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## President Bergeron's 104th Convocation Address - "The Beginning of an Education"

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## "The Beginning of an Education"

**Remarks by President Katherine Bergeron**

**104th Convocation**

**August 27, 2018**

Convocation is a major ritual event at any college, the formal act of calling together the community at the start of a new academic year. Therefore, the first thing I must call on all of us to do is to extend our most spirited Camel welcome to the newest members of our community: the eight new faculty members; the 24 new staff members; and the 542 new students who have recently arrived on this hill, including 29 wise and discerning transfer students, and the 513 exuberant, smart, and committed members of the wonderful Class of 2022! It is my duty and my honor to declare this new year—the 104th year of academic exercises at Connecticut College—officially open.

Days like today are momentous occasions and so it is valuable for us to pause a moment and reflect on what they celebrate. For you new students, this is, in a way, both an end and a beginning. You said goodbye to your family members last week; you made it through the rigors of Orientation; you registered for classes; and now here you are, ready to begin your college education. And that's essentially what I want to think about with you for the next few minutes. I want to reflect on what it means to be poised at this point, at the beginning of an education — and what, especially, that might mean for your education here at Connecticut College.

The excitement and fear of new beginnings is certainly one of themes explored in the book we asked all incoming students to read this summer, *Exit West*, by the Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid. For those of you in the audience who may not have had a chance to read it, *Exit West* is a futuristic novel, or perhaps a fable, about humanity and migration. That makes it sound simpler than it really is, because, in truth, the book is not all that easy to categorize. Beautifully written and told from the perspective a worldly and omniscient third-person narrator, the novel presents a deliberately a hybrid tale, slipping between conventional storytelling, editorial commentary, and critique as easily as its characters slip through magical doors. It is at once a story about young people in love; a grim account of the chaos of civil war; a critique of globalization and Western indifference; a tale of three cities and the refugees of the future; an argument for human resilience; a meditation on leaving home; and a reflection on the beginnings of an education.

The title, *Exit West*, foretells the westward migration of the novel's two protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, as they make a series of precipitous exits: from their war-torn city somewhere in South Asia or the Middle East; to the isle of Mykonos in Greece; to the city of London; to the hills of Marin County, California. That is the extent of the plot: a long slow arc across the globe taking the couple further and further from their homeland. But as the story evolves, the title begins to take on greater significance, too, suggesting not just the peregrinations of our central protagonists but also the abdication, or exit, of rich Western nations from responsibility in the world refugee crisis; and eventually, through the sheer magnitude of human migration over time, even the end of the West as we know it.

It's probably for this reason that the novel has been described as a dystopian classic. But I somehow cannot read the story in this way, nor do I think that Mohsin Hamid would want us to. I am thinking, for example, of the novel's futuristic vision of a ring of new cities rising up like a halo in a formerly protected

greenbelt on the outskirts of London, built by migrants' own hands and overtaking in magnitude the city it encircles. How are we to characterize this imagining? The London Halo, as it is called, is presented to us as a plausible solution for the vast numbers of displaced people who had earlier been squatting in abandoned mansions in the center of the city. In exchange for labor, the workers are promised 40 square meters and a connection to municipal services. The narrator comments on the "almost unimaginable scale" of the undertaking, as if "they were remodeling the Earth itself." (Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007, p. 178)

And yet it is characteristic of this novel that the vision of such a gargantuan task also contains a measure of hope. The imagined city is a hopeful alternative, a plausible desirable future for us to contemplate. In a book of his collected essays from 2015, "Discontent and its Civilizations," Mohsin Hamid offers some insight, commenting on his inclination toward optimism in his own writing about the uncertain democracy of his native Pakistan. While the optimism might seem misguided, as he puts it, it is also "not useless." "With optimism comes agency," he says, and the notion that solutions can be imagined for the problems we face. (Mohsin Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London*. New York: Riverhead, p. 4) More recently, in an interview about his novel *Exit West*, Hamid makes this point more directly. "I think we have a responsibility, everyone as human beings and as citizens, to proactively imagine the futures we want." (Andrew Travers, "Novelist Mohsin Hamid discusses Aspen Literary Prize-winning 'Exit West'," *The Aspen Times* [June 18, 2018])

This is exactly the kind of imagining that a work of art does best, of course, and Hamid's novel enlarges the vision in the last chapters, as Nadia and Saeed make their exit to the very edge of the West, into a new community in the hills of Marin County. It is a telling final destination. I don't know if you have ever been to Marin or can picture it in your minds, but it is an almost mythical site on the Pacific Ocean beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. I found the following description from a recent New York Times travel column, "36 Hours in Marin," that gives a sense of its rarified air. "Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco," it begins, "you arrive in Marin even before landing on solid ground. The county line hangs above the water's edge, which is fitting, since the county itself feels suspended—ethereal, privileged, a place apart from the rest of the Bay Area. Fearing the perils of suburban sprawl," it goes on, "Marin invested early and often in conservation. . . . [This] surprisingly rural landscape of cattle ranches, rolling hills, redwood groves, houseboat communities and roadhouses [counts itself] among the wealthiest counties in the country." (Freda Moon, "36 Hours in Marin," *The New York Times* [January 24, 2013])

Needless to say, by the time Nadia and Saeed show up to this place, the exclusive enclave has changed, having become home to thousands of refugees, now living in a shanty settlement high in its rolling hills. The new environment transforms the couple, too, giving them a newfound sense of freedom as well as the strength, eventually, to move on with their own lives.

It is Nadia who is the first to move out of the shanty, finding a room of her own at the back of the food coop where she works. Hamid's languid description evokes the comfort and familiarity and, yes, dignity of the humble space. This is what he writes: "The room smelled of potatoes and thyme and mint and the cot smelled a little of people, even though it was reasonably clean, and there was no record player, and no scope to decorate either, the room continuing to be used as a storeroom. But Nadia was nonetheless reminded of her apartment in the city of her birth, which she had loved, reminded of what it was like to live there alone, and while the first night she slept not at all, and the second only fitfully, as the days passed she slept better and better, and this room came to feel to her like home." (*Exit West*, 216-217)

The new world community in Marin begins to find its footing as well, as beautiful hybrid cuisines and new musical forms come together for all to taste and experience. Hamid analogizes the slow rebirth to the rousing of a people from a collective gloom, his narrator commenting on the phenomenon in one long sentence that wanders like the novel's subjects, ending up in a place very different from where it starts. Let me read whole thing: "It has been said," it begins, "that depression is a failure to imagine a plausible desirable future for oneself, and, not just in Marin, but in the whole region, in the Bay Area, and in many other places, too, places both near and far, the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief." (*Exit West*, 217)

To begin to imagine something that was previously unimaginable. This is the real promise—the real hope—that the novel holds out for us amid all the stories of love and war and migration: a vision, neither utopian nor dystopian, of relief, of new beginnings, of possible desirable futures. For Hamid, this kind of imagining is a matter of urgency, a political conviction. If we don't keep working to create such stories, "all that will be left," he argues, "is a sense of hopelessness. And out of hopelessness comes hatred, comes divisiveness, comes demagoguery." (*The Aspen Times*) Holding on to hope, then, means much more than trusting that everything will turn out fine. It means engagement. It means bringing the courage of your convictions to everything you do, to your work, your personal life, your communities, your writing, your politics so that you can make, again, in his words, "the kind of world that you want to see." (*The Aspen Times*)

At Connecticut College, of course, we have a name for that kind of engagement: we call it the liberal arts in action. And that, Class of 2022, is really the hope I want to hold out to you today as you begin your education here at Connecticut College. What must you do to go about making the kind of world you want to see? Just three simple things: study deeply; engage authentically; and live honorably. There are exceptional faculty at this College who will help you expand your conceptual frameworks for understanding the complexity of pressing global problems. There are unique centers for scholarship and student support where you will develop that understanding, and imagine new futures, by living with and learning from people and communities who are different from yourselves. And, very importantly, there is a nearly 100-year-old honor code that will serve as a personal compass and guide along the way.

Later in this ceremony we will recite together the words of a pledge that represents our common observance of that code. It is a simple but beautiful aspect of Convocation at this College. You new students just yesterday signed the matriculation pledge. And in a few moments, everyone—staff, faculty, and students of all classes—will renew that pledge together. This is not an empty ritual but an affirmation of our long history as a community bound by integrity, trust, and, yes, hope.

Which brings me to a final point, about that history. The end of this academic year will mark the 101st Commencement exercises at this College. It was 100 years ago, in 1919, that the very first class of students took their baccalaureate degrees from Connecticut College, a college that imagined, with great hope and conviction, a plausible desirable future as the first and the only institution in the state of Connecticut dedicated wholly to providing advanced baccalaureate education for women. In other words, even before women had earned the right to vote in this country, this College was established with a conviction to make a world we wanted to see, by achieving progress in the pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity. Let us hold that memory and that conviction in our hearts as we begin this

new year together. And let me say once again, and with renewed hope in our common purpose, welcome to the beginning of your education.

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*(Remarks as prepared by Katherine Bergeron.)*