University Medalist Speech
Convocation
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Thank you and good afternoon, Chancellor Tien, Regent Flinn, Regent Heggie, Secretary Reich, fellow graduates and ladies and gentlemen.

When I first found out that I would be speaking at this ceremony, I was too excited to worry about what I was going to say. Then, in the last days of the semester, I found myself so busy that I was weighing whether it was more important to proofread the first of my three term papers or to do the last chapter of reading for my historical linguistics class in the time between breakfast and my morning Chinese class. As I waded through my assignments, though, there was the persistent thought that I would indeed be speaking here and that I'd better have something to say. I asked my friends what they thought I might speak about, and they said only that I should be entertaining. The professors in my major said I should be sure to include linguistics jokes. My friends on the staff at the Education Abroad Program office said I should talk about my experience as an exchange student to Japan.

When I asked the organizers of this event what was expected of me, they said, "This is your 10 minutes to say whatever you want." But when I finished my assignments and had time to put some words on the page, the words wouldn't come. That's when I left my computer and went to campus to walk and to think. The first place I went was Dwinelle Hall, home to the Department of Linguistics. My speech could begin with being lost in this maze, I thought. It would be about going to find my first classroom a day ahead of time, about hearing the music of the Campanile on foggy mornings when I walked to Japanese class at 8am. It would be about reminding myself that 8 am is the same one as in "I got up at 5:30 every morning for high school, so what's so bad about 8 am?" It would be about another 8 am class in 146 Dwinelle where I learned that bees have different dialects of the bee dance. It would be about choosing linguistics as a major and about learning after 4 years how to know which entrance is the best to get to 247, 1026 Dwinelle. It would be about saying, always with a smile, that no, I do not plan to work at the United Nations, though my roommate probably will.

Getting to know my current roommate, Shoko Hanzawa, has been the best part of my dormitory experience of two years in the dorms and one year at International House. She is an exchange student from Japan, and I was an exchange student to Japan last year. This common ground has led to a flourishing friendship. And dorm experiences are certainly not limited to roommates. Often this year, I have found myself at lunch with an economics student from Sweden, a history buff and math student from Canada, and a statistics student from Croatia, talking about the situation in the former Yugoslavia. I thought about how this, along with many other situations that crop up often at Cal, has been a way to learn about the rest of the world.

Anyway, I left Dwinelle and walked towards Sproul Plaza, to the plaque on the ground

that reads, "This soil and the air space extending above it shall not be a part of any nation and shall not be subject to any entity's jurisdiction." My speech would be about the legacy here of the Free Speech Movement, about lunchtime preachers and Rick Starr singing under Sather Gate, about the Naked Guy and the nude-in of Spring 1993. I have to admit there have been many times that I have found the events and speeches on Sproul to be bizarre. But there have also been times where I have found myself fascinated, and thrilled that we have this open forum and the wealth of information that it brings.

I walked down Telegraph to Unit 3, where I lived my freshman year. My speech could be about the sophomores who lived on my floor and who knew so much about Berkeley—like that it's at Cafe Milano that you wear black and talk about death. I hosted a prospective student who came to visit and took her to Cafe Milano where I watched as a pregnant white rate she called her traveling companion crawled out from inside her black turtleneck and started scratching her chin. That was a moment of triumph for me because I gained my own original weird-thing-I-saw-happen-at-Cal story.

I walked back along Telegraph past the vendors' stalls and their 60's legacies, past the homeless of the 80's and 90's, past the students and others looking at arts and crafts or considering "free piercing" signs, past the smell of greasy pizza wafting out of Blondie's, and past the display of blown-up condoms in the window of Owl Rexall, to campus and then to the stillness of the Main Library. My speech could be about the old stacks at Doe, the dusty books 100 years old, the 9-story tall bookshelves, the glass tile floor at the 9th tier, about looking down through glass at centuries of knowledge. It could be about visiting the particle accelerator on the hill, about my professor's ultra-low temperature physics lab, about a styrofoam cup of liquid nitrogen, and finding leaves and twigs to freeze. It could be about walking each day past parking spaces reserved for Nobel Laureates, about sitting in on a contemporary American poetry course taught by the new United States Poet Laureate, Prof. Robert Hass.

My speech could be about coming to Cal because I knew it was a great university but realizing I didn't know at that time what great university meant. I didn't realize then that a great university is where people are finding out things that no one has ever known before. I didn't realize that being a student at a great university meant being able to participate in that research. I didn't know that as a sophomore I could be asked to do original research. And I didn't know that taking upper-division courses would mean finding out that there is a frontier to every field, and that some of the stuff in the lower-division textbooks is contested or still speculative.

I walked on to Moses Hall, where I had arrived out of breath many times, rushing to deliver important forms to the office of the Education Abroad Program before the doors closed at 3:45. My speech could be about going on EAP to Japan, about menus full of unfamiliar food printed in a language I couldn't read, about taking a bite of salad expecting it to be cold and finding out it was hot.

My speech could be about the grandmother of the family who hosted me for a weekend. She asked me a question after I had carefully left my shoes in the entryway and donned the house slippers all guests and family wear in a Japanese home. "Is it true," she said, "that

in the West you don't take your shoes off before going into people's homes?" When I said, "Well, yes," she said, "Tell me, do you take them off before you go to bed?" And my speech could be about thinking that this was a good question.

Knowing how different my culture was from that of Japan, when I first got there, I was convinced that I would never be able to understand the language, the country, or the people. Japan seemed beautiful, intriguing, and closed to the outsider. Even worse, I was the only student in my group who didn't have some life-long connection to Japan such as having relatives there or planning a career in trade with Japan. I had just wanted to be an exchange student and I had studied some Japanese. I resigned myself to the idea that I would be an observer for a year, not the usual participant I had been at Cal.

However, when I finished the summer language program and went to my host university, I found that my classmates were very willing to share their culture, and I delighted in hearing all they had to say. Eventually, my willingness to observe and to listen led to true friendships with my classmates, and being accepted into their community in a way that I had never expected.

At the very end of my stay in Japan, my host department had a going-away party for me. At the party, one of my classmates said to me, "The only other Americans I have known are the few English teachers that came to our schools in my hometown. In all of my dealings with them, I always felt that I was the one who had to be careful to observe their customs. My friends and I often talked about how all Americans must be like that. Now, if I ever hear anyone talking along those lines, I will tell them that that's not true. I will tell them," she said, "about you."

After a year in Japan, I was feeling very content with all that I had managed to learn through watching and listening when people wanted to explain about the culture. But in listening to my friend say this, I realized that when we learn, it is not only for ourselves, but for the benefit of our communities as well.

I walked up to Piedmont Avenue with its eucalyptus trees. My speech would be about the scent of eucalyptus, about how the eucalyptus trees burst into flame one October and spread the wildfire. It would be about evacuating the dorms, and about deciding that my photo album is more important than my econ textbook. It would be about riots on Telegraph Avenue after the Rodney King trial, about the glass from shop windows scattered on the sidewalk, about a garbage can on fire, about a resident beat up on the front steps, about a curfew. It would be about the homeless population, people looking in garbage cans for food, and about "Spare change?"

Being a Berkeley means finding out about reality, all at once, full in the face. The fire in 1991, like the earthquake in 1989, might not have been so bad if we had taken more precautions. But natural disasters are essentially out of our control. What, then, about riots, gang activity, homelessness? Before coming to Berkeley, these all seemed awful, but distant. Living in Berkeley, it is all too close, and seems out of our control. But this is another instance in which our learning can eventually help our communities. Hopefully, there are some among us who will see how to prevent riots, how to make the city streets safe, how to feed and house the homeless. And hopefully, as our former classmates work

towards these goals, the rest of us will know and honor their importance, because of what we have seen and what we have learned.

I came finally to Zellerbach. My speech was for our convocation, which means a group of people assembled by summons. We are assembled now by the summons to commemorate our learning. We assembled at Cal because of the summons to learn. As we disperse into the world, my hope is that the communities we belong to and our collective community will benefit from our energy, our experience, our feelings, our friendships, and of course, the learning which we have sought from Cal and which we have received.