

**Deborah Frempong '15**  
**Senior Class President**  
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Good-morning faculty and staff, friends and family, fellow classmates! I am honored to have served this class in our senior year, and excited to be sharing some words with you today. Before I begin, I would like to say that the teal ribbons and badges many of my classmates and some faculty are wearing today are in honor of the survivors of sexual assault on our campus, and a reminder that Pomona must not only be a safe place for survivors, but also a forerunner in the fight against rape culture.

In trying to come up with the kind of speech that would be relevant to about 400 people, I thought through the list of things I could possibly talk about – failure, success, the fear of the unknown, apartment hunting, rent, making your own meals, etcetera. After countless hours agonizing over what exactly I wanted to say, I recalled a pretty insightful Facebook status from Pomona first year Tanvi, which said, “wondering if there’s a time to be okay but not be okay whilst living the lovely but relentless Pomona life”. With that in mind, I am going to attempt to talk about two things today: institutions and loneliness; things that we are all somewhat familiar with at this point, I bet.

In the summer of 2012, right after sophomore slump had ended, I became friends with a nameless nostalgic senior, who remarked, upon seeing the emptiness of a college that had been bustling the week before, “wow, institutions are buildings, but institutions are people too”. It was the kind of thing that was supposed to be profound in the way that remarks at 2am by sleep-deprived college kids are supposed to be profound – so I nodded politely, and promptly forgot about it until I was struggling to find something to say in this speech.

Yes. Institutions are people; all the way from Margaret Adorno’s emails about class registration, to the students whizzing down on sidewalks with their skateboards, threatening our lives. On a more serious note, what this really means is that we are the builders of the very things we engage in – some of us being responsible for bigger portions than others, but each one of us, builders nonetheless. The implications of this are endless: in such an undeniable network of relationships, and of lives, every single action we take matters. It means that one traumatic experience can spiral into an unbearable semester, into difficult years, and that a sustained silence from the community, and the invisibility that results, will hurt many others. But it also means that true communal care will lift your head when you’re weak, and that a shout-out from Dr. Maria Tucker or Dean Townes in the middle of a bad week can remind you that you matter.

Pomona Professor and renowned poet, Claudia Rankine said of loneliness, that it’s what we can’t do for each other. Today I ask, when can we fill in the gaps for others, when can we be buffers against violence, when do we refuse to be complicit in enforcing alienation?

As we move towards an incessant bout of self-reflection, away from our friends, and back to our old bedrooms and neighborhoods, or maybe to unknown places, it is important to think about the new spaces we wish to create. Thrown into a community of people with different ideals, politics and opinions – how do we proceed? If my Pomona education has taught me anything, it has taught me to ask these questions of myself: When can I be better, how can I listen longer, when can I empathize? And I throw them back to this community gathered here today: when can we be better, how can we listen longer, when can we empathize? What are the limits to our compassion

for one another – and I do not mean this in the banal “we need world peace/kumbaya” kind of way, that reduces active, painful engagement to buzzwords like multiculturalism and diversity, – but to really insist that we each ask ourselves, what are the limits to our compassion? If our actions and policies have the power to create spaces that can hold, support or turn away, what are our roles as people with agency, as people with power, graduating from an elite institution? What are our blind spots, and what do we need to learn more about? What is the purpose of an education such as this one, if we refuse to grow, to feel for others?

My time here has been tender; I have been supported and loved beyond measure, and I have laughed so deeply and been held in hugs that have simultaneously nourished and taken the breath out of me. I have also felt really lost, and I have been scared - I have had to hide accents and to swallow words to not appear too angry, too ungrateful. Perhaps this is something that resonates with each one of us - how to reconcile the difficulties with the joy? Pomona has taught me that love goes a long, long way; that while the road to building rigorous, supportive communities can be fraught with bureaucracy and politics, there’s incredible joy, and a surprising abundance of hope, in walking the talk all 47 miles through, over and over again.

It is my hope that if, and when, we ever call ourselves Reverent, Eager and Thoughtful, Class of 2015, that we do so with an honesty that is true to ourselves and to others; and that we do so with an energy that is similarly as lovely and relentless as this Pomona life.

There are no bridges formed in loneliness, and shaky structures do not stand. Thank you very much.