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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2002

Balance: The CMC Convocation Address

John J. Pitney, Jr.

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As Yoda would say under these very warm circumstances: “Short I will be.”

You learn a lot at CMC.

I don’t just mean scholarly topics. I’m talking about life lessons.

One is humility. Jerry Eyrich has often noted that three-fourths of you at CMC were in the top ten percent of your high school classes. By definition, half of you will be in the bottom fifty percent of your college class.

But don’t feel bad. Professors learn a lot about humility, too. Let me give you some firsthand examples.

I had the great privilege of knowing our founding chairman, Donald McKenna. *There* was a man who could keep you humble.

The year after I won a teaching award, another faculty member won it – quite deservedly. In the Athenaeum lobby after the awards banquet, Donald looked at me for a long second and said: “YOU LOST!”

Then there was our founding president, George Benson. He too was a one-man antidote to pretense. He knew my wife pretty well and was especially happy that she had earned a graduate degree from Harvard. One day, he gave me the ultimate in backhanded compliments:

“Jack, the trick in this life is to marry someone smarter than you are. And you’ve done very well indeed.”

Undergraduates do their bit to keep us humble. Last spring, I had a picture of my newborn son on my desk. On seeing it, one of my students asked: “Grand-dad?”

All of us – students and faculty – learn other lessons at CMC, too. The college toughens us up by exposing us to various afflictions: heat waves, blackouts, earthquakes, WebCT.

You can even learn lessons by listening to commencement addresses. A few years back, Doris Kearns Goodwin came here and gave a fine one. Lately, she’s gotten into trouble, and probably for good reason, but this particular speech was solid and unapologized.

She talked about Lyndon Johnson. Even before the tragedies that ended his presidency, he was not a happy man. As she explained it, he had no balance in his life. Everything was an extension of his work. Home was a place to entertain other politicians. Parties were an occasion to gather political intelligence. Family and friendship were just politics by other means.

He achieved a great deal in his career, but he died sad and lonely.

So what does LBJ have to do with CMC? The key is balance. During your college life, you can put your time and energy into three things: social life, activities, and academics. All are important, but if you put too much of yourself into any one of them, your life will be out of balance. And you will not be happy.

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The easiest to explain is social life. You ought to spend time with your pals. But if your social life has you face down on the floor at three o'clock in the morning after one too many . . . root beers, then you know that things are out of balance.

Or as Dean Wormer said in *Animal House*: "Fat, drunk, and stupid is no way to go through life."

Now for activities. You can, and should, take part in a whole range of co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. They all give you a chance to meet people, hone your skills, and do some good. But watch out for the "Dungeons and Dragons" syndrome. Sometimes that role-playing game becomes a real obsession, and people bend their lives around it. The same can be true of campus activities.

So if at three o'clock in the morning you find yourself trying to round up votes for the vice presidency of the Klingon-Speakers Club, then you know that your life is out of balance.

I proceed to the topic of academics with some caution. Yes, it is possible to overdo your studies. Now that I've said it, I worry that students will ask for extensions on their papers, citing the need for "balance" time. As the pragmatic philosopher Tony Soprano would say: "Fuhgeddaboutit!"

Seriously, though, I want to draw a distinction. On the one hand is the love of learning and the desire for excellence. Those are virtues, which we should encourage.

On the other hand are grade-grubbing and the sweaty pursuit of paper credentials. That's where problems come in.

Some students think they should focus their waking hours on a narrow set of courses. "I'm a double major in Mergers and Acquisitions with sequences in Manipulation and Power Point."

Mind you, it's good to think about careers. I maintain my own web page of job information and I spend as much time as anybody helping students get ready for the working world.

But remember: you're at a liberal arts college. You have a chance to think about big questions and explore passionate interests. You can take courses that literally span the universe. That's an astonishing gift that very few people on this earth will ever have. Don't throw it away because of what you think some corporate interviewer might want to see.

Now, grades. Yes, grades matter -- up to a point. And that point comes around three o'clock in the morning. If it's that hour and you've been studying since noon and if every day is like this one, then your life is out of balance.

I know whereof I speak. You see, I just described my own college years. To get top grades, I pushed most other things aside for four years. And in one way I succeeded: I did get the grades.

But on graduation day, I learned the price. After the diplomas, graduates went to the athletic field to reminisce and say goodbye. I looked around, and I saw strangers. There were a few people I knew casually from the lunch table, but no close friends, and nothing to reminisce about. I got in my car and drove home.

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Since then, things have gone well for me. The Good Lord has given me many blessings. But I often think about my college years: the friends I could have made, the things I could have done, and the four years that I will never get back.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day." That's the way it is when you let one small part of your life take over, and things get out of balance.

There's a saying that the secret title of every book is "How to be More Like Me." I suppose that the secret title of this talk is "How to be Less Like Me." And that's the life lesson I leave you today, with an appropriate note of humility.