

Aims of Education XIX 2011
To Find, To Create, To Remake
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As Chapman University approaches the conclusion of our 150th Anniversary year, we can all look back with a great deal of pride upon a year filled with celebration, meaningful events and special occasions during which we honored those who have meant so much to our university over the past century and a half. We have also created a series of publications that look back upon our history as well as looking ahead to our future, including anniversary issues of *Chapman Magazine*, two spectacular anniversary books – and this year’s *Aims of Education* pamphlet, which publishes the lecture given by English professor Dr. Anna Leahy at this year’s Opening Convocation for new students and their families.

Who better than a poet to sum up not only Chapman University’s history, in artfully crafted sentences that say so much in just 150 syllables, but also to expand upon those ideas and present them so powerfully to this year’s entering students? In doing so, Anna touches upon a theme that is also a favorite of mine: what happens when the prevailing culture declares that everyone is a winner, that every child is equally talented and deserving of a trophy – in short, that no one ever loses? Is this culture creating generations of students who expect to win easily – only to have their hopes dashed when they encounter real-world challenges?

The philosophy that everyone is always a winner, just by being themselves, is antithetical to the process of learning, as Anna so brilliantly points out in her lecture. As she says, education is about *doing*, not merely *being*. And that is particularly true in the university learning experience, as students come here not just to study, but also to find their true passion. They may search for a while, changing majors, finding that certain fields they thought they enjoyed are not for them, but discovering others that are. Frustration and even failure – whether in social situations, on the athletic field or in the classroom – are sometimes part of the college learning experience, and they are vital lessons. What we as educators and administrators do is to help guide our students through the problems, brick walls and questionable decisions that are an inevitable part of college and life, and help them realize that they, as individuals, can learn from failure and rise above it.

Anna also able communicates the importance of concentration, of taking precious time to think and contemplate – also a crucial lesson we teach our students, in an era when they are constantly distracted by hundreds of texts, Facebook posts, tweets and other media bombardments every day. I hope you will take time to relax, read her essay and contemplate her words – and the beautiful text of the poem she wrote to celebrate Chapman University and our mission: to prepare students for real achievement, well and honestly earned, in their lives and in the world.

To Find, to Create, to Remake

I'm honored to have the opportunity to share my thoughts with everyone gathered here and to share the stage with the university's leaders. On behalf of the faculty, I welcome new students to Chapman University and extend our appreciation to the families who value our aims for a life of learning.

I came to Chapman University three years ago. It's the sort of place I sought out as an educator and as a writer who wants to create and to make a difference in the lives of others. Last year, Charlene Baldwin, the dean of Leatherby Libraries and chair of the 150th Anniversary Committee, asked me to compose a poem to mark the university's birthday. I had never before written a poem on commission and thought she was joking. She wasn't, so I gave myself an assignment, much as I give students poem assignments that generate constraints within which they can discover language and ideas.

The title of that poem is *To Find, to Create, to Remake*. My talk this morning is an extension of that poem and an exploration of what those three aims might mean for education and for those of us gathered here this morning.

When I was young, some of the most important wisdom in my life came from Mr. Rogers, who hosted 895 episodes of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* on PBS from 1968 to 2001 and who began each episode by changing into sneakers and a cardigan while he sang a song asking me to be his neighbor. "You are special," Mr. Rogers told me. "You are the only one like you." That's great and I certainly believe it's true. Each of us is a unique, original iteration of what it means to exist as a human being. But when you think about it, if each of us is special, then being special isn't, in and of itself, very special at all.

A few years ago, I was visiting my nephew's family and noticed several trophies on his desk. I was impressed by what seemed to me evidence of his great athletic accomplishments. But he downplayed these rewards, saying, "My team didn't win. Everybody got a trophy." He recognized that there exists a difference between who a person is and what a person accomplishes. While the experiences of playing baseball and soccer remain important to him, the trophies seemed to carry little meaning.

This summer, as I was thinking about what I might say today, I read an article in *The Atlantic* that recounted, among other anecdotes, concerns of a soccer coach who opposed his community's rule that there be no score-keeping. The coach argued that kids keep score even without an official tally and that children learn from losing as well as from winning. Another expert commented that it was far better for a person to learn ways to deal with defeat as a young child than to miss recognizing those early shortcomings, only to face one's first major obstacles and mistakes on the job.

Wait a minute. If you think you're great, if you're racking up trophies and good report cards, shouldn't you be happy? Several studies show that's not the case. I suggest that learning – defined as finding, creating, remaking – is more important to long-term happiness, success and enthusiasm in life.

In his book *Writing Life Stories*, creative nonfiction writer Bill Roorbach offers another version of this notion: "To be taught, one must be willing to learn."

One must be willing to change, sometimes in fundamental ways, because to learn is to change. A writer [or any student] who really wants to make the next step, to grow, must give up the idea that she's already arrived [...]" (5). In other words, being satisfied with what we can do well easily and with what we have already accomplished can keep us stuck. Instead, effort becomes rewarding, a little anxiety can be thrilling or motivating, and complacency is not the ultimate goal nor is it equivalent with happiness.

Education is about doing, not merely being.

The word *education* comes from the Latin, meaning *to lead out of*. Viewed from this perspective, viewed with the idea of change in mind, education leads us out of our childhoods, out of the homes we have known, out of habits into which we may have settled. Of course, any leading out of is also a leading into.

The university education is a place to *find*. When I was in college, I discovered not so much who I already was but who I wanted to be in the future, how I wanted to spend my time, and where my greatest interests and talents lay. With being special and individual comes both opportunity and obligation.

Fifty percent of college students nationwide change their major at least once before they graduate. When I started college, I wanted to be a surgeon and took chemistry classes my first year. In the end, I came within two courses of earning a degree in sociology-anthropology, even though I was, by then a creative writing major. My sister, a history major now working in politics, claims that one of the most valuable college classes she took was acting, even though her previous acting experience was limited to her kindergarten role as the Virgin Mary, which she reprised in first grade.

One term, I enrolled in ceramics. I found out later that my father questioned the cost of tuition for playing with clay, but my parents didn't criticize my decisions in college, for which I remain grateful. In that ceramics class, I learned how to focus on a task that was both physically and mentally demanding. In a world which it's difficult to resist checking Facebook between paragraphs as I drafted this talk, concentration becomes an even more valuable skill. Nicholas Carr warns, in his book *The Shallows*, "The tumultuous advance of technology could [...] drown out the refined perceptions, thoughts and emotions that arise only through contemplation and reflection." (222).

We ask that students take time with facts and ideas. We ask students to practice and reconsider. We ask students to stick with problems that they find difficult. Poet Robert Frost recommends that a poem begin in delight, perhaps the writer's existing in delight, perhaps the writer's existing interest and knowledge, but end in wisdom. To accomplish such a process involving both delight and wisdom requires time and attention.

Steven Johnson, in his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, discusses the importance of patience and persistence in cultivating those slow hunches that eventually reshape the culture. He says, "You get a feeling that there's an interesting avenue to explore, but then you get distracted by more pressing matters and the hunch disappears" (83). In day-to-day life, potentially good ideas can be lost all too easily. Education and the university campus offer a means and a place for focus, reflection and concentration. The content of a given course is often less important

than the habits of mind it encourages a student to develop and then use over a lifetime.

Perhaps even more important in that ceramics class was that I saw other students smash platters that failed to live up to their own expectations. Those students, who smashed pieces that were better than anything I could manage, understood the role of experimentation, practice and failure in the process of creating. Early or easy satisfaction cuts off possibilities, whereas revision and re-envisioning test ideas and extend one's thinking. Learning surprises us. Robert Frost writes, "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." If we are never surprised, if we do not seek to surprise ourselves, we become stuck in our tracks. Steven Johnson writes, "Being right keeps you in place. Being wrong forces you to explore" (137).

I'm not arguing that anyone make mistakes on purpose, but error – and learning form it – is part of the process from which great ideas and learning arise. Frost says, "And then to play. The play's the thing. All virtue in' as if." To play is to ask, *what if?* without knowing the answer. To play is to use delight to move toward wisdom. That's what education does. If you already know the answer, you're not learning much. Education, therefore, asks us to risk mistakes and sometimes sends us back to the drawing board. While content knowledge remains important in every field, experimentation, error and revision lead to creating and remaking ideas, regardless of subject of field of study. We must remain curious and also open to what we can't yet see around the corner.

Two important forces in meaningful education, then, are curiosity and serendipity. I can't imagine how my ideas would emerge or how I would transform my thinking into language without a drive toward inquiry. Stephen Johnson writes, "Encouragement does not necessarily lead to creativity. Collisions do – the collisions that happen when different fields of expertise converge in some shared physical or intellectual space." In other words, wide and enthusiastic curiosity results in serendipity. Divergent interests offer multiple sources for ideas, images, language and questions. As Johnson puts it, "Serendipity is built out of happy accidents, to be sure, but what makes them happy is the fact that the discovery you've made is meaningful to you." As we learn, ask questions, struggle to solve problems, and create art, we enlarge our access to serendipity and to meaningful discovery. At Chapman University, we form an intellectual space where we can find and create happy accidents the remake our thinking.

Learning, therefore, is somewhat unpredictable. A student may read 10 poems she doesn't particularly enjoy or appreciate, though she probably becomes intrigued by a few, just as she would listening to songs by different bands. By reading those poems, she learns how to read poems. She does not give up the first time she is confused; instead, she asks questions and, I hope, she rereads aloud. She begins by paying attention to the sounds and meaning of the words and worries less about finding a single, reusable key to unlock some universal poetry lock. Suddenly, she finds that the next poem shifts the way she sees some aspect of this world and even begins to remake the world for her. She likely would not have found that particular poem deeply meaningful had it been the first she'd read, but then she would have happened on a different poetic happy accident. She may also want to

create a poem of her own to figure out what might happen, and she may want to share her creation with others.

Five years ago, I had no idea I'd be living in California or standing here today. Two years ago, I could not have imagined witnessing that last two space shuttle launches in person. I was able to stand just outside the fence of launch pad 39A to see each of the three remaining space shuttles ready to go. I waved to the last two shuttle crews in their orange flight suits as they headed to the launch pad for their last flights. Whether you argue that the space shuttle program was a symbolic representation of our global community, a great scientific and technological achievement, or a waste of valuable resources, its end marks an important moment in our lifetimes. I became especially curious about this moment in history.

Putting a few people on top of a massive explosion to launch them out of earth's atmosphere is, in many aspects, crazy. Standing three miles from the shuttle when this happens remains difficult for me to describe. I continue to put that experience and its meaning into words for others to read. My visits, with Chapman University's science Librarian Douglas Dechow, to Kennedy Space Center over the last year have opened up new, unanticipated connections and paths for my thinking, my writing and my teaching. (And I may be the only poet whose department chair calls her a "petrol-head.") Sometimes, all this curiosity and serendipity makes my resume and my office appear rather chaotic, but out of the mess, conceptual understanding and new projects emerge.

The wonderful thing about curiosity and serendipity is that you become able to recognize ideas that might otherwise slip by unnoticed. Maybe you're not sure something is an opportunity, but curiosity and serendipity allow you to take that chance. In the long run, you figure out how life's unexpected opportunities fit together, though sometimes only in hindsight after several happy accidents – which may at first look like obstacles – form a pattern you can build upon.

The questions about education and its aims aren't merely about being, but also about doing, about changing, and about putting your current state of being into flux. The reasons that we gather here on a university campus – on this beautiful day in the neighborhood – are to find, to create and to remake ourselves and the world around us.

I conclude with the poem I wrote to commemorate Chapman University's 150th anniversary. It is composed of 150 syllables, arranged in 15 lines, with references to the day the university opened as well as today's campus.

To Find, to Create, to Remake
To find this place where curiosity
Feeds the cat; where books can be plucked from rows
In our grove; where little what-ifs swim
Like maybe-droplets in the fountains grow;

Here where bronzes nod; where the possible is
Adjacent, and we brush up against it as we round the corners of disciplines
To find what we didn't know to posit

To create this sun-drenched place together
Where reading leads us to conversation
And our discussions lead us elsewhere; where
Questions become songs, stories, equations;

Where, even when our passions become strained,
We maintain bonds, bettering our nature –
To remake ourselves, our world each day

About the Speaker

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Anna Leahy's poetry collection *Constituents of Matter* won the Wick Poetry Prize and was published by Kent State University Press in 2007. Her chapbook *Turns a Point* is available from Finishing Line Press. Her poetry also appears in literary journals such as *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cream City Review*, *The Journal*, *Nimrod* and other literary journals and anthologies. She served as the guest poetry editor for the second issue of *Fifth Wednesday*.

Leahy directs the initiative Tabula Poetica: Poetry and Chapman University, which hosts an annual Poetry Reading Series and other events and projects. With Chapman University librarian Douglas Dechow, she writes the *Lofty Ambitions* blog, which focuses on aviation, science and collaboration.

Leahy publishes widely in the area of creative writing pedagogy and is currently researching how different fields define creativity. Her edited collection *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom* launched the New Writing Viewpoints series from Multilingual Matters in 2005. Her articles or chapters about teaching appear in *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* (2010), *Stories of Mentoring* (2008), *Can it Really Be Taught?* (2007), *The Handbook of Creative Writing* (2007), *New Writing*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *American Book Review*, and others. Leahy has collaborated with art historian Debora Rindge and with Douglas Dechow on scholarly articles.

Leahy earned her Ph.D. from Ohio University, her M.F.A. from the University of Maryland, and her M.A. from Iowa State University. She teaches creative writing courses.