



Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2013

No Constraints

*Hiram E. Chodosh,
President of Claremont McKenna College*

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No Constraints

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Thank you Diana [Selig]. I'm not sure I could ever live up to that billing. But it is a great thrill to be here with you today: with our brilliant faculty, our dedicated staff and alumni, and especially our amazing students, including the Class of 2017.

And it's also my great pleasure to introduce Priya to all of you and it is also a great honor to deliver this convocation address.

Today, to each of you, especially our students, I offer two words:

No Constraints!

I started College 32 years ago. On the surface, I shared a common profile with all of you: high school athlete, student body president, foreign language experience, read the paper every day, a strong impulse to make a difference. But I wasn't nearly as accomplished as you are. Indeed, anything I learned to do reasonably well, I performed miserably when I started.

I forgot my lines in the 3rd grade play, as my friend Lois held a pin in her hand to stick me if I messed up. In my first ten at-bats in Little League, I was proud to be hit by a pitch to take my first base and to make contact once: a foul ball. I showed up to play ice hockey and had no idea how to skate. Later, on my college's placement test for German, I scored a remarkable 25 out of 100: 4 multiple-choice questions. I was able to eke out a D-plus on my first Russian test. I could go on.

Understanding two simple words helped me reverse and learn from this record of initial failure. Two simple words form the theme and plea of my address today: No Constraints!

Now I don't mean that we live in a world of no constraints. Indeed, we live every day with constraints, many outside our control: inadequate resources, disease, political polarization, vicious cycles of violence, to name a few severe limitations on the realization of our most cherished human freedoms.

And this is also not to tell you, particularly our class of 2017, that you are all now free to do whatever you want. Obviously, I want you to have deep regard for others, think through the consequences of your actions, and most of all, to be *safe*. As both president and especially as a parent, I understand the pressures you have been under: the non-stop homework, the endless tests, the innumerable college essays, the service obligations. And I also understand from both sides the

pressures from your incredibly supportive, well-intentioned parents, from the bright lights on your college choices at the dinner table to the constant reminders to keep you on track.

I know that many of you may think now that the point of your newfound freedom in college will be to do the things you could *not* do (or *not* do as *freely*) in high school. I know too that the need for moderation may be the furthest thing from your minds. But moderation, health, and safety are all important constraints that are essential to realizing your greatest dreams.

So which constraints do I mean? Which constraints do I want to target today? I want to touch on three.

One, we frequently harbor false ideas about our own limitations, what we might call educational insecurity or prejudice about what we can achieve as individuals;

Two, we tend to carry narrow concepts of identity that are excessively exclusive in nature; and

Three, we often, all of us, hesitate to take on new challenges out of fear of failure.

Each (alone and together) holds us back. Let's take a quick look at these in turn.

First, we grow up internalizing limitations of our abilities and interests. What we can do is often seen in opposition to what we can't. And we become insecure and unjustifiably deferential. Yet, these ideas about opposition and inability are often naïve and demonstrably false. The great writers have an implicit, deep understanding of structure and rhythm. The great mathematicians are in many ways pure philosophers (and often very good musicians). The great physicists are outrageously imaginative in their ability to visualize the real world in advance of their empirical observations. The great social enterprises draw on the most sophisticated business practices. And great thinkers and doers take charge of understanding disciplines and expertise at a deeper methodological level. Recognizing those underlying connections is so essential to the critically creative contributions our civilization needs. This is what makes the liberal arts so vital, not only in the fulfillment of full and productive *living*, but also in the effectiveness of *learning* and *doing*. And it is that special connection of rigorous study and action that makes CMC so powerful. So I know together we can overcome this first constraint.

Believe me. My language ability was poor when I graduated from high school, but I still managed to learn four foreign languages in five years. And when I confronted major intractable problems in my own modest work—corruption in

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Indonesia, sectarianism in Iraq, notorious court delay in India—I have drawn widely on my liberal arts experiences: the diverse exercises from my liberal arts education, from creating Euclidean and non-Euclidean theorems from scratch, drawing teleological comparisons of St. Augustine and Marx, and mastering performing arts in a foreign medium.

Each experience helped me challenge assumptions, see underlying connections, imagine new possibilities, and gain self-confidence in tackling tough problems.

Second, as a parallel to educational prejudice about our abilities, we grow up with social, cultural, and institutional identities that tend to be exclusive. I mean the *us/them*, the ways in which we define ourselves by what we are not. And that sense of exclusion limits who we can become, what we can do. To be sure, identities are important to our sense of belonging, yet they also can be destructive to our mutual interdependencies. Demographic identities, disciplinary identities, and political identities are important, but they can also put us in a box, constrain our thinking, and inhibit our capacities. And yet, when we open up the opportunity for expanding them, we not only create the foundation for greater empathy but also integrated solutions to mixed problems. This is what makes the liberal arts experience so important, to develop those close relationships that go way beneath the surface, to nourish the interconnected roots of your studies, and to be free to grow in ways that transcend the limited identities we tend to impose on one another. Together, I know we can overcome overly narrow conceptions of ourselves as typical or atypical. *Us* or *them*.

Believe me: I grew up in a town, divided by a highway, where everyone was partitioned into one racial or ethnic group or another, and where inter-ethnic humiliation was common. And now, I live with many sub-identities I have embraced over the years. I am still who I am, still a Giants fan, still from exit 141 on the Garden State Parkway, but when I meet someone from Jamaica (where one of my college roommates was from), or Ghana, or Russia, or China, or Iraq (some of the countries I've grown to know), I feel a special connection and friendship. And with my wife Priya and extended family from India and my 17 years of work and close relationships there, and seeing my kids grow their own connection, I feel a strong identity—in the words of my closest professional colleagues there—as “India’s son-in-law.”

Beyond these two, there is a related third constraint: the fear of failure. Here I mean the anxiety that keeps us from trying things we think we’re not capable of. If

we are afraid to fail, we never learn. We never try anything new. We can't score if we are afraid to shoot. If the founders and leaders of CMC had let the fear of failure overwhelm the institutional decisions they had to make, we would never have become the premier college we are today.

With the exception of a few prodigies, no expert or leader starts out with success. You can't master a mathematical theorem, you can't speak a foreign language fluently, or take an organization from good to great, without embracing and learning through failure.

Believe me: My first memo in law school, my first brief in practice, my first article in academics...each came back with more red ink than the Greek national budget!

Now, for all these experiences, for all these obstacles I faced, they were dwarfed, they were eclipsed by those of my closest friend in high school, Darion. So if you don't believe me, listen to his story.

Darion grew up in Newark, New Jersey. He had some sort of undiagnosed tongue ailment, and didn't speak until he was five. This set him way back in academic terms but he overcompensated for it with charisma. Darion moved to my town, Hillside, when he started school. The town, as I said, had racially tracked real estate practices, so 4 of 5 elementary schools were segregated. Darion and I met on the basketball court in 7th grade. Neither of us was very skilled, but we both played and competed hard. We had an unspoken communication at first, based on mutual respect as both of us kept the racial tensions under close wraps, particularly in close games with controversial calls by white refs. When we entered high school, we became close. We were *then* on the same team. We spent summers baling hay and building fences on my sister's farm. We worked together in our school and communities. We played a fierce one-on-one. We entered each other's world, and we were called many names for our friendship. And we taught each other many things.

Most of all, we motivated one another. Darion saw me do things (like study dance) that he knew I was horrible at when I started. And I saw the kid whose tongue didn't work grow into a serious student and a dynamic speaker. Notwithstanding his academic challenges, Darion got through high school, went to community college, graduated from Morgan State, had a spiritual transformation as born-again, went to a year of seminary school, learned to bring down the house as a preacher, and eventually founded a church in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Baltimore. He got married, had two kids, a house, and the Volvo sedan he always

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wanted, and then he got very sick. After his first illness, he dreamed only of watching his kids grow up, and then (nearly fifteen years ago) he got very sick again, and his last dream turned to dust.

Darion wrote his own sermons. He was constantly studying and coming up with new approaches. He was learning and teaching off of his own page. Even through most of his illness, he saw no limit to what he could learn or achieve.

Darion grew his own identity. He was comfortable in all-white, Latino, and other communities, as he was in his own. He loved me, my siblings, my parents as his own family. He never limited the range of people he could learn from or teach.

Darion transcended his own fears, and he led by example. He didn't let the weighty obstacles keep him from his dreams. He learned what he didn't know. He broke through the social barriers that tried to contain what or who he could become. He didn't let the perception of a ceiling keep him from reaching for the sky.

Darion and I were separated by many things: the highway that cut through our hometown, the racial divide, the uneven resources of our families, conflicting religious beliefs, and then sadly, his illness. And at the same time, these divides brought us together.

At the heart of what brought us close were the parallel lessons we pursued: a shared commitment to attack the educational prejudices and insecurities we carried about our own abilities; the growth of our shared identity; and the courage we summoned to never give up until external forces beyond our control finally defeat us. In sum, we learned to live by the mantra, No Constraints!

Why are these lessons so important for all of us here? Because the ability to transcend constraints is a singular strength at CMC, and we can get even better at testing and building on it.

Because, these are the capacities the world needs and values: the creativity that comes from attacking educational insecurity and prejudice, the shared identities we need to transcend our sectarian challenges, the courageous sense of diving into the most intractable problems without fear of failure.

And because the alignment of CMC's strengths and the world's greatest needs is our most central, powerful pursuit—for each of us, for all of us.

Just think of CMC alum Brentt Baltimore, Class of 2010, who wanted to make a difference in Detroit and turned to *Venture for America* to do for entrepreneurship what Teach for America has done for education. Or think of 2012 alums Zach Ingrassci and Chris Temple, who tried to understand what it's like to live like 1.1 billion other people in the world on only one dollar a day. Or think of Milly Fotso, Class of 2016, who is developing a venture to bring needed medical supplies to her home country of Cameroon. I could go on.

So I'm not telling you anything you don't already understand, *not you*, for you already exhibit the qualities we seek to cultivate, the capacities our society needs. Yet, articulating these constraints and the ways we can all overcome them makes us more aware, more articulate, more deliberate about harnessing the power of overcoming them.

You have the intellectual curiosity and drive to transcend these self-limitations, to question assumptions, to be skeptical of the data, to look beneath the surface and ask the *why* and *how* questions beneath the *what*. And you have the creativity to reconstruct those assumptions, bring new bodies of evidence, to sharpen our working theories and behaviors in the world. Can we build on that?

You have the openness and out-going nature to put your attention on others, to learn their stories, to adopt and internalize those narratives as your own, to fight back against anyone who wants to put you in a box, as a typical of this or that. Can we reinforce that at every turn?

And you have the courage and the drive to overcome your fears, to enter a demanding and challenging academic program in which you will have to take courses that you may not feel you are as strong in, to be compared with other extremely talented students, and to distinguish yourselves in an increasingly competitive world.

I know this is tough, and I know you will worry about disappointing yourself, your parents, your professors. I know too that the worry of failure is motivating. I won't dilute that for a moment. But I want you to know that after every wrong answer on a test, for every phrase in red ink on a paper, for every failed initiative, I will be celebrating the risks you take, your openness to new endeavors, your drive and perseverance to confront challenges, because those are the lessons that will make you stronger, better, more productive in all you seek to achieve. And those are the qualities that make this College great and will make it even more powerful in the future. So can we tackle this one too—can we support one another as we fearlessly take on the most formidable challenges?

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Yes, we can do all this, with confident, cross-cutting creativity, open collaboration, and fierce courage—to remove, within our power, any and all obstacles in our path.

If Darion were here in person, he would tell you the same thing.

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Thank you very much.