

USF TALK

Members of the Board of Trustees, President Fitzgerald, Provost Heller, Dean Camperi, faculty and staff of the University, friends and fellow graduates, Good Afternoon!

It's such a pleasure to be here on this auspicious occasion to share Commencement with you, and I'm thrilled to receive an honorary Doctorate from such a distinguished university.

In preparation for this moment, I looked carefully at the mission statement of USF, which resolves to "educate leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world" through a "diverse, socially responsible learning community". What a laudable aspiration at this particular moment! And how highly unusual to focus on the idea of community and social responsibility, especially when that responsibility is coupled with the Jesuit tradition of rigorous humanistic learning. The luckiest thing in life is to find something bigger than oneself to focus one's energies on. And sometimes finding that passion takes an unexpected amount of trial and error. So if you're one of those people sitting at graduation today who has no idea how or where your life is about to unfold, don't despair! A sense of direction can present itself in surprising ways and at moments where you least expect it. Such was the case in my own life. I went to Stanford to become a classical archaeologist. My first class my freshman year, at 8 a.m. no less, was Ancient Greek, taught by an inspired professor who loved drama. After we learned the alphabet, she gave us a small text from Aristophanes' THE FROGS, and we were able to read "brekekekex koax koax" which the frogs sing as they enter the stage. I was immediately hooked, transfixed by the idea of those ancient actors performing in a vast open air space for a group of citizens in a young democracy trying to understand how to live. Unexpectedly, I gave up archaeology and committed to a life in the theater, in spite of the fact that no one in my family had ever done such a thing and I had no previous training in the field at all. What was compelling to me about Greek drama was its belief that a performance could galvanize a community, that the most complex issues of the time could be best understood by being embodied in larger-than-life characters who spoke in extraordinary verse and were accompanied by music and dance. Every great issue, from the nature of justice to the culpability of war to the silencing of women to the agonies of immigration to the responsibility of one generation to answer to the crimes of another, are laid out in full force in Greek drama. Here was something big that I could devote my talent to.

One of the things I came to love most about the theater is the way in which it gives audiences access to the inner life of characters from other cultures, time periods, classes, races, belief systems and points of view. Olympia Dukakis likes to call actors "ministers from the interior" because they bring deep thoughts and feelings to the surface for an audience to encounter and contend with. This process invites understanding, and makes it more difficult to look at people unlike ourselves as the

“other”. Demonization is easy—it happens when we are ignorant. The more we know, the harder it is to make the kind of destructive generalizations that lead to terrible choices. Theater is thus emotional knowing. It is a zone of empathy. Over and over again, it has lifted my gaze and opened my heart to ways of thinking and behaving that are unlike my own, it has given me compassion for difference and has kept me adjacent to beauty, to dreaming, to exquisite language and music and light. It has helped me to get beyond myself, to imagine different worlds, to experience love and loss and joy and despair, and to put a little of all of that back into the world. Which doesn’t mean the conflicts aren’t always there, but that there is a larger frame in which to understand them.

Interestingly enough, even when I decided to pursue a career in theater, the last thing I ever thought is that I would become an Artistic Director. I dreamed of being Peter Brook (which is ironic since the great man himself, at age 92, has just spent two weeks in residence at A.C.T. all these years later!), travelling the world making magnificent theater. Instead, another door opened when I was asked quite out of the blue to run a small and totally broke theater called the Classic Stage Company in downtown New York. Randomly, a life path was laid out before me. I have spent the last 30 years running theaters, first CSC and now ACT, and in doing so I have found my voice and in a sense my calling. Leading a theater was not something that had ever occurred to me. But when that door opened, I could see a world on the other side that I was compelled to explore. Perhaps because my vision for running a theater coincided so closely with my initial passion for Greek drama, I have always tried to position my organization as a kind of public square in which beautiful and emotionally resonant work could open new avenues of understanding for the citizens of my city. I am a total outlier in that Broadway or commercial success has never been my goal. Instead, I had to become an ace fundraiser and public advocate in order to keep my theater alive and healthy. While I never want to see it inscribed on my tombstone: “Here lies Carey Perloff, she raised a lot of money”, I have come to understand that many of the skills it takes to keep an arts organization alive are valuable and worthy of pride, even though they bear little relationship to all that I had envisioned I would be doing when I began. So don’t be too sure you know what you’re good at—sometimes life will teach you that. Try to stay curious about what’s on the other side of the door, and trust that the amazing education you have received here will prepare you for what’s ahead even if it isn’t where you thought you were heading.

Finally, let’s go back to the task of “fashioning a more humane and just world”. How is that supposed to happen, in a culture in which individual success (particularly financial success) is prized above all else and choosing to focus on the common good feels quaint and often impossible? Since I am in the midst of preparing a production of HAMLET at the moment, many of these questions are refracted through that lens. When his school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to find out the source of his misery, Hamlet says “I have of late, though why I know not, lost all my mirth.” And then he goes on to exclaim “what a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form how moving, how express and admirable in action,

how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god... and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me". How, asks a grief-stricken Hamlet, can human beings be at once so like angels and so like beasts? How can one person hold within him or herself the potential for goodness and the potential for cruelty and destruction? Why is it that people fail to live up to their own promise? Why is our potential to create beauty so rarely realized? If we are like angels in apprehension, why don't we behave that way, particularly in our social and political lives? Or as Hamlet asks, "Sure he that made us with such large discourse, looking before and after, gave us not that capability and godlike reason to fust in us unused."

The purpose of a good education is to make sure that our innate capabilities do NOT go unused, to open up our minds to new ways of thinking, speaking, hearing, imagining, knowing. At the end of the play, Hamlet finally achieves a kind of clarity in which he is able to accept his own destiny. "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" he tells Horatio. "If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all." So now you are ready! You are the beneficiaries of a great education, one that celebrates community and the collective good, one that has opened you to new worlds and new ways of thinking, you are the ones we are counting on to pick your heads up and stay focused on the bigger picture. I hope that as you move through the world, you will remain open to the possibility that, in spite of it all, it is possible to care about something bigger than oneself. Indeed, it is necessary. For each of you, that window onto bigger things will be different. You may not even know what it is yet. But whatever it is, it will invite you to remember the exquisite piece of work man is, to celebrate how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, how like an angel in apprehension! Live up to yourselves. Live up to the gift of your education. Live up to the ability to add to the communal good. Live up to your appetite for change. Live up to your ability to make something beautiful. Whether or not you succeed on a daily basis, the aspiration is all. It will keep you buoyed and floating when grim reality threatens to drag you down. It will remind you of what is angelic about your own being. The rest... is silence.

Thank you and congratulations to every one of you!