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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2012

**A Journey Through Life with  
the Liberal Arts**  
*President Pamela B. Gann*

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Human beings often analogize many things through the concept of a journey, and I want to do so today as well. I will be speaking about a long and challenging journey, not about travel, and certainly not about tourism. This journey is one of cultivating one's humanity through liberal arts and how the liberal arts accompany one throughout life.

As best we know today, and surely we will continuously know more about this puzzle in the future, modern homo sapiens originated about 200,000 years ago in East Africa, for example, in today's Ethiopia and Tanzania. These early humans migrated and dispersed from there into southern Africa and up into today's Israel and increasingly further afield. Recent evidence from DNA, fossils, and behavioral sciences suggests that the Americas were inhabited in three waves, with the first and largest about 15,000 years ago, followed by two lesser migrations, all of Siberian-East Asian origins.

Yet, this evidence also strongly suggests that we humans are inveterately nomadic, restless, curious, and forever ready to explore what is outside the confines of our own environment, whether because of the sheer requirements of survival or from a curiosity to broaden our horizons and knowledge about our surroundings. Journeys can be for many purposes, but the one I want to speak of today is one of serious purpose where we seek to pursue a restless and keen sense of intellectual curiosity that will be fueled by the delights of the liberal arts.

I want to suggest that the CMC community is made of such individuals. Our 1307 degree-seeking students have journeyed here to earn a liberal arts education of the most ennobling sort. You come from as close as the town of Claremont to as far away as New Delhi, India. You come from 35 different countries and from 45 different states and the District of Columbia. For centuries, students have journeyed, in a literal sense, to reach centers of learning for their education, and you are no exception. Our faculty have originated in at least 23 countries, with 40 born outside the United States, and they have earned degrees from over 165 colleges and universities; yet, they have journeyed here to be teacher-scholars in the CMC community. Our staff originates too from many different states and countries, and some are first-generation Americans. Thus, the CMC community of which we are members reflects our myriad, individual journeys, some of which have been long and very challenging.

These agglomerations of humans around educational centers exist for one of the most purposeful endeavors of humankind: that is, the creation and transferal of knowledge, of the best-tested and persistent kind that has been generated by humans for millennia. We call these studies, artes liberales – the liberal arts – which are composed of that knowledge that ought to be known by all free persons. Regardless of our individual journeys, we meet together today, as one, to celebrate the beginning of another academic year, in the time-honored fashion of convoking this learned and learning community.

The act of making a journey plays an important role in the liberal arts canon across many disciplines. These writings reflect journeys of necessity, migration, commerce, enlightenment in both the religious and secular senses, explorations and discoveries, and also for personal development. Let me mention a few, of which you will no doubt be familiar.

One of the oldest pieces of literature is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, from Mesopotamia, in which Gilgamesh undertakes two long and perilous journeys. In the first, with his friend Enkidu, he sets out to make a name for himself. In the second, in grief after his friend's death, he seeks out the meaning of life and also the

quest for immortality. He is told time and time again, that it is better to enjoy the pleasures of life than to seek out the meaning of life, as there is no permanence, and Gilgamesh will not escape death. Another ancient piece is the *Odyssey*, the Greek epic poem attributed to Homer, about the 10-year journey of Odysseus to reach his home of Ithaca. We observe his humanity, including his intelligence, his cunning, and his hubris.

Many of the most important journeys of the medieval period involve religious pilgrimages. These journeys were to destinations of shrines for saints and relics, often associated with stories of miracles, and they held for many participants religious, moral, or healing goals. These include journeys to the Christian Holy Land or the Santiago de Compostela. Moreover, one of the earliest and most often read pieces of English literature is about a pilgrimage, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, stories by a group of pilgrims as they travel together to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. Famous journeys exist across many religions and cultures, from the Oracle of Delphi in Greece, to the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam, and to Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimages to circumnavigate the holy mountain of Mount Kailash in Tibet.

But we also study fantastical journeys, such as Dante's travels through hell, purgatory and heaven, allegorically the soul's travel toward god, in the *Divine Comedy*; or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* to many foreign countries and with many misfortunes that befall him, written as a contemporary political satire of the early 1700s in England.

We also study travel journals of remarkable explorers and naturalists, such as those of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the first known crossing to the Pacific Coast, or Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, both a splendid travel journal as well as his scientific field journal.

Journeys also play an important role in commerce and political economy. Marco Polo's *The Travels of Marco Polo*, from Venice to China, informed the western world of this merchant family's extraordinary and dangerous commercial journeys as far away as China, and helped to inspire Christopher Columbus. Thomas Jefferson had an insatiable curiosity, and one of his often studied writings is *Thomas Jefferson Travels: Selected Writings 1784-89*, which covers his time as American minister plenipotentiary to France, and his travels in Europe. And, many CMC students read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, after his travels to the United States. In these writings, he explores the emerging democratic order in America, its emerging equality, its civil society independent of the state, and the hard work and money-making character of Americans. He also makes the important observation that even then, almost any issue of great consequence eventually reaches the U.S. Supreme Court.

Actual personal journeys also figure in the writings of many authors whom we study in literary fiction. For example, the book *The Innocents Abroad* was Mark Twain's best-selling publication in his lifetime, which concerned his actual journey through Europe and to the Holy Land. Charles Dickens wrote his *American Notes for General Circulation*, about his trip to North America in 1842 (and particularly noteworthy was his condemnation of slavery). Anthony Trollope wrote about his travels to South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Lawrence Durrell wrote *Reflections on a Marine Venus* about his time on the Greek island of Rhodes. I enjoy reading these authors' interpretations of a particular place at a particular time. Their writings accompany me on my Nook as I travel to these same destinations.

So, the reading, studying, and discussion about journeys, whether as allegories or actual personal journeys is a time-honored method of pursuing the liberal arts. On the deeper palimpsest of the CMC liberal arts journey, students acquire an education that is with them forever, whether it is the development of critical thinking and communications skills; the ways to analyze a problem from both the sciences and the humanities; or learning the skill of how to learn in such a way that their education is much more useable and likely to remain with them over a lifetime.

Moreover, the liberal arts are essential to the better functioning of our democratic society and institutions. As Martha Nussbaum, has stated in her book *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, the liberal arts help create “complete citizens who can think for themselves, critique tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements.” She notes that in a democracy, young people need to grow up to be participants in a form of government where people inform themselves about crucial issues that they will address as voters or elected officials, have an understanding of the wide range of types of people and their backgrounds, and understand how their votes and public policy positions will impact others.

As I know from many years of personal experience, an outstanding liberal arts education is also the best preparation for professional learning and work experience, whether in the older professions of law, medicine, and theology, or the newer pursuits of business and engineering. Let me use a few examples from my own experiences as a law school student and law professor.

One of the most famous liberal arts examples is that of John Milton’s *Areopagitica*. As many of you will recognize, Areopagus is a hill in Athens near the Acropolis, the site of tribunals and the name of an important Athenian council. Written in 1644, the *Areopagitica* was a polemical condemnation of pre-publication censorship. It is considered even today as one of the most important defenses ever written of freedom of speech and of the press. The U.S. Supreme Court has cited it several times in its interpretation of our U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment.

If you are going to study law seriously, one ought to have some foundational insights drawn from the philosophy of law as to “what is law anyway?” “What are the goals or purposes of the law; I mean; why should we want it?” “What are the criteria by which we ought to judge the validity and acceptability of a law?” “How do we have both law and freedom?” “What are the theories of human relationships by which we should hold Person X liable for harm to Person Y for negligence to the person or criminal harm and punishment?”

Some sense of Western history is extraordinarily useful. Most people in the world live under a so-called civil law system that is derived from Roman law and the Napoleonic Code, and fewer people live under the so-called common law system that evolved out of the juridical history of England. Roman civil law, with more than two millennia of jurisprudential evolution, is applied throughout Western Europe, Russia, China, Japan, and Latin America. The common law, starting roughly with Henry II in England, is largely applied in those countries that were colonized by England, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, and parts of Africa. The history and approaches of these two systems to statutes, judicial opinions, and legal processes are quite different, and these differences matter to contemporary, comparative practice of law, whether it is with respect to commerce or individual rights and liberties. Few lawyers are so bi-culturally trained to understand the disparate approaches to legal issues under each

system. Those few who are so trained have received an education that includes history, culture, and languages within the context of liberal arts.

A question that is often asked is what accounts for the exceptional success of business, commerce, and wealth creation in the common law, English speaking countries? One argument attributes some of this success to the importance placed on case law or precedent developed by judges and court opinions, rather than civil law statutes. Cases and their precedent provide legal flexibility to suit the evolution of actual practice and needs while also giving reasonably precise guidance and predictability through the strength of precedent in court opinions.

An understanding of economics, particularly microeconomics, is also essential to the appropriate study of law. Probably the application of economic principles and methods has been the single greatest influence on law and legal analysis in the last quarter of the 20th century. One of the most famous examples is the Nobel Prize winner Ronald Coase's Theorem from his writing *The Problem of Social Costs*, which looks at how well-defined property rights can minimize the problem of externalities.

Newer social sciences, such as psychology, and the natural sciences, have a very important role to play in law. Let me provide just a few examples. Psychological methods are applied, for example, to understand jury decision-making, and whether it is as fair and just as that of judges, or the reliability of eyewitness testimony and the problem of mistaken identity. The Innocence Project is a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted individuals through DNA testing and also pursuing the appropriate use of science in legal procedures. Mathematics and statistics are also critical to contemporary, complex litigation, whether it is antitrust or employment discrimination.

And, of course, our Government Department's splendid focus on students' reading the texts of our Founding Fathers, such as Adams, Franklin, Hamilton, Jay, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington, and their practical application of political philosophy, leads to a much richer professional study of constitutional law.

I cannot think of a single liberal arts subject, including all of those that you are required to take, that does not inform the study of law and legal institutions. Moreover, such core learning outcomes as critical thinking and reasoning, communication skills, both written and oral, and a strong sense of moral responsibility and civic virtue, all play an important role in the study of the law and a successful professional life in the law.

Journeys and the liberal arts can also influence the direction of one's professional work in interesting ways. Earlier, my own personal, global journeys led me gradually and enthusiastically to increasingly adjust my professional scholarship and teaching to international subjects. I was particularly interested in U.S. foreign policy as it applies to international economic law and international economic organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. I spent a fellowship year at the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. Trade Representative's Office. As a faculty member, I also developed and directed international and comparative law programs in Europe at the University of Copenhagen, the Free University of Brussels, and the University of Geneva, and in Asia at the University of Hong Kong. I taught from time to time outside the United States, and I always enjoyed the mix of students in my U.S. classes from a wide range of countries. After the fall of the Soviet Union, I will never forget a young man from the former Czechoslovakia who informed me one morning that he was having

trouble with the economics in our international trade class because he had been taught Marxist economics!

Another important purpose of a liberal arts education is to help you lead an interesting personal life and also be an interesting person, thus preparing you for both society and solitude. In my family, we liked to play word games. For example, what is the difference between a “solecism” and a “solipsism”? “Or a “modicum” and an “aliquot share”? We would explain to the children at the breakfast table that they were “masticating their comestibles.” This sent them scurrying off to the dictionary. We spoke to them about words named for people, such as what is a “Spoonerism”? Or what is a “Malapropism”? It is a word after Mrs. Malaprop, a character in *The Rivals*, a play by Richard Sheridan, produced in 1775, in which she constantly uses words inappropriately. One of her efforts: “If I reprehend anything in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs.”

Well what do I mean by all of this? Our students are engaged in an important process that will make them a well-educated man or woman. An important part of being a well-educated person is very simply becoming an interesting person in society. Students, you do not want yourself or your family or friends to conclude that you possess an uninteresting mind or that you are an even downright boring person! A well educated person can indeed become playful with his or her own knowledge; can discover endless forms of self-amusement; and can be a recurring source of joy to close family and friends over a lifetime.

In addition to enhancing (hopefully) my interpersonal relationships, my liberal arts interests have increased greatly my enjoyment and benefits from professional and personal journeys. I use these opportunities to read history, literature, art and architecture, and contemporary politics about the countries that I am visiting. I like the tangible and melancholy nature of ruins, and also the insights you gain from experiencing geography, such as the great drop of land to the north of Roman Britain’s Hadrian’s Wall in northern England; or seeing how the Golan Heights loom directly above the Sea of Galilee, or how small Israel actually is when you drive across it. Physical geography helps enlighten the study of history and contemporary politics. And, my insatiable curiosity has sent me over the world from the Karakorum Mountains en route to K2 in northern Pakistan to Jane Goodall’s chimpanzee Gombe Stream Research Center at Lake Tanganyika. In these ways, the liberal arts prepare you for the pleasures of solitude.

And, continuing on my autobiographical note, the liberal arts inform me every single day as the President of CMC as I work to uphold, promote, and sustain some of the most important values and virtues of our College. First and foremost, I have a passion and belief in the importance of the liberal arts education that we provide to our students, for all of the aims and outcomes that I have previously described. I support our leadership mission as best executed within the foundation of liberal arts understandings enhanced by some pre-professional, practical skills development. Appropriately executed, this is a healthy and successful tension of liberal arts and pre-professionalism that distinguishes us from almost all other liberal arts college.

I have a passion for freedom of inquiry, freedom of expression, and academic freedom. I can think of no other liberal arts college that pursues these important values with more vigor and balance across differing viewpoints. And, speaking of differing viewpoints, I know of no liberal arts college that brings more speakers to campus of such a wide range of viewpoints, around which we educate our students to take critical inquiry seriously, and to debate differences of opinion in a civilized fashion. In 2008, *Newsweek Magazine* chose Claremont McKenna College as the “hottest college for Election Year.” It noted that we

have many students who major in government and international relations, but it also stated: “Most of the rest are also talking politics, the campus obsession. Few selective colleges in America have such ideologically balanced faculties and student bodies. Speakers like Bill Clinton and Justice Antonin Scalia dropped by last spring, and neither was tarred and feathered.” Indeed, cultivating the liberal arts of civilized debate is to be celebrated.

CMC is a young institution, arguably the most successful institution of its kind in such a short period of time, which has always out-performed the size of its resources. We accomplish this, I believe, because we possess a more focused educational platform of liberal arts, but with a commitment of superlative achievements and excellence in those areas that we do contain. I unquestionably think that our faculty is the very best in their fields among all liberal arts colleges. We pay attention to our students, and each can obtain an individually, hand-tailored education. And, although we are far from perfect, we, and I personally, do try to pursue and cultivate those virtues that make for a worthy and happy community, such as cultivating intellectual curiosity, fairness and justice, integrity, and courage.

The human journey is analogous to that of a pilgrimage where we constantly move toward and seek a serious purpose through life and to its end, trying to follow the virtues for the best possible good and happy life. On September 18, 2007, Randy Pausch, a Carnegie Mellon Professor of Computer Science, Human Computer Interaction, and Design, presented to 400 people his last lecture, entitled *Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams*. It has been viewed by many on YouTube and caught the imagination of persons throughout the country. Although he knew that he was dying of pancreatic cancer, he appeared healthy, and his last lecture was not one about his thoughts on dying; rather, it was a lecture on how to live life to the fullest, applying aspects of universal human wisdom. Indeed, it was a liberal arts lecture about his uniqueness as a human being, and he celebrated that he had been lucky and able to achieve the dreams rooted in his childhood. He noted that educators best serve students by helping them to be more self-reflective, to learn how to judge themselves, and how to develop character-building honesty.

For our students, my message today, is that we are so very pleased that you originate from so many different places, cultures, and backgrounds. We are happy that you decided to make the journey to study here with us. These are a precious four years in which to garner as much of human wisdom as you can from your liberal arts education. Most assuredly this education will benefit you every step in the journey of your life, just as it has benefited me so very, very much. It will enhance your professional achievements; it will teach you how to learn for a lifetime; it will provide you with personal pleasures in your solitude; it will provide joy to your family and friends because you are a more interesting person; it will make you a more responsible member of our democratic, civil society; and it will help you live by the virtues for a happy and fulfilling life.

In closing, it is an honor to serve as your President, and I wish for everyone a splendid and personally rewarding academic year in this fine CMC, liberal arts community.

## References

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