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Claremont McKenna College Opening Convocation 2006

It's the Hurricane We're In

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It's the Hurricane We're In

The late philosopher Philip Hallie was a distinguished professor at Wesleyan University, the Connecticut liberal arts college whose tenth-place put it just ahead of CMC in this year's *U. S. News and World Report* rankings. As an artillery officer in World War II, Hallie helped to destroy Nazi Germany, but he was best known as an ethicist whose belief in the preciousness of human life led him to write about cruelty and also about a French village called Le Chambon, where five thousand Jews found a wartime haven in the 1940s.

A fine storyteller, Hallie often recalled a hurricane that battered New England. The storm's devastating power gave him an apt metaphor for the human predicament. "It's the hurricane we're in," Hallie liked to say, amplifying his conviction with the admonition, "Don't forget it."

Opening the 2006-2007 academic year at Claremont McKenna College, this sixtieth anniversary convocation takes place one year after Hurricane Katrina stormed ashore along the Gulf Coast and at New Orleans. Forecasters keep watch today because, once again, hurricane season is here.

Philip Hallie's concern about "the hurricane" was not limited to lethal weather. Human existence, he thought, is always contending with hurricane seasons of one kind or another. Hallie was right about that. Evidence for his judgment is embedded in CMC's history.

When I arrived at CMC in 1966, Story House was a real house on the campus before fire damaged it beyond repair in February 1969. My wife, Lyn, and I lived in Beckett Cottage, a faculty apartment attached to Beckett Hall. Several years ago I watched its demolition make way for a Collins Hall expansion. Forty years ago, the eastern edge of the campus was at Mills Avenue, where the North Quad dorms left off, except for a few athletic facilities farther to the east, including the gymnasium where Ted Ducey coached basketball before a flash flood in the desert took his life in September 1974. Ducey Gym reminds us of that storm-inflicted loss. At the age of twenty, CMC's still youthful growing pains also included a hurricane called the Vietnam War. Its aftereffects still swirl through the politics and culture of our country and college.

CMC was born and raised in turbulent times. In 1946, much of the world was ruined. CMC's first student bodies included veterans who, like Philip Hallie, had fought in Europe and the Pacific. The unprecedented mass murder of Jews during World War II would introduce new words into the College's vocabulary and, eventually, into its curriculum: *Holocaust* and *genocide* are two of them.

In 1956, CMC turned ten in a country that had added the words "under God" to its Pledge of Allegiance. Nevertheless, hurricanes of racism and segregation bedeviled the country. Their wreckage still scars our landscape.

The passing of those early decades did nothing to remove CMC from the hurricane. The College's thirtieth birthday in 1976 was the nation's bicentennial, but those celebrations took place during a Cold War in full cry. One after another, nuclear weapons tests marked the calendar that year. In CMC's fortieth year, 1986, I remember watching television after lunch in the new Athenaeum and seeing the space shuttle *Challenger* launched and then exploding with no survivors. At fifty, CMC's Southern California location protected it, but record-setting