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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2003

**Top 10 List of Best Advice
for College Students**

Diane F. Halpern

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Convocation is about beginnings and about bringing people together, that is convening them, to celebrate the start of the academic year. In preparing for my presentation, I began with the kind of deep thoughts that would be appropriate for this occasion. My first thought was, of course, “What will I wear?” Fortunately, I had this basic black robe, colorful cape, and stylish square hat accessorized with a gold tassel that provides very little shade—the perfect outfit for anyone planning to attend an outdoor Convocation on a sweltering afternoon. With the first important question answered, I then turned to the next one—what should I say? After all, I don’t want to waste my 15 minutes of fame with some eminently forgettable remarks. So, I did what countless other convocation speakers before me have done (and no, the answer is not copy it from the internet, although I did find out that you can buy convocation speeches on the internet), I did it the old-fashioned way, I turned to admired colleagues and friends to cull their collective wisdom. Surprisingly, the advice I received was unanimous. As one dear friend, who has given many convocation and graduation speeches over a long lifetime advised me: It is important to have strong beginning (well I guess I already blew that one) and a solid ending (there’s still hope for that), but the most important thing is to keep them close together.

So, in the spirit of brevity and with all of the solemnity of another loopy lover of lists, I present The Top Ten List of Best Advice for College Students—

Drumroll please (Is a drum roll possible? Perhaps the audience could hum a drum roll)—

First, let me say that I like lists. They make me clear up the clutter in my thinking and force me to clarify my ideas and values. So, let the listing begin:

<drum roll>

***Leonard Bernstein's character, Anita, in West Side Story was wrong—Don't stick to your own kind.**

You cannot be broadly educated and narrow-minded, and you cannot see your own world with objective clarity without viewing it from a perspective that is different from your own. Whatever your background, however you define yourself, hang with people who do not belong to your own ingroup. They will challenge your world view and force you to rethink your assumptions about people whose race, religion, politics, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, heroes, beliefs, values, music, dress, and humor are different from your own. They will make it easier for you to tell the difference between truth and dogma. These are important lessons in our ever-shrinking world.

<drum roll>

***Think Big Ideas**—Sometime soon, you will find yourself bogged down with more class work and assignments than you ever thought possible. You will moan about the paper you have to write on the allegorical significance of Chaucer's metaphorical journey, the impossible calculus problems that your twisted textbook author labeled either "the proof is obvious" (when you have no idea how to begin and would like to meet the person for whom the proof is obvious in a dark alley some night) or, the even more damning words, "The proof is left to the reader," and you suddenly realize that they're referring to you. You will conjugate verbs in languages you never heard of and in tenses that you cannot think in. And, if you are like many other students, you will perform these heroic tasks in the dark of night and, unfortunately, under conditions of severe sleep deprivation.

When my son started college, he piled up all his textbooks for the first semester of his freshman year, (they stood several feet high), placed his head next to them and declared the simple fact of physics that "it" would never fit. He could never cram the information in so many feet of textbooks into his much smaller head—yet, somehow he did. It is far too easy to feel overwhelmed by the day-to-day assignments and forget to stop and ask the big questions. Someday, you will see the allegorical significance of your own journey through life and someday you will share a taxi with someone who speaks only that language you wondered why you are learning. It's like my dancing lessons. For years, I have taken dancing lessons—I learned steps,

watched my feet when I was supposed to look away, counted to four in various beats—quick, quick slow, quick, quick, slow, and always managed to demonstrate a profound level of awkwardness that made Dumbo the elephant look graceful. Then, one day (well actually it was only one day)—I danced, and I finally understood the tedium of learning steps and counting beats. In the same way, even the most abstract and tedious concepts in economics or government or even psychology come down to questions about the ability of families to feed their children, live in a safe democracy, develop a meaningful identity, and someday you will use that knowledge to pose and solve life's big questions.

<drum roll>

***Really Care About Something Bigger Than You**

Find your passion and then find some way to use that passion to make the world a better place—to make morally courageous decisions even when they are unpopular. Become a selective zealot and choose to offend, if necessary (but please, only when necessary and not just for the hell of it). No one ever said that saving the world would be easy. With education comes responsibility, and in a few years, you will be among the best educated adults in the world, so the responsibility to use your education for good is even greater than most. Apathy, indifference, and cynicism can get in the way—don't let them. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it well: "If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live."

<drum roll>

***Celebrate the People you love, and along with that—love carefully and often.**

No, I don't mean anything lascivious. Love your friends, your family, and the other special people you come across in your life. Humans are social animals and we suffer great pain and even illness, if we do not establish emotional bonds with the other members of our species. Whatever difficulties life has in store for you, they will be easier to bear if you have a friend by your side. You need them to laugh with you when life is at its grimmest and there is nothing to laugh about and to celebrate the good times, too. A friend will think you are a good egg even if you are a little cracked, and there is no greater gift than that that we can give each other. Become friends with at least one of your professors and one of our terrific staff, these academic friendships can help you through the lows and highs of college life and the life that waits for you

beyond Claremont McKenna College. For those of you lucky enough to have a loving family, hold tight to them even as you move away to become an independent adult. You won't outgrow your need for family.

<drum roll>

***Finally, have the courage to learn.**

Now, you are going to tell me that you are all good learners, after all you got here because you had top grades, scored high on standardized tests, and finished near the top of your high school class. Guess what?—so did everyone else sitting here today. For the first time, you will face academic and intellectual challenges and you will have choices as to how you will meet them. It will be far easier to take courses in only those subjects where you already have a strong background—you already know that you will shine in these academic areas, and with some careful finagling you may be able to avoid courses that are hard for you. In that way, you can avoid the discomfort of not understanding, the uneasiness of finding your views and opinions challenged by ones that you don't like or understand, and you can safely sail through college without showing your own vulnerability. But, real learning is about taking risks. Real risks—being able to say “I don't understand”—being able to think about opinions that you don't like—being able to speak out for an unpopular cause—and being able to say you were wrong and change your mind because of something you learned. Hopefully, you will graduate from CMC a changed person. You will see the world in a different way because you have actively taken an excellent education. If you are willing to take intellectual risks, you will take away far more with you than if you played it safe.

You are each here today because you have something unique and great to give back to society. In the next four years you will develop skills and abilities you didn't know you had and never knew you wanted. I know that there is much greatness in each of you, and I look forward to watching it unfold and like all of the faculty and staff who are here today—you know the ones who showed up to sweat for the sake of convocation—I look forward to knowing you.

By the way, for those of you who have kept count, I only listed 5 of the Top Ten Best Advice for College Students. As I left the house this morning, my daughter yelled out, “Remember Mom,

keep it short.” So, I did. The other 5 items on the list of best advice for college students are left for you to discover on your own. I hope that sometime over the next 4 years, you will discover your own top 5 best advice for college students and share your insights with me and with each other. After all, you really didn’t really expect me to give you all the answers because as the more seasoned college students know already know, the proof is always left to the reader.