"On Genius"

Let me start by saying welcome. Welcome to the Class of 2017 and to all of the other students, staff, Trustees, and faculty who are gathered here today at the start of Pomona’s 126th year. It is an incredible pleasure and an honor to share this beginning with you, the start of the Class of 2017’s journey through this wonderful lifelong adventure that we call Pomona.

So, speaking of Pomona’s incoming class, I want to talk today about genius. We have assembled together in this hall an incredible collection of smart people. The collective SAT scores of you, the Class of 2017, are through the roof, and Mensa might as well open a recruiting station here. But “smart” implies potential …How do you translate potential into genius, into something extraordinary?

Let’s start in true academic form by asking what we mean by “genius.” Pause for a minute and think about it. Who pops most immediately into your mind when you think “genius?” How many of you thought of Albert Einstein? That’s a pretty specific image, yes? Let’s try to open that up a little. Since most of you are online anyways – don’t think I can’t see that blue glow from up here – let’s look it up. I’ll tell you now that Wikipedia is unhelpful; try that old standby, Webster’s dictionary, instead. Webster has a number of definitions of genius, including “a person endowed with transcendent mental superiority,” “extraordinary intellectual power especially as manifested in creative activity,” and “a person who influences another for good or bad.”[1] Now, there are some interesting ideas: “transcendent,” “creative,” and “influences another for good.” (Since we’re talking about “creative,” I’m going to ignore the part about influencing for bad.) So, with those three phrases – creative, transcendent, and influencing for good – in mind, now who pops to mind? If you’re me, it’s the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who used his creative genius to inspire a nation to transcend its own darkness and to envision a better world. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and anticipate the upcoming anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, I am struck by just how centrally MLK’s legacy continues to resonate in our national consciousness; his remains a genius to which we can all aspire.

So how then does one acquire creativity, transcendence, and the ability to influence for good? Those are bigger questions than we can fully answer here – you will perhaps be unsurprised by the suggestion that you could spend your next four years at Pomona exploring those questions from a range of perspectives. More to the point, I hope that you will spend your lifetime thinking about those ideas as you go about your days. But let’s try to do some initial thinking about these ideas here. Be sure to pay close attention, since this will be on the graduation exam in four years.

All right, creativity, transcendence, and good – how do we get there?
First, you must take an ice-axe to your mind. How is that for a terrifying thought? I am paraphrasing Franz Kafka here, who wrote in a letter “If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? … A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.”[2] I disagree with him, by the way – your life would be a poorer place if you couldn’t read for pleasure (although admittedly Stephen King is no slouch in the axe department). But let’s broaden “books” to “education” – I do like the idea of liberal education as the taking of an ice-axe to the frozen sea inside your mind, the active attempt to break down those narrow little boxes and frozen spots we all build inside our heads. Remember that when your Great Uncle Omar asks you why you’re wasting your time taking a course called “Food, Power, and Culture” or scoffs at your Media Studies major. Those courses are meant to be ice-axes, chipping away at, in the words of Martin Jay, the truths you take too quickly for granted and the values you uncritically accept.[3]

Speaking of frozen spots, you must, must, must learn to view the world from a multiplicity of perspectives; you cannot “transcend” or be creative if you are locked in a tunnel. I have in mind three intersecting ways to wield that ice axe. First, the personal: at risk of both sounding trite and mixing my metaphors – there goes my grade - I challenge each of you to walk in someone else’s flip flops for an afternoon: go to the Office of Black Student Affairs’ block party, go tour the border with the Draper Center, study abroad, … do something that makes you squirm with discomfort – and while you’re cringing wondering who saw you walk into the Queer Resource Center, pause for a moment to consider what it means on a personal, day-to-day-living level to be “other” in a values-laden, majority world. Second, the intellectual: take advantage of the incredible richness of the Claremont Colleges’ course offerings, and commit to taking at least a couple of courses that look at the world from a perspective that differs from yours: Green Political Theory, Gendering the Renaissance, whatever. The point here is not that you should agree with those perspectives, but rather to learn that competing ideals are grounded in substantive thought and historical contexts and should be treated as valid intellectual arguments rather than as moral litmus tests. Finally – and this is the fun part – take that ice axe all around the greater LA basin and learn to enjoy the world for the messy, crazy, overwhelming, gorgeous mash of people and cultures and geographies that it is. May you learn to laugh for the joy of being alive when a twelve foot human tree wearing a Leviticus quote walks by (yes, I spent my vacation in Venice Beach) – you can feel those little boxes in your head splintering with every astonished laugh.

Speaking of human trees, back to that idea of creativity. There’s this wonderful quote from Arthur Schopenhauer “Talent hits a target no one else can hit; genius hits a target no one else can see.”[4] So how do you do that, how do you envision what no one else can see? I used to believe in a romantic notion of creative genius, that some people are just born being able to leap outside the box. Nowadays, I’m thinking practice and breadth of experience. This is where that diversity piece comes back in; genius comes in part from pulling all those little threads of your experiences together into a central vision that is uniquely yours – so get out there and find courses and life experiences that will create as rich a tapestry as possible. Go take an arts course – I don’t care what your intended major or career is – go take a course in studio art or music composition or a performance class in which you’re really making something. Those classes will push you to transcend the mundane: to look at a question from new perspectives, to practice seeing the unseen, and then to critique and sharpen your vision into something extraordinary. Regardless of your discipline, depth and technical expertise in your field is of course essential, but what I just described, the ability to take a creative leap that transcends the canon, is the difference between being good and being great. My point is this: Yes, pick a
major in the field closest to your heart and dig into it as deeply as you can; pursue that primary interest with all the grit and rigor that you can muster. But save a portion of your time to revel in Pomona’s intellectual riches, to take courses far outside your ordinary. Practice taking intellectual risks and creative leaps – that is the road to the genius of seeing the unseen.

All right, we’ve talked about creativity and transcendence. What about that third piece, “influencing for good?” Let’s start with the obvious: How will you know “good?” Remember that ice-axe, chipping away at “the values you uncritically accept?” “Good” is a case in point here – there is simply no easy definition. The question of “what is good” is one that you could – and should – spend your lifetime answering. You can get partway down that road by reading history, philosophy, religion, literature… Those courses will introduce you to some of the finest thinkers across the eons and help you to structure your own thinking on this subject. I find it ironic that people ask what philosophy is good for; the college course on which I most often reflect is my first philosophy course, which to this day informs my own ethics. Alas, my friends, Pomona can help you to think deeply about “good,” but good luck writing the final paper on that one.

Since we’re stuck on good, let’s shift the question slightly: How do you “influence for good” in the contemporary, 21st-century world? We are confronted daily with enormously complex issues: immigration, marriage rights, public health, climate change, to name a few. I think part of the answer to that question lies in the word “complex.” You cannot begin to understand – much less influence – any of these topics without the ability to grapple with complexity. Martin Luther King himself understood this when he famously referred to our “inescapable network of mutuality.”[5] This is a world in which there are no easy answers, and you will need everything Pomona has to give you in order to “influence for good”: history, chemistry, politics, statistics, sociology, economics… If you think I exaggerate, pause for a moment to think, for example, about climate change from each of those disciplinary perspectives. You cannot possibly master it all in your precious few years here, but what you can do during your time at Pomona is to develop the sort of hungry, agile mind that will enable you to build this understanding and influence over a lifetime.

Like any member of the professoriate, I could go on about these topics for at least another semester or two, but time is running short, so let’s come back around to our original question of how you, members of the Class of 2017, can transform your enormous potential into something extraordinary, into a life of genius exemplified by creativity, transcendence, and influencing for good. My advice to you boils down to this: keep your ice axe handy and revel in your Pomona education. Let me close with a final quote from the Reverend Dr. King, who brought his genius full circle by arguing that the ultimate goal of ending racial inequity in the United States is “so that everybody will be able to live a creative life.”[6] On that note, I wish for each of you a life of creative genius. Thank you.


[6] Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from the Pacifica Radio Archives (see podcast at http://archive.kpfk.org/mp3/kpfk_130820_100040letters.MP3; KPFK 90.7 FM Archive, Special Programming 2, August 20, 2013, 5PM)