

Welcome to the opening Convocation of the one hundred thirtieth year of instruction at Pomona College. On this occasion I am pleased to welcome the Class of 2020 and transfer and exchange students to our community, and to greet returning students, our faculty, and our staff. Nine members of the Board of Trustees join us today and I'd like to thank them for coming to campus on this special day.

I call your attention to the prizes and awards listed on the back of your program, as we join together to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of our students.

The purpose of today's Convocation is to celebrate beginnings and to join together to explore the goals of a Pomona education. This exploration will last through your years on campus and, I hope, throughout your lifetimes, since education does not end with the granting of a degree. As we begin the academic year, I'd like to share a few thoughts on the values of a liberal education, with a particular focus today on community, empathy and engaging in difficult dialogues.

You are starting college at one of the most tumultuous and challenging times in recent years. This has been an especially difficult summer: terrorist attacks on unsuspecting individuals in several countries around the world, shootings of unarmed black men and of police protecting demonstrators, targeted killing of LGBTQ people, and a presidential campaign in which one candidate has openly encouraged violence and hate. All of these events and challenges have had a tremendous impact on our students, faculty, and staff over the past year, and I expect that—like other colleges and universities—we will continue to be engaged as a community in the current year. How should you respond, and how will these events shape your years at Pomona College?

One response is to escape into the safe and even cloistered space that a college and its academic subjects seem to provide. Throw yourself into the study of medieval history or linear algebra or French literature, play your heart out on the volleyball team, or join the orchestra and work on your flute technique. These are—of course--all good things to do, and I hope you will follow your passions to explore new and unfamiliar subjects simply out of curiosity, or to challenge and broaden your skills. Don't let the difficult circumstances of the world around prevent you from getting a liberal arts education that will serve you well for your entire life.

But if a college is cloistered in some respects, it is also a crossroads, and the events in the world around do keep breaking in on us, for better or for worse. In an age of instantaneous information from social media, an event in Istanbul or in Orlando immediately reaches every dorm room and office on every campus in the country, setting off debate, discussion, and, too often, causing deep pain and anxiety. How can we respond as a college community? Let me share some of my own thoughts this morning, and I hope to hear your ideas as well.

First, work in the weeks and months ahead to cultivate empathy. Do your best to put yourselves in the place of others around you – and around the world – and feel what they feel. Listen to the hurts – and also the joys – of your neighbors, whether you share their circumstances or not. Build safe spaces in which you can engage in discussions of controversial issues, with people who may disagree with you, and yet where you can share mutual trust and respect.

Second, don't give in to hate and respond with hate. Listening to some of the political and social rhetoric that assaults us daily makes me, and many other people, mad, and makes me want to shout back. But that is not always the most productive response, and from my perspective the worst thing would be to abandon our core values of open and productive discourse in the face of hate-filled invective. We need to respond to lies with truth, stated as clearly and calmly as we are able.

And third, recognize that we all have much to learn as we engage in difficult dialogs in a diverse community. Develop a generosity of spirit, recognizing that we all make mistakes. Don't be afraid to speak up because you might say the wrong thing and, in return, be brave enough to tell someone if what they are saying seems offensive to you. The silence of any student, faculty, or staff would be the most damaging outcome in these troubled times.

One of the core goals of a liberal arts education is to make us better citizens of our country and the world, developing skills of civic engagement that can serve us throughout our lives. A four-year campus experience helps us to practice those skills in a small community, but it relies on civility and respect for one another as core values. By civility, I am not talking about a community where there is no place for protest, or where disagreeing with those in authority is seen as "bad manners" or "inappropriate." Rather, I am encouraging you to stand up for your values in ways in which you remain in empathetic contact with those who may disagree with you.

Sunday evening you had the opportunity to discuss with classmates and faculty the book of poetry entitled "Citizen," written by Claudia Rankine during her years as a faculty member at Pomona College. I hope that, like me, you found it both disturbing and thought provoking, and that your discussions helped to broaden your understanding of race in this country. I'd like to close my remarks with a story from the spring that has been on my mind ever since I heard it.

At a rally for Donald Trump, TV cameras showed, as such events are often set up to do, an array of people sitting behind the candidate on stage. One of those clearly visible on the screen kept holding a book up in front of her face, occasionally putting it down when someone next to her turned in annoyance to ask what she was doing. What was this book that was so captivating? A close examination of the video showed that it was Claudia Rankine's book "Citizen" and that the woman was using this poetry to make a silent, but highly effective, protest against the words that were being spoken on the stage by the candidate.

I am not saying that every protest should be silent; sometimes disrupting the status quo and responding strongly and loudly to provocation is the best approach. But our forms of protest should be consistent with our core values, and we should not give in to hate-filled language and imitate those who use personal attacks and cruelty as weapons.

Your voice matters now. Your actions matter now. Speak up in the months ahead, visibly through votes or volunteer work, publicly through debates, quietly or loudly through protest. In this moment, stay true to your own values and help us all to strengthen Pomona College as a community in which difference and empathy are celebrated and supported. This convocation

marks a beginning in more ways than the obvious start of the school year. This is your moment, our moment. Let's make it matter.