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## 2019 Commencement Speaker Address, Matt de la Peña

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## UOP Talk – Saturday

Congratulations to all of you . . . the 2019 University of the Pacific graduating class. I'm honored and humbled to be able to share this moment with you. I have to say, it's pretty surreal to be back on campus, back in the Spanos Center where I spent so much of my time while I was a student at UOP.

A quick story. Just after my first book came out back in 2005, my publicist called to tell me I'd been invited to give a talk at the newly renovated New York State Museum in Albany. This was going to be my first-ever public event as an author. And all the details were being arranged by my first-ever publicist. How amazing that someone like me – an average, ordinary person – had written a novel that was going to be in actual bookstores and libraries.

Two weeks later I was on an Acela heading north from NYC. I pulled out my phone and called home. "Hey, Dad," I said, "I'm on a train right now, going to Albany. A driver is picking me up from the station and taking me to some fancy Bed and Breakfast. And this museum's paying for all of it." I paused a sec. "I think I might be big time." "Wow, Matt," he told me, "that's great."

That night I stayed up late watching TV. It was the first round of the NCAA tournament, and I didn't have a TV back in my tiny Brooklyn apartment. The following afternoon I headed to the museum. The curator gave me a behind the scenes tour of their moving 9/11 exhibit. We had a sandwich in the café. Eventually he led me to their brand new auditorium. The whole

place smelled like a new car. The tech guy had me test the mic and get a feel for the stage. Then I was escorted to the green room where someone had set out a platter of sliced fruit and mini croissants and a small pitcher of juice. They left me in there alone so I could mentally prepare. I sat in a chair and poured myself some juice and watched the clock. When there were only twenty minutes left before the event, I peeked into the auditorium. Still empty. I pulled my book out of my bag and flipped to the section I planned to read. Ten minutes later I checked the auditorium again. Nobody. Okay, I thought, I guess these people like to show up right on time. Then it was 6pm, my official start time. Not a soul. 6:05. 6:10. 6:20.

The curator was in a panic. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he said. “Maybe it’s because it’s St. Patty’s Day. Or maybe it’s that March Madness thing. The Albany men’s team plays tonight. I guess it’s the first time they’ve ever made the tournament.”

“Oh,” I told him, glancing down at my novel about basketball.

He hurried off to make another announcement.

A few minutes later he returned in much better spirits. “I’ve just been made aware that there’s a troop of boy scouts having a sleepover on the third floor. I’ll go get *them*.”

“Oh, no, it’s okay, sir,” I told him. “I can just go back to my hotel room. I can watch the TV.”

“The boy scouts will come,” he promised. “It’s part of their oath.” And he took off.

It was after 6:30 now. I felt embarrassed looking up at all the empty seats. And I felt like I’d let the curator down.

He came back ten minutes later, shaking his head. “I’m sorry,” he told me, “but the leader has politely declined.”

I called my dad as soon as I got back to the Bed and Breakfast. “Guess I’m not big time after all, Dad. I couldn’t even get a damn boy scout.” He chuckled a little and told me, “It happens.”

Look, I know you’re all here because you’re graduating. But whenever I find myself standing in front of a big group of people like this, I think back to that day in Albany when no one showed up. So thank you for being here!

## SPEECH

It’s a privilege to be here today, and I’d like to thank a few people who made it possible. Chair of the Board of Regents, Kevin Huber. President Pam Eibeck. Provost Pallavicini. Professors Susan Giraldez and Xiaojing Zhou who nominated me for this honorary degree.

To the graduates. I salute each and every one of you for this tremendous academic achievement. You have worked very hard in your respective fields

of study, and today you are being formally recognized. But you will leave campus with far more than the knowledge you have pulled from textbooks and lecture halls. You have also developed beautiful friendships, some of which will last a lifetime. You have navigated complex social situations. You have been introduced to ideas that have made you see the world in a new way. You have felt alone, homesick, heartbroken, exhausted, yet you have persevered.

And it's going to surprise you which memories from your time here will endure. For me it's skateboarding alongside the murky levee water on my way to early morning basketball practice. It's sitting on the bluff above the tennis courts watching a woman I'd fallen in love with stage a late comeback against a higher ranked opponent. It's the hot summers I spent on campus, taking extra classes and working in the paint shop. Playing pickup games in South Gym at insane temperatures with teammates who were like family. It's the day I stood in the halls of the English Department, staring at a flyer encouraging students to submit their creative writing for the annual Arlen J Hansen Award. I had never shown my poems to anyone. Not a soul. Where I'm from guys weren't supposed to write poetry. It was too soft, too sensitive. So I wrote in secret. But on that day I shed the machismo mentality I'd grown up with and submitted my work. Because the professors and students here made me feel safe. And I'll never forget the electricity I felt coursing through my body when Dr. Camille Norton called several weeks later to inform me that I had won. At one point she even referred to me as a "real writer."

But the UOP memory that takes up the most space in my head is my own graduation ceremony. It was accepting my degree. I have no idea who the speaker was that day – and I suspect you won't remember yours either, once enough time has passed – but I do remember the pride I felt about being the first de la Peña to graduate college. I remember the tears welling in my Mexican grandmother's eyes as she held my diploma in her hands. I remember the celebratory dinner we had at the Chile's on Pacific Ave. that night. Me, my mom, my dad, my two younger sisters and my grandmother. I remember my family. Together. Sharing two orders of those amazing chips they have. At one point during dinner my grandmother reached over and patted my knee. She didn't say anything. Just patted my knee. And I understood.

These are the things I have carried with me all these years.

I have a rule for myself as a writer. I never go into a book with any kind of message or agenda. That's bad writing. That's an essay masquerading as fiction. But I do enter each book with a point of view. This is how I would like to approach my remaining time with you here today. No messages. No agenda. Just a few thoughts about what comes next from my own subjective point of view.

1. Here I Come. Back when I was still fairly new in Brooklyn, I was invited to brunch by an interesting married couple. The guy played guitar in an experimental rock band. The woman was a pre-school teacher. I think I was a little overeager to make friends because I showed up at their brownstone an hour early. So I walked over to the

playground on Lincoln and 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. and sat on a bench to kill some time. (Years later I would frequent this park with my wife and daughter. And later still my son would come along and make us a foursome.) But back on this day, I was still single. And still poor. I had no idea what the future held. Anyway, as I was sitting there I saw a mom and dad come into the park with their young daughter. She was maybe two or three. She was bundled up even though it was late April because it was still cold. (Which is why none of you should ever move to New York City). They went right up to the slide. The mom helped the little girl up the stairs and the dad stood at the bottom with his arms out. When the little girl was at the top of the slide she sat down and banged her heels against the steel. (For some reason all kids do this. I'm not sure why.) And then she called out to her dad. "Here I come!" a huge smile plastered across her face. And she slid down into his waiting arms. I remember being so moved by the whole thing. It was the joy emanating from the little girl. And the love the mom and dad had for their child. But mostly it was her words. "Here I come." She wasn't just saying it to her dad. She was saying it to the whole world. "Here I come." She was bounding into her new life, and she wanted everyone to know she meant it. Somewhere along the way many of us lose this. We begin slinking into the room. We avoid eye contact. We stand against the wall at the party staring at our phones, praying nobody will recognize how anxious and alone we feel. As you step into this next phase of your life I hope you'll channel that little girl in the park. Or the little-kid-version of yourself. The fearless one. "Here I come." Remember these words the next time you find yourself at the top of a metaphorical slide. "Here I come."

2. Careless Whisper. Back when I was a new writer I tried to control everything. I wanted to prove to the reader how great I was. Every sentence had to be a SportsCenter highlight. I wanted to be the star of the show, even if it was at the expense of the characters. But as I've gotten older I've learned the power of restraint and authorial humility. I remember when I was in high school I had this one really great relationship. We were together for almost four months, which is like an epic love story when you're that age. But then disaster struck. She broke up with me. That weekend I listened to "Careless Whisper" by Wham over and over and over. It must have been a hundred times. I thought the song was genius. It was like George Michael knew my *life*. Because I was never going to dance again. I came across the song again just a few years ago. And I listened to it. And you know what? Those are the stupidest lyrics I've ever heard. But what was I doing back in high school, post-break up? I was putting pieces of my own story into the margins of the lyrics, making them bigger and better than they ever could have been without me. Now I try to honor the reader's place in my own work. My goal is to create a true collaboration. I believe this idea translates to almost any field. I encourage you to lead with humility in whatever work you do. Leave space for the reader. Leave space for your colleagues. Leave space for the people you have personal relationships. We are bigger and better together, whether it be in love or art or business or pedagogy or politics. All life is one life.



3. Just because you have a degree doesn't mean you're done learning. A sad truth. Most adults read exclusively to reinforce their own ideologies. Conservatives read books espousing the virtues of conservatism. Liberals read books espousing the virtues of liberalism. I challenge you today to continually read outside your comfort zone. To read ideas that challenge your existing beliefs. To listen to people you'd ordinarily dismiss. The minute we think we have an answer solidified is the minute we begin our intellectual decline.
  
4. The Beautiful Mystery, Pass it on. Years ago I presented at an elementary school in Virginia, in the auditorium. I read *Last Stop on Market Street* and told them a few secrets about the book, but before I said goodbye, I explained that I wanted to give away my copy of the book. I'd been watching them the whole time I was talking, and there was one kid I needed to give the book to. I then walked up into the crowd and gave it to a boy who was sitting sort of on his own. He took the book and everyone clapped and then I said goodbye. As I was leaving campus about fifteen minutes later, a few kids gathered around me. They wanted to talk. And suddenly the boy I'd given the book to appeared. He was still clutching it in his hands. "Mister," he said in a quiet voice, "why'd you give it to *me*?" I shrugged and told him, "I'm not really sure, to be honest. I just . . . I think there might be something special about you." And then something wild happened. He began to cry. And the other kids began rubbing his shoulders and patting him on the back and someone told me, "He just moved here. He's new." As I walked out into the parking lot, to my rental car, I kept thinking about that boy. And his tears. And how tightly he was

holding onto the book. I didn't know what any of it meant, but it seemed significant. And for him maybe it was a beautiful mystery. I have handed out a book at the end of every presentation since. Always to a kid I feel drawn to for whatever reason. Because I've realized something. That is what Camille Norton did for me when she referred to me as a real writer. And that is what Coach Bob Thomason did for me when he made my dreams come true and offered me a scholarship to this amazing university. Sometimes I think the power of suggestion can change the course of a person's life. I hope you'll join me and call out special when you see it. Especially in young people.

5. A Secret. If you ever want to do something cool, something that truly excites you, something you've always dreamed of, you're going to have to take a risk. Risk-taking can feel scary. Because what if you fail? What if you feel humiliated when not even a single person shows up to your event in Albany? Well, I have a little secret I'd like to share with you. No one is paying attention. They're all too busy worrying about themselves and their own potential successes or failures. Once you understand this, risk-taking no longer seems so risky. I'm going to close by taking a little risk of my own. I'm going to read a picture book – one I just finished last week – to an arena full of grown ups. I'm going to let this be the last thing I say because above all else this is what I've come to believe . . . .

## Patchwork

You were blue before you were even born.

We mark, we mark.

Your mom cut into a two-story cake and out spilled blue  
and everyone hugged and pointed toward the cloudless blue sky  
because it was a sign.

And here you are today, blue dressed in blue.

But sometimes your paintbrush at school  
hovers above the pink.

Some days so much hurt floods your eyes  
you're scared to even blink.

But tears are not pink or blue or weak – they're human.

You are human.

And when you grow up,  
the color you will come to love most  
is brown.

You were put on this earth to dance.

We know, we know.

Ballet, tap, hip hop, your body bending to the beat,  
leaping from note to note,  
dipping into demi-plie.

You dream in one-two-three, one-two-three.

But those rhythms inside your head  
are also a kind of math,  
and one day you will discover coding

and change the way the world moves.

You go everywhere with a ball in your hands.

We see, we see.

You are basketball-baseball-fútbol-any-kind-of-ball,  
and you were born to compete.

Even in defeat  
the game feeds you,  
it leads you.

But soon you will see your sport for what it really is.

An expression.

The sound of a bouncing ball  
is the language of your loneliness.

You are bilingual.

And one day you will carry words with you instead.

You will spin couplets on your finger  
because you've always been a poet.

You are the kid perpetually in time out.

We sigh, we sigh.

You shove and cut lines and talk over teachers.

You tell jokes during the Pledge, and your whole body buzzes  
when you get a reaction.

But the skill it takes to make people laugh,  
is the skill you'll use to help people learn,  
when you become a favorite teacher.

And when a restless kid like you lands in the back of your class,

you will see her,  
you will love her.

You are kind to everyone and everything.

We beam, we beam.

When you win it feels like a loss.

The disappointment of another is a knot inside your stomach.

You sit beside the new kid at lunch

and give away your only cookie.

But do not mistake kindness

for a weakness.

You are a powerful magnet pulling people.

Crowds will one day swarm your ideas,

and they will look to you for guidance, eager to follow.

They will follow.

You are more than a single note played again and again.

You are a symphony.

You are sounds plucked from all the places you've been

and all the people you've met

and all the feelings you've felt.

You are blues and browns and pinks and loneliness and laughter,

mismatched scraps accumulated over time

and stitched together into a kind of patchwork.

And even when your pattern loses its design,

when it grows lopsided

or tangles

or is hard to follow –

it will be beautiful.

We are beautiful.