation as you grow to take your place in the world.

At this point, however, thinking about what you’ll be when you leave here is not uppermost in your mind, as you have only just arrived and are getting used to your new surroundings. Indeed, you might perhaps be asking, where is this going to take me, running as I did through College gates that declare, “Let only the eager, thoughtful, reverent enter here”? As you ran through, perchance if you looked over your shoulder, you would have also read, “They only are loyal to this College who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for mankind.” Today we might replace the words mankind with humankind, to extend our field of concern to include women, or all living beings, to include the species that are dying off daily, or with Earth, to include all its ecosystems. Your question, where will this take me, if it extends beyond getting a degree that will already assure you somewhat longer lives and higher incomes than those without a college degree, if it extends to also getting an education, then that question entails a journey of exploration toward identifying and developing the values by which you will live. As Chris Hedges puts it, “We’ve bought into the idea that education is about training and “success”, defined monetarily rather than learning to think critically and to challenge. We should not forget that the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers. A culture that does not grasp the vital interplay between morality and power, which mistakes management techniques for wisdom, which fails to understand [that] the measure of a civilization is its compassion, not its speed or ability to consume, condemns itself to death.”[3]

To understand the connection between morality and power, I think there are three critical topics--globalization, the environment, and the power of representation--for which your energetic minds will need to find fresh approaches and possible solutions. First is economic globalization, which I use as shorthand specifically to refer to neo-liberal market capitalism. This is an ideology that promotes wealth creation through a global economic system that is predicated on dismantling barriers to corporate activity, to free trade, to the search for and control over finite resources including those that are essential for life, to the relentless search for markets and consumers to fill those markets, and to the insatiable pursuit of energy sources that will keep the global capitalist machine working. As many, including religious leaders such as the Aga Khan have asked, What is the purpose of wealth creation? Take some time to think about that question, which is intended to turn attention to two things simultaneously: how does one acquire wealth, and how is that wealth mobilized. As Gandhi has said, “The earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not ever man’s greed.” While there are many benefits to economic globalization, we must also ask the question, at what costs? Despite the promises that neo-liberal market capitalism will reduce poverty, levels of poverty are increasing around the world. Resources such as water are increasingly being privatized, increasing terrorism means wars in oil-bearing regions of the world may well continue until that easy-to-extract oil depletes. Meanwhile, efforts to step up production of hard-to-extract oil such as Canada’s shale oil, otherwise known as tar sands oil, and Alaska’s deep sea oil continue to pose huge environmental and ecosystem risks. Who among you will dare to ask questions about the morality of the current global methods of wealth creation and engage in seriously exploring and considering alternatives to economic globalization?

As you begin your journey here, your current location might lead you to ask: what if the center of the world were not New York but Pomona College, situated as it is on the Pacific
Rim? Does the view of the world change as Mexico and Latin America, China, Japan, Southeast Asia and India gain greater proximity? We increasingly look south for our labor needs while simultaneously talking about walling up our borders. As Asia’s population, educational levels, resources, turn to industrialization, and its growing middle classes generate both consumers and wealth, the strain on the earth’s resources, and our ability to provide for an economic model of incessant growth is increasingly strained. However, climate change specialists as well as any number of citizen activists have sounded the bell and we need to pay attention. This is the second topic for which your energies will have to find creative solutions. China with its coal plants and now oil refineries, Japan with its nuclear disasters, Southeast Asia with its massive deforestation to serve the growing demand for palm oil, and India as with China with their megadams all present ecological and environmental challenges whose consequences will ultimately be borne by the globe as whole. As Carl Pope, the former Executive Director of the Sierra Club said at a talk at the Claremont Colleges a couple of years ago as he noted the high level of airborne particulates in Los Angeles, air molecules do not need passports. As he has said elsewhere, “What comes out of Chinese coal-fired chemical and manufacturing plants has already polluted the snow fields high in the Canadian Coast Range.”[4] The now-famous picture of the plume of radioactive material making its way from Japan to the eastern shores of the Pacific—yes, that’s right, that’s us, as well as our Canadian neighbors to the north—reminds us that we are one world. How is this a moral issue? It is immoral to stop at pointing fingers at who or what is increasingly placing the ability of the earth to continue to sustain its most fragile and yet its most destructive inhabitant, the human race. Rather, we each need actively, as Gandhi reminds us, to “be the change that you wish to see in the world.” That is going to take an education, and not just a degree.

My time is short, so I will speak briefly about the last topic that concerns the connection between morality and power, which is the power of representation. We can extend Shakespeare’s observation, “The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose”[5] to say some, in looking for justification for their racism and Islamophobia, will take recourse to the law for overzealous tracking down of undocumented, illegal, and unpatriotic persons. To strongarm the eyes of justice towards unjust purposes may be legal, but is it moral or right? As Hector Tobar showed us in The Barbarian Nurseries, the reasons for Araceli’s precipitous journey into Los Angeles were misconstrued by the media, the law, and those who fight to keep America pure of immigrants, before others stepped forward to right those misrepresentations and to continue the tradition of American pluralism, openness, hospitality, and justice. In order to consider the morality and rightness of restricting the hours during which a person can vote takes an education that extends its awareness into the real-life circumstances of the voters who are thereby prevented from going to the polls and denied an essential American right. Others misrepresent religion to mount a campaign against the concocted threat of Islamic shari’ah taking over the United States. Yet others take vigilante justice into their own hands and kill Sikhs mistakenly for Muslims, while burning down mosques or leaving unfriendly tokens or messages. Words matter. How we represent others matters, and has consequences. An education asks that you question ideologies, and the radical as well as prejudiced uses to which ideologies are put, whether they be religious or political, economic or legal, to determine whether they advance justice and fairness for all in relation to the very real issues we face collectively in America and in the world.

We might consider the comments made by Henry Giroux, an educator and cultural critic.[6] In asking us to think about the pedagogical environment in which we are educated, he observes that:

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"A gated or border pedagogy is one that establishes boundaries to protect the rich; isolates citizens from each other; excludes those populations considered disposable; and renders invisible young people, especially poor youth of color, along with others marginalized by class and race ... The gated intellectual works hard to make thinking an act of stupidity, turn lies into truths, build a moat around oppositional ideas so they cannot be accessed and destroy those institutions and social protections that serve the common good."[7]

Giroux emphasizes the critical need for borderless pedagogy “that enables Americans to reclaim their voices, speak out, exhibit moral outrage and create the social movements, tactics and public spheres that will reverse the growing tide of authoritarianism in the United States.” Indeed, Giroux’ ideas about critical thinking and borderless thought as the hallmarks of an education are very much connected to the journey you are embarked upon here, in which you recognize the connection between morality and power, and the responsibility to wield that power wisely.

Thus, as you open yourselves up to the best education our country can offer during your next four years here, I welcome you to take journeys of the mind and spirit that are sure to transform you, just as our encounters with you will transform us and enrich our shared life travels. Go forth in peace. Thank you.


