

“Only Connect”

Audrey Bilger

Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Pomona College

August 30, 2016

Welcome, Pomona College class of 2020!

It’s great to be here in this majestic, 101-year-old space to mark the beginning of classes and the official start of your Pomona College journey.

As a word nerd by nature and trade, I like to pause to savor words, to catch their nuances, to see if they can answer questions I didn’t think to ask. For instance, I stopped to consider the name of this event.

*Convocation* is the noun form of the verb, *convoke*, which means to summon together, to call for an assembly. Today, we have been summoned, called, assembled by our college to reflect upon what lies ahead.

Turning nouns into verbs is more than just a word-nerd language trick. Look for ways to do this in your speaking and writing, and you express your thoughts more energetically. Look for ways of doing this in your life, and you will avoid becoming passive or worse, boring. You are here to act.

In the spirit of word appreciation, I picked three keywords to fuel my remarks this morning: *convoke*, *connect*, *commence*. The first and third—

convoke and commence—are the actions that book-end your college experience; as nouns, they become convocation and commencement. The middle verb, connect, is the repeated activity at the heart of your learning.

Word one: *convoke*. Ten days ago, you ran through the gates and “chirped” goodbye to your parents and loved ones, marking the outset of a new phase in your lives. Congratulations on that first big step! You were then as now convoked, or called, to be a part of Pomona College. In the past week, you’ve gone off on OA trips, you’ve read and discussed Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, your shared class book, and you have begun to get your bearings on campus. As of today, you embark on your coursework, and on behalf of the faculty, I can say that we are all eager to meet you and to help guide you in the coming years.

I am enormously pleased to be with you here and now. My journey to Pomona took a while. After 22 years at Claremont McKenna, I moved a short distance geographically—literally from right across the street—but I stepped into a brand new world. Pomona called me, and I couldn’t be more delighted to have been convoked.

I won’t strain that seldom-used verb any further. It’s not a great sounding word in that form. Convocation is much better, and here we are.

On to word two: *connect*. As I thought about what I would say this morning, I recalled when I started college, and that space between

convocation and commencement, between all the convocations and commencements that followed. I measure my life in school years.

At 17, when I was getting started, I didn't know that places like Pomona existed. I attended a rural high school in Oklahoma, and out of the handful of my peers who went on to college, most of us gravitated to Oklahoma State, a large public land-grant university. We were first-gen students before anyone used that phrase. At OSU, in the late 1970s, pretty much everyone I knew was first generation. We came from cornfields and sub-divisions, from tiny towns in the flat middle of the country.

My goal at the time was to become a writer. I used to get teased at home for always having "my nose in a book." I was (and still am) a non-stop reader, and I wanted writing to be my living. Without ever having known a professional writer, I wasn't sure what to study, and so I started out as a Humanities major and eventually went with Philosophy. It turned out that at OSU, Philosophy majors were few and far between (go figure), so I connected with teachers who challenged and inspired me. I found that I learn best when I'm fully engaged and passionate, and that learning is an activity, not something that happens to you. You happen to it. I decided to go to graduate school at the University of Virginia where I earned an English Ph.D. and discovered women's studies, a field that was in its infancy. I didn't really plan to be a professor, but I fell in love with research and teaching. That early passion for writing stayed with me, and over the years, I have been able to write not only scholarship, but

magazine articles, essays, book reviews, blog posts, interviews in feminist zines, a few thousand long comments at the ends of student papers, and, to date, exactly one convocation address.

The beauty of a liberal arts education is that the boundaries between disciplines are not fixed. There's a web of connections that each of you will discover, formed by the choices you make and your willingness to explore. Last week, my associate deans and I told you that it's not about the major, it's about learning. We urged you to ask one another, not "what's your major," but "what are you learning?" Take stock on a regular basis of what matters most to you and ask yourself if what matters most to you is connected to what you are learning. If so, you will find that something magical is taking place.

In the coming years, you will connect with people who are like you and ones who are not. You will discover connections where you least expect them. You will go beyond the superficial and question your assumptions. Beware of the assumptions you make about others. Beware of "othering" as a rule. In the gay rights movement, we used to say, "don't assume I'm straight." (I'm not.) I'll add to this, "don't assume I'm cisgender." (I am. My pronouns are *she*, *her*, and *hers*.) Remember that what you don't know about people can hurt them. Become aware of your own biases and seek to unlearn them—it is only then that the path can be cleared to connect.

To be sure, there is value in distinguishing, in dividing, in taking things apart, but connecting is a supremely creative act. It can also be an act of bravery. When we open up, we risk rejection—or worse. We may discover that we’re wrong about something. Connecting can shake you and make you question. But that’s what we’re here for. Here, at an institution of higher learning. Here, on this planet.

Allow me to slip into Lit professor mode for a minute. The title of my talk, as some of you know, is the epigraph to the 1910 novel *Howard’s End* by the English writer E. M. Forster. “Only connect” is a guiding principle for the female protagonist, who wants to change the man she loves for the better. At a moment of crisis for the couple, the narrator shares the heroine’s thoughts: “Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man. With it love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the grey, sober against the fire.”

That’s heady stuff. The monk and the beast, the soul and the body—if the language sounds lofty and somewhat religious, that’s because in this book, which concerns itself with clashing value systems, gender and class biases, and the artificial barriers that create divisions within society, to connect is to become transformed and ultimately to transcend.

The idealistic heroine, in imagining the conversion she would like her lover to undergo, believes that the merits of connecting should be self-evident. “It did not seem so difficult. [. . .] She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.”

According to the novel, the rainbow bridge can connect soul and body, intellect and passion within an individual, thus paving the way to greater bonds between and among people and resulting in an elevated form of love that will soar above the petty prejudices that divide us from one another. Those of you who have read the book know that building this bridge is far from simple. Bad things happen to good people in the novel, just like in real life. Yet “only connect” is a powerful mandate, and one that I have taken to heart. It has served me well in my roles as a professor, a mentor, a friend, and a wife to my wife.

As we launch this new school year, it is my fervent hope that you will look for ways to connect to one another and within your learning. Whether you already know what you want to be or you’re in questing mode, your time at Pomona will be filled with unexpected connections and the discovery of new and surprising passions. Try to stay open to different points of view and ideas that might seem alien. Have fun with those connections. Remember that social media can breed confusion and

parse your words with care. In-person dialogue is best. I know I speak for all of your professors when I say that we want you to cross divisions and expand your horizons.

I promise you that at some point in your studies, you will get the dizzying sense that everything you are learning ultimately connects. I can't tell you how many students have said to me, usually two-thirds of the way into a semester, "I'm amazed that the things I'm learning in your class—on comedy or Jane Austen or gender studies—overlap with these other classes I'm taking that would seem to be unrelated—politics or history or science or economics." Trust me, this will happen. Connections lead to more connections. That's just how it rolls.

OK, last word: *commence*. At the end of this particular journey is a fresh beginning. In 2020, your time as Pomona College alumni will commence. It's worth noting that convocation and commencement are the two main events that will bring this class together as a group.

You can't read the future, but the people you see here will be in it. Maybe you've already met someone who will remain your friend for life. Maybe you will exchange hard words with a person and then reconcile. Maybe that stranger who seems remote will open up to you or you will open up to them, and you will see that you have more in common than you thought. Maybe you will stay up all night discussing poetry or physics or neuroscience. You will most definitely learn a great deal about

yourself from the bonds you form with the other members of this extraordinary class.

Look behind me on this stage. I can guarantee that at least one of my colleagues on the faculty—probably more than one—will influence you profoundly. I've found that as a professor, you never know when you will say something that will change somebody's life, and it's seldom the phrase you polish and perfect, the nugget of wisdom that you yourself cherish. Quite often, it's something that can seem extraneous to the subject at hand—my pronouns are she, her, and hers; a reference to my wife; an acknowledgement of white privilege; even an admission of ignorance—the rainbow bridge, the link between two people, the light on a path hitherto untraveled.

Now I don't want to hurry you into the future, to the day less than four years from now when you will cross the stage and accept your Pomona diploma. Instead, I will repeat that you are here to act, to build your own adventure, to be alert and open to possibilities. It may be a cliché to say that what you get from your education will depend on what you put in, but it's true. We all want you to succeed, and even more, we want you to define the terms of your success. Convocation and commencement are markers, but connections are the key. What are you learning?

Only connect.