

Inauguration of Audrey Bilger as the 16th President of Reed College

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Transcript of the keynote address by Yoon Sun Lee, Professor of English, Wellesley College.

Greetings, Reed College and community! It is such an honor to be here standing in front of you all. Even though I supposedly work with words for a living, I find it challenging to find the words to say how thrilled I am to be here today on this occasion—and what an occasion.

I first met President Bilger many years ago. Let's just say toward the very end of the last century. Actually, someone already said the date, so there's no point in my trying to hide that. It was at the beginning of the fall semester, in beautiful southern California weather, when we both began teaching in the literature department at Claremont McKenna College. I knew instantly that she was one of the most badass people I had ever met—that's the highest term of praise in my vocabulary. For one thing, she drove a vintage green Volkswagen beetle. For another thing, she was taking rock and roll drumming lessons. These were levels of coolness that I had not encountered before. Seriously, she had a confidence, a warmth, a fearlessness and authenticity that inspired me then and continue to do so now and in the future.

I want to share with you a very brief story that illustrates how Audrey does more than inspire people from a distance—she will lift you up and create the conditions for you to thrive. This is what she did for me as her colleague at CMC. So there is a little preface to this story: in the world and age that we live in, we are constantly told that competition is our natural state. It's all too easy to believe that we have no choice but to compete with other people, to kick them off the island, to get them chopped, that you win by eliminating your competition. In ways both direct and indirect, we are told that only one, or only a few, can win the prize, the award, the internship, the job. Sometimes it seems to me that competition has replaced the role of stories in our culture. Instead of telling stories, we watch people knock each other out of the running (even, incredibly, in cooking food and baking cakes). You might be a little surprised to hear that academia, this world of nerdy professors, is also a fiercely competitive place, but it is. Everything inside and outside academia reinforces the message: build your brand, sell yourself, step on or over your competitors. I have to note that this message is sold with a particular relentlessness

to women in a society run largely by men; women are trained to compete with each other. But this is true of everyone, right? You want to catch the eye of your boss or your professor, get that approval or promotion, and doesn't that mean you have to limit your care and concern to yourself?

Audrey showed me that the answer is no, and I have never forgotten it. It was very soon after we got to Claremont, at a reception or gathering, she took me aside and said, "Yoon, I just want you to know that I have your back. You can trust me." No one had ever said this to me before. And here's what was amazing: it's true that we were now colleagues in the same department, but a different person might have assumed our relation to be potentially a competitive one. We both worked in the same field (British eighteenth-century literature), we were both women, and so on. It was an act of enormous generosity to a colleague she had just met, but more than that: she showed me that there is another way to see the world—a way to reject these false arguments that we all have to compete with each other, that it's a zero-sum game, that one person's gain is another person's loss. Because it is absolutely not true. And thinking of the people around you as competitors, all fighting for the same little thing—this only helps the people who have the power to designate a small handful of prizes, to hold out the few shiny things and make everyone scramble for them. Her words that day had a powerful effect on me; they showed me the falseness of a way of thinking that I had pretty deeply internalized.

Those were not the only important words of President Bilger on this topic, mind you. When I later read her wonderful study of eighteenth-century women novelists, *Laughing Feminism*, I saw that this insight was central to her work as a literary critic. Even in the eighteenth century, novelists showed a world in which women, often in very cruel ways, are forced to scramble and compete with each other—whether they are old or young, rich or poor. Audrey's book shows how some important women novelists unmasked, in her words, "the foolishness of a system that offers limited options for female life and then pits woman against woman for available positions" (165). She makes the hugely important point that in Jane Austen's novels, the heroines do not initiate competition. This is something we need to think about more deeply. I agree that it does require heroism. To create the conditions for others to thrive requires moral strength and insight, a capacity to see beyond the norms that surround and stifle you. I am still grateful and still inspired by her example. President Bilger showed me, then, what it means to be truly with and for someone else: to see thriving as something that must be not an individual matter, but essentially shared. This is what justice requires. Justice isn't merely an objective social arrangement. It

comes down to this: to believe that I cannot be truly excellent unless you are, too. It's the opposite of what we hear and see all around us. The world is always trying to say that your success requires some others to fail, or to do less well. You have to defy the powers that are constantly defining you as a mere single individual, the sole proprietor of yourself, climbing over everyone else, struggling to capitalize on your own small selfhood. Audrey has demonstrated that there is not one way but so many different ways to be excellent, and that excellence is not a solo endeavor, not something that lies at the end of a solitary path. I learned from her that the best work is the work that we can do together, that the best goals are the ones that we share. I learned from her, too, that shared laughter creates a circle, and can begin to change the configuration of the world.

Congratulations, my friend, and congratulations, Reed College, on a wonderful new beginning.