

Through One Another

Aims of Education Address

Chapman University Opening Convocation

Dr. Grace Fong

Thank you, President Parlow and Provost Ibba for the wonderful honor of being here tonight. Good evening, everyone, and welcome to Chapman. Class of 2030, we are so glad you're here.

There are few seasons of life quite like this one. For the next several years, you'll live and learn in a community unlike any you've known before—surrounded by professors, classmates, roommates, teammates, mentors, staff, coaches, and friends. **It's one of the rare times in life when so many people are invested in your growth all at once.** As I begin my twentieth year teaching at Chapman, I've come to believe that the greatest gift of a college education isn't simply knowledge. It's the profoundly human relationships we find here that shape who we become.

Those relationships often continue long after graduation. One of the great joys of teaching is getting to see who you become long after you leave Chapman. One day, you'll call to celebrate milestones, wrestle with difficult decisions, or seek advice as you navigate the next chapters of your lives. I've been so grateful to receive those calls, from students who once sat exactly where you're sitting now. I've celebrated their weddings. I've sat with them through heartbreak and disappointment. I've cheered them on, on opening day, as they cut the ribbon to their own music schools. I've even had the honor of holding their babies. Perhaps that's what moves me most—to witness becoming.

I get to see it every year. Many first-year students come to me already playing well. The technique is there. The notes are in the right places. Lesson by lesson, semester by semester, something changes. By the time they perform their final

recitals, the pieces we've worked on sound completely different. The notes are the same. The musician is not. The music stops being something they play and becomes something they say. Somewhere along the way, they become more fully themselves. Perhaps that's one of the most beautiful gifts of education—to help each of us discover the voice that is uniquely ours.

One student, in particular, comes to mind. Before Olivia had even been admitted to Chapman, she said to me during her audition, “I want to major in piano. One day, I want to be a lawyer.” Now that's not something I hear every day. I usually help students play bars of music, not pass the bar. But at Chapman, those dreams aren't impossible. They're worth pursuing. Over the next four years, we spent countless hours working on Bach, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff—but we also talked about life, purpose, and the future she imagined for herself. After Olivia walked across this stage with her degree in piano performance, our conversations continued. We talked through law school applications, acceptance letters, and then the challenges she faced at Yale Law. Last year, I received a text from her with a screenshot of her California Bar Exam results. The status box read “Pass.” Beneath the screenshot — well, after a row of heart and teary-eyed emojis — was this message: “Dr. Fong... I became a lawyer because you believed in me.”

None of us becomes who we're meant to be entirely on our own. Along the way, someone believes in us, stretches us, or simply walks beside us. Olivia's words reminded me that **the deepest work of education happens between people. Not the transfer of information. The transformation of one person through another.**

I know this because someone once did exactly that for me. I had the extraordinary privilege of studying with the legendary Sergei Babayan. Preparing for what many consider the Olympics of the piano world meant days that began and ended at the piano, often practicing nine to ten hours a day. There were days I honestly didn't know if I could get through it. But my teacher stood by me every step of the way. He saw something in me that I could not yet see in myself. We rarely become who we are entirely on our own.

The same is true of great music. It, too, is born from human connection. Playing thousands of notes accurately matters. But it is only the beginning. The performances that stay with us are the ones in which we transcend ourselves, and for a few moments, the noise of the day fades away. Those moments can't be generated. They can only be felt. And that's one of the reasons I love Chapman—because education here doesn't happen in isolation. It happens between people.

Some of my work has begun with a simple walk from the Music Conservatory to the Fowler School of Engineering, where I've been fortunate to collaborate with a computer science colleague to use machine learning to make music and art more accessible to people who are blind or deaf. My colleague understands code; I understand music—and together, we created something neither of us could have created alone. **As the tools of your generation become more extraordinary, so, too, are the opportunities to be more deeply human.**

Some of my most unforgettable moments have come alongside my students in children's hospitals and cancer centers. I remember one student who played for a patient. When the music ended, the patient spoke—for the first time in more than eight months. It wasn't only the patient who was changed that day. In those moments, students discover that music isn't just something we perform. It's something we give. And in giving it, they aren't just becoming better musicians. They're becoming the kind of people they want to be.

After twenty years of teaching, I have come to understand that education is fundamentally a human endeavor because it is through one another that we become who we are. Some of the most important things you'll learn at Chapman won't be on a syllabus. They'll come from the people here who will shape your life. And I have no doubt you'll be that person for someone else, too.

Welcome to Chapman.

Thank you.