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UCSB Convocation Speech

I'm honored to speak to you today, and I'm especially thankful to my colleagues in the Division of Student Affairs for bringing us all together. I'd also like to thank Chancellor Yang, Vice Chancellor Young, Dean Nisbet, Dean Marshall, and the many Deans and professors and staff for making this University such a terrific place to work and study. For those of you who are new to the University, you're in for a wonderful experience. I think you're very lucky, and my remarks today are about why I think you're so fortunate to be here.

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I started college a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, but standing here, looking out where you're sitting, I remember what I was thinking and feeling when I was eighteen. My brother Edward went to college first—he transferred to a UC campus, he struggled, and his friends had struggled even more. A few of them had been dismissed for poor grades, and it was a shock because I knew these guys and they seemed super smart to me. Watch out, my brother said, it isn't easy, and even though you're smart, everyone in college is smart. Ed showed me that about ten percent of first year students in the UC system don't graduate, and just the thought of that was scary. My brother freaked me out.

Still, like many of you right now, I had high hopes. I wanted to be a lawyer, and I knew that this would mean three more years of law school after college. I thought I'd be a judge, too, maybe a federal judge, maybe even a Supreme Court Justice. I would also have a way-cool wife, 2.5 children, and a nice house with a big TV. First thing first, though: I knew that I'd have to do well in college to have a chance at a good law school, and I felt most of the time that this was quite possible. I did well in high school (just like many of you), and my teachers told me I was pretty smart (just like you).

Also, I can't speak for you, but in my late teens, I thought I was smarter than a lot of grown-ups—I mean, I thought I knew more than most of my peers, some of my own teachers, and most of the people who lived on my street, people in Congress, and maybe my older brother and my mother, too. My brother lost his keys all the time, and my mom struggled with English—she'd say, "I'm so exciting," when she meant, "I'm so excited." I thought I was smarter, I thought I could handle college.

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College turned out to be a humbling experience. In high school, I hadn't really gotten bad grades, but my first midterm was a B-, my first essay was a C-. In the first few weeks, it was as though my wheels were coming off. Going to office hours often made me feel worse: my professors and TAs told me that my writing needed a lot of work, that I wasn't thinking deeply enough about this or that, and that I wasn't reading carefully enough or paying attention. All of this was quite depressing.

I was also sobering up in my classes, too. The trouble was that I didn't know how little I knew until college—I thought I knew a lot, but college revealed just how vast, how big, how complicated the world was, and how things like black holes and interest rates and Mark Twain could suck up your whole life. It was as if smart had nothing to do with it: my brilliant economics professor knew finance, and my American literature professor seemed to have read every novel and poem in the English language, but the economics guy admitted that he didn't "get" fiction, and the lit professor said that she had a hard time understanding mortgages. It dawned on me that all smart people had limits, and not because they weren't smart enough, but because things are just very, very complicated. I had no idea that economics and American lit were such vast fields of knowledge. At eighteen, I was too dopey to realize how dopey I was.

Of all the classes I took, the ones in the social sciences shook me the most, for it was in these classes that I'd learned how lucky I was, too. If you take Soc 1 or a history class, you'll learn as I did that social forces shape all of our lives—I'm an Asian American, and about sixty years ago, people like me could not become American citizens, and no matter how smart Asian Americans were back then, they couldn't go to college, they were defined as enemy aliens, and opportunities were restricted for them and for other people of color and for women, too. My

own children sitting over there would have attended segregated schools. Sometimes, even in this great country, where Chinese Americans are now Chancellors and women are now Deans, smart just didn't matter.

Things have changed, of course, but less than you would imagine: one of my colleagues, Dean Leila Rupp, reminded me, from this very podium, that right now, if the world were a village of a hundred people, only one person would even have the chance to complete a college education. Very few people in the world get to be in the position you enjoy right now. Many of you have friends and siblings and parents who've gone to college, and so you might think that this is somehow "normal," but I assure you that it is not. Indeed, many of you will meet fellow students who will be the first in their families to go to college, and for those families, this is like a dream come true. All of you—all of us—are exceptionally lucky: in this world, many people still have no access to clean water or flushing toilets, let alone college. Right now, for a depressing majority of people, being smart is still not enough.

I learned in college that I'd been fortunate my whole life. I had a supportive family, I had good teachers, and I had been born in a time when being a person of color didn't mean that my life chances were restricted in ways that were legal, formal, and institutionalized as much as they'd once been. I learned about slavery and poverty and the inhumanity that one group of people can inflict upon another. I learned that being "smart" didn't save people from suffering, from persecution, or from other forms of horrendous grief and misery and pain.

Those lessons changed me and took me out of myself.

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College was upsetting. I was forced to admit certain things about myself that were hard: I wasn't in college because I was "smart" per se, but because I was lucky; I had been very naïve about the world and I knew a lot less than I'd ever imagined and I had been arrogant even as I was being dopey; and I had to come to terms with certain limits, limits that seem obvious now but were not obvious to me when I was your age. I could not, for example, become an economics professor and a literature professor and a civil rights lawyer and a Supreme Court justice and a guitar player and a linebacker and a novelist and a poet. I had to choose. The

difficulty with these choices wasn't that any of them were bad, but that all of them were pretty good, and all were worthwhile in their own way.

A few of the choices were made easier by my obvious lack of talent: guitar player wasn't going to work out, and linebacker was even less likely. Still, what to do? I remember that confusion very well, and ever since, I still feel that it's a little unfair to expect people who are still eighteen or nineteen to know what they'll do for the rest of their lives. I know that picking a major and having plans after college isn't quite the same as "knowing what to do for the rest of your life," but sometimes I resented having to decide anything while I was still so clueless.

To tell you the truth, I *still* don't know what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. I did pick a major in college, I went to grad school, and now I like teaching and I like writing and doing research, but I still think it'd be wonderful to write a novel. I miss lawyering, too, and I miss having clients who could benefit from my work. I miss winning. I also admire people who do non-profit work, people who help others find housing, employment, and other services. I have friends in public office, and I can see the sacrifices that they're making to do that, and I'd like to think that I'd have the courage to do that, too. I also really love this University, and I'd like to contribute to this ascendant institution. I would like to do more to help our students enjoy and finish college.

All of these are admirable things, but I know that I can't do everything, and that I still have tough choices. Through all of this, I am still quite obsessed with my own academic work—as you've heard, I specialize in immigration law and policy, and nothing would please me more than to contribute solutions to our most vexing immigration problems. Again, all of these things—any one of these things—can easily consume a lifetime.

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Problems of choice, of knowing what to do, of wanting to know more about the world and how best to live a good life—these are problems that I still share with you. You should know that all of your professors are wrestling with similar issues, and although you may have thought that the professors and scholars and all of the grown-ups have everything figured out, that's just not true. By definition, a professor at a research university is committed to discovering things that we still don't know, things that are confusing, problems that are

unresolved. You are here to learn from us, but you're here also because we need our best and brightest young people to struggle with us, to help us figure out what we still don't know, what remains to be done. You are here because we need your energy and dedication, we need you to pay attention, and because our world is in trouble, and it's going to take a lot of people working together to figure things out. We have big problems.

You should find a major, and you should do well in college, but instead of going about this as though you were doing this on your own, I'd ask you to do it with a certain frame of mind. Instead of just picking a major, pick a problem. Let me suggest a few:

- Please help us figure out how to live in our world without destroying it. Help us discover and develop new forms of energy that won't cause misery for polar bears and millions of people. Protect that beach, that other beach, this coastline, and every beautiful place you've ever heard about or seen yourself.

- Please help us figure out capitalism—I mean, I think we're pretty much done with communism or with other centralized economic systems, but capitalism could still use some work. We need a more ethical market, something less destructive and less likely to exploit people, or to cause them suffering through recessions, depressions, unemployment, or wage slavery.

- Please help us figure out what to do about social inequality, not just within our nation, but around the world. Poverty forces people to do desperate things, poverty is exceptionally cruel, and it deprives and diminishes all of us. More than ever before, we can see and witness the horrible circumstances that poorer people face every day, and it's morally unacceptable to do nothing in the face of all of that suffering.

- Despite decades of globalization and international travel, most people in most of the world still don't understand one another very well, they fight and kill because of religious or ethnic or racial differences, and with consequences that are devastating. You yourselves know this well: you are a generation that grew up in

that dark shadow of 9/11, and you've lived in a country that seems now to be in a perpetual state of war. It sounds trite and sad and tragic, but we hope that some of you will devote your lives to world peace, so that subsequent generations can live in a safer, more tolerant, and more just world. We still need help to figure out how to live with all of our differences rather than living in fear of one another.

- And please, perhaps a few of you can do something about cancer, malnutrition, obesity, heart disease, or the common cold. We need better medicines, we need more people to have access to medical care, and we have a lot more work to do for everyone to live better, healthier lives.

It'd also be great to have a cheaper iPad, stronger buildings and safer bridges, more honest government, a more rational tax code, and please, please, someone, everyone, do something so that we have a UC system that is more affordable and more secure in its finances. I am twice as old as you are, but you are paying ten times more tuition than I did. That's a huge problem, it's a danger to the state of California, and we need your help to keep this system and this University the best in the world.

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In essence, what I'm saying is that instead of picking a major, you'd be better off picking a problem—a horrible, difficult, and intractable problem. This strategy has many advantages: let's say for example that you pick malaria as your one big problem. This is a big problem, by the way: millions of people get sick and die of malaria, even though we know what causes this disease and we can treat most people who have it. Still, there is no effective, widely-available *vaccine* for malaria, even though such a thing could help save millions of lives. Some of you should pick malaria.

But say you pick malaria, and yet you can't get through organic chemistry. You can take any class at this University more than once, but what if you just can't get through organic chemistry? (Organic chemistry is, in fact, a big problem for many undergraduates.) You may get depressed, you may not ever make it to med school or to a graduate program in

microbiology, but I tell you truly, do not despair. Do not give up. Stay focused on your problem. You can still do so many other things to combat malaria: you can become a public health professional or a health educator so that people can avoid it altogether; you can run for office and win, and then you can raise my taxes to finance malaria research; or you can design cheaper and better mosquito nets, or you can work in a non-profit organization that gets these things to the people who need them.

You can also become a novelist or a journalist or an artist or a poet or a film-maker, and you can tell compelling stories about people who live in fear of disease, of a death that comes often, takes their children, and leaves them heartbroken. A humanist can measure grief, loss, and pain, in ways that scientists cannot, and narratives—powerful stories—are still the primary ways through which we as human beings connect and come to care for one another. We need effective vaccines and medicines, but we also need great art and moving stories that reveal *why* we should all care about malaria even though you yourself may never have worried about it until now.

So, you can be sad that medical school might not be in your future, but think again about your problem. You'll realize that although it does suck that you can't through organic chemistry, other people have much bigger problems, other people face far more serious challenges, and that you are still in a privileged position to help them.

For their sake, for our sake, you must not give up. Smart is not enough, so draw upon the other virtues: be persistent, be honest with yourself, and show courage. Be creative and flexible: write some software, make a gazillion dollars, and give a chunk of your fortune to those geeky people who were freakishly good in organic chemistry, so that *they* can develop a vaccine. Find a problem—something bigger than you—and whatever you do, don't give up.

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I so enjoyed college, even though a lot of what I learned was hard and difficult and upsetting. I learned many things. I learned that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. I learned that even though I may be a little smart, luck and circumstances have shaped my life far more than my meager talents. I learned to work hard to cultivate what little talent I did have. I learned that life was about making tough decisions. And I learned that I could not possibly learn and do everything.

I learned that life was complicated, that many of our problems—whether they are environmental, moral, technological, organizational, political, economic, aesthetic, or medical—are so complex that they require many forms of expertise. We need artists to help us see, skilled writers and speakers and musicians and visionaries to help us understand and connect. We need ethicists, theorists, feminists, economists, and environmentalists. We need anthropologists and linguists, chemists and physicists, historians and philosophers, people who can do a good survey and people who can write neat software. We all need excellent librarians, counselors, advisers, and teachers. No single person, no single discipline, no single organization or group has an answer to the problems that trouble us, and a single lifetime is just not enough.

That's why I believe that the most important thing I learned in college was that we need each other, that we need each other to be successful, that as much as we have benefitted from the love and support of others, it's time to grow up now, to take those blessing that have enriched us and to use them to love and support *other* people, to better ourselves and to understand, to help, to educate, and to apply ourselves to the problems that vex us all.

I learned a lot about myself. I was and I still am obsessed with social and political inequality—that was my big problem—and yet I learned that I could do something about that problem whether I was in a courtroom, in a boardroom, in a conference room, in the classroom, or just working and writing quietly in my own room. I learned that a B- or C- was not a judgment against my character, but it was good feedback, it was an occasion to take stock of myself, then to try harder, and to challenge myself to be a better student and a better writer and thinker and a better person.

I want the same for you. Many of you will struggle here. It's a foreseeable thing. College is upsetting and college is hard. You may discover things about yourself that are unpleasant and difficult. When that happens, do not self-medicate or despair. Reach out for help if you need it, take a break from school if you need it. Whatever you need, however long it takes, we hope that ultimately, you will find the strength to continue your college education, and not just for your own sake, but for my sake, for the sake of my children, for the sake of your children, and for the benefit of the world that we share.

I went to college thinking that it was a simple stepping stone to a profession—I got so much more than that—I got a mind-blowing, gut-wrenching, eye-opening education. If you struggle here, if you persist here, if you can remain focused here, you too will get a most

wonderful education. This is why I am so pleased to see you and why I am so happy for you as you start your own college education.

All of my colleagues wish you the best. My colleagues on this podium are older than you, we are more educated than you, but you should know that we need you. *We* are lucky that *you* are here. So, pick a problem. It isn't really hard: you'll find many professors here who are lost in thought, preoccupied with one vexing thing or another, in our libraries and in our laboratories and in our offices and in our classrooms. Please, join us. Help us out. We are so pleased for your company. We are here for you, and we tell you truly that the best students honor their teachers by going beyond them and by learning more and by doing more than we have.

My mom understood that lesson much better than I did, and long before I even got to college. Because of circumstances, my late mother never went to college herself, but when I went, she was jumping up and down, crying and so happy. In a quiet, serious moment, she said: "I am so exciting for you, John."

Seeing all of you here, thinking about what *your* college experience might be like, I'm so exciting for you, too.