

STANFORD CLASSICS COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

I am thrilled to be here today with all of you, thrilled to celebrate your success and especially thrilled that you chose to major in classics during your time at Stanford. Who would ever have thought that the true mavericks of contemporary education would be those who chose to study the ancient world?! And how fascinating that what we now call the study of classics was at one time considered the basic foundation of *any* contemporary person's understanding of their world.

I majored in classics and comp lit at Stanford in the era just preceding the computer revolution, so we Greek scholars were accorded some modicum of respect because we were privy to a strange and mysterious language represented by letters and codes most mortals couldn't comprehend. I had dreamed of becoming a classical archaeologist since being introduced to the ancient world by my second grade teacher Mrs. Dawson, who for some unknown reason spent most of the school year teaching us about Sir Arthur Evans' excavations at Knossos, which captivated me utterly and induced me to want to spend my childhood and teenage years doing excavations wherever I could find a pit of dirt. Even when I discovered that Evans had rearranged his finds to suit the fancy of his own imagination, I was not deterred—I intuitively felt that the exploration of the ancient world invited a leap of the imagination and an act of faith to crack the code and discover the secrets buried within. Of course, as soon as I took the requisite courses in radiocarbon dating and geological archaeology and realized how highly scientific the field had become, I understood that my particular aptitudes might better be applied elsewhere. Thank god for my genius Greek instructor Helene Foley who taught us first year Greek via the theater. Indeed, my first class at Stanford involved learning the Greek alphabet and then proudly reading BREKEKEKEX KOAX KOAX, the Chorus of Frogs in Aristophanes' comedy, which thrilled me to death and was probably responsible for moving me towards a lifelong career in the theater. I know many of you here today participated in Stanford Classics in Theater, so you know exactly what I mean. Over the course of my four years at Stanford we worked our way through the AGAMEMNON and ELEKTRA, through HECUBA and ANTIGONE, staging dramas in the backyard of Helene's Palo Alto home where the intrepid and flamboyant expert in the Hellenistic novel Jack Winkler would come shooting down her chimney as the *deus ex machina* in any number of the plays. Ancient culture was our touchstone for endless debates about our own culture, as we struggled to create our own narratives, endure our own collegiate dramas, and carve out a path for ourselves.

So it was more than kismet when I arrived back in California in 1992 to run the American Conservatory Theater, whose gorgeous home, the beaux art Geary Theater, lay in ruins from the Loma Prieta earthquake. Being an archaeologist at heart, I was totally at home running a ruined theater. There's nothing like a classical education to give one perspective. We once staged ANTIGONE using the rubble of our damaged theater as scenery, and every night as Kreon combed his hands through the dirt, actor Ken Ruta would find artifacts he remembered from the

theater's glory years before the destruction. Our Chorus were dressed as bewildered subscribers, having returned to a destroyed building in search of a play to hold them together. Over and over again in my theatrical career I have thought about the way in which drama MATTERED to the Greeks, as a living metaphor to show a city its own fate, its own story. The fact that drama to the Greeks was the occasion for civic celebration and civic introspection seems hugely important, more important now than ever as we live in an era of isolation and individual destiny in which there are precious few occasions for a *polis* to come together to explore its own mythology, its own contradictions, its bad behavior, its lies, its aspirations.

All of you sitting here today have explored the classical world from your own perspectives as contemporary people: I loved reading about your thesis topics, your areas of focus, your passions, from Greek lyric to Euclid's diagrams to representations of ugliness in ancient drama, you have covered it all. I do think that one thing all classicists have in common is a love of narrative. Because everything to the Greeks was, in a sense, new, they excelled in creating narratives to explain their own history and to imagine their own future. Once when I was rehearsing Euripides' HECUBA with the actress Olympia Dukakis, the rehearsal ground to a halt; it was just after Hecuba had managed to put out the eyes of her enemy Polymestor and was then confronted by Agamemnon, who asked her what she had done. Olympia couldn't understand why she had to recount her deed of revenge; having accomplished her vendetta, what was the point of talking through it again for Agamemnon? What we came to understand was that this was Hecuba's chance to write her own history. That in itself is a powerful act. It is one thing to rush through time, accomplishing the tasks before us. It is another thing to record our thoughts, our behavior, or deeds, for history. He or she who writes history controls the imagination of the future. The Greeks were highly suspicious of the manipulative power of words, but also reverential about language when it was used to advance the law, to illuminate the past, to remind its citizens of where they had gone awry as they struggled to determine the best course of action for the future.

Classicists have been exposed to the modern world in the making. Our sense of ourselves, our democracy, our role in the culture, the nature of justice, the essence of gender and the fickle nature of fate, all of this is the fertile ground in which classicists toil. As you have watched the middle east erupt over the past few years and seen cultures of oligarchy and autocracy struggle with fledgling democracies, you are the ones who have had access to the original and best thinking about the nature of democratic government and the threat of tyranny and abuse of power. You are the ones who have charted the rise and fall of empires, and climbed into the dirt to find shards of evidence of human behavior and belief thousands of years ago. You are the ones who have watched the Trojan women mourn, who have followed Aeneas' struggle to found a new city, who have seen what happens when religious fanaticism drives a group of maenads to destroy their own king. So it is you who will bring perspective to contemporary crises, and who have learnt the art of persuasion from the original masters of rhetoric. You are fully armed to take on the world.

And now you are, to move from a Greek to a latin reference, at a *liminal* place. I love that word. It comes from the latin word for threshold: *limen, liminis*, meaning “a lintel, a threshold, entrance, beginning, starting gate”. As a root word it still permeates our own language: we talk about an idea or a feeling being *subliminal* when it has traveled below the threshold of our consciousness, we say *eliminate* when we mean to take away from the threshold and *preliminary* when we are at that place before we arrive at the threshold. The notion of threshold was hugely important in the ancient world; for example, the borderline between the worlds of the living and the dead involved a river and a dog, and a crossing point fraught with peril and the giving of coins. The passage of waking to sleep was similarly marked with images of the threshold, with those who could cross that threshold easily being those least likely to remember their dreams, as opposed to those who wrestled with consciousness at the threshold before becoming fully awake to the world. So today you are liminal beings on the threshold, ready to step through a door into a new world. Everyone responds slightly differently to thresholds. Some of you will glide through that threshold easily and fluidly, and hardly look back, others of you will linger in the doorway like Orpheus and be tempted to look back at the beautiful Eurydice you have left behind... many of you will linger on the threshold looking out at the fearsome world ahead of you and wondering whether if you had studied something practical like computer science or engineering (and I know some of you here today have done both), your march through the threshold might be more assured. But you have a secret weapon which will serve you no matter what you choose to do: you have widened the lens of your own 21st century lives by an immersion into the best and most fertile moments in cultural history. In a culture obsessed with short-term profits, with apps that give us instant access to whatever we are seeking and attention spans that have become concomitantly shorter with each passing year, you classicists are the true mavericks. You’re the ones with the long view, the big picture, dialectical perspective that has been taught to always argue from both sides. You who have watched great civilizations rise and falls, who have memorized spectacular epic poetry and unearthed coins that began international trade, will not be fazed by a momentary blip on your life screens. When all else fails, remember Winnie in Beckett’s HAPPY DAYS, buried up her to her neck in sand. “One loses one’s classics!” she laments. And then she takes a deep breath and assures herself “Oh, not all. A part . A part remains. That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one’s classics, to help one through the day.”

Congratulations to all of you!