

BERKELEY CLASSICS DEPT GRADUATION ADDRESS

It's an enormous pleasure to be here today, to salute this happy band of self-selected classicists. I too majored in classics as an undergraduate, and all these years later I am still profoundly grateful that I chose the seemingly most arcane and non-utilitarian course of study to occupy the four years of my undergraduate career, as it continues to inform the way that I think and live and understand the world.

At the beginning of Samuel Beckett's *ENDGAME*, Hamm asks Clove, "Do you remember your father?" to which Clov replies (wearily), "Same answer. (PAUSE) You've asked me these questions millions of times." "I love the old questions" Hamm exclaims with fervour. "Ah, the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them."

In a wildly unpredictable present, there is something monumentally important about asking the old questions and trying to find new answers. It's fascinating that we now call the field of study you have just completed "classics" when it used to be simply assumed that the great ideas and works of antiquity were the basis of study for a contemporary understanding of the world. The incubator of Platonic thinking, Sophoclean poetry and Pythagorean mathematics was that small corner of the Mediterranean adjacent to the part of the world in the greatest state of upheaval and unrest today. And perhaps the most important legacy of that small coastal area on the middle of the Mediterranean Sea is the centrality of humanism and the passion for self-knowledge and human responsibility. I remember my first classics course at Stanford on fifth century architecture, and my elation that the Parthenon was designed NOT to make the human being feel small in the face of God, as was the case with Gothic cathedrals, but to make the human being feel exalted and central. Everything about the proportions of the Parthenon is centered around the figure of a man, so while it feels thrilling and humbling to walk through its porticoes, it does not feel dwarfing. There is nothing like the exaltation of the human form to make one feel responsible for one's behavior and beliefs in the light of history.

The Greeks seemed uniquely aware of what it was to write their own history, and to create a narrative by which they wished to be remembered. Perhaps this is why they were so fascinated by and committed to creating a national drama, which became part of the shaping of their own history. I loved the fact that the Dionysian festival which took place once a year in Athens was the culmination of a year's work on the part of its most able citizens and that it MATTERED in a way that theater has never mattered since: it was the chance for the "polis" to look at itself through the lens of metaphor and honestly wrestle with its own behavior, politics and predilections.

Some time ago I was staging Euripides' *HECUBA* with Olympia Dukakis, and we got to the section where Hecuba in essence puts Agamemnon on trial after she has blinded Polymestor and murdered his children. Olympia stopped the rehearsal in frustration and said "I've enacted my revenge; why do I now have to argue my

case?" to which our dramaturg, the distinguished classicists Helen Foley replied, "This is your chance to write history the way that you want it to be written." The relationship of public discourse to artistic expression is a fascinating one, and the Greeks were profoundly aware of the slippery nature of words and the potential of language to manipulate the truth. But they were also aware that through language, through drama, it was possible to create a kind of civic discourse and cultural literacy that helped keep a complex and potentially fractured culture alive.

This is the gift of having studied the classics as an undergraduate. You will always understand