

History Department Graduation Celebration Remarks June 8, 2022

Thank you, Nicholas and Rane, for those wonderful remarks. It is an honor to be on the program with you. I'm also honored to represent the History Department faculty and follow in the footsteps of distinguished colleagues who have spoken at these celebrations over the past ten years.

So, congratulations History and Classical Studies majors! And congratulations to your friends and families who helped you make it to this point!

We in the History Department are proud of your accomplishments, and you should be too. Graduating from a university is a major life accomplishment in the best of circumstances, but as Nicholas and Rane have just indicated, completing a degree during a global pandemic has presented a particular set of challenges.

You stayed with us as we pivoted quickly from in-person to remote classes, which then morphed into a shifting series of remote, in-person, and hybrid offerings, which sometimes changed format in the middle of the quarter. All the while you've put up with more than a few of us faculty struggling to learn on the fly how to teach in these new modalities while figuring out how to actually make the technology work.

And I know that some of you have at the same time been dealing with much, much more while pursuing your degrees: illness, personal and family loss, the inability to find affordable housing (or any housing) in the area, working multiple jobs, mounting debt, discrimination in its various forms, and other challenges.

All the while, the weight of the world has pushed down on us. As we know, just to invoke events from recent weeks, the news has often not been good: from Buffalo to Uvalde, from Eastern Ukraine to South Sudan, and from the Oklahoma and Texas state houses to Washington, DC. And let's not forget the ongoing saga of the Antarctic ice sheets.

We obviously experience this news differently by virtue of our positionalities, proximity, and politics. But we all nonetheless live in a world defined by the sum total of the effects of "so much trouble in the world," to quote the Wailers, and a

good deal of uncertainty about the future. So, again, it was no small feat to complete your degrees at this moment.

My hope is that you will all be sustained by the lessons you have learned during your university experience as you move into the future, defined to some extent by this uncertainty but also by a horizon of possibility.

Valuable lessons can be gleaned from many things you've experienced here at UCSC: from courses across departments, activism and performances, friendships and relationships (good and bad), work, and everything else.

But let me reflect a bit on how you might draw upon the skills and perspectives you've developed studying History and Classics in particular as you move on to the next phase of your lives.

At a fundamental level, of course, the basic skills you've developed as history and classical studies majors can help you in your professional lives: here I'm referring to things like assessing evidence, reading with a critical eye, recognizing the power of language, writing with precision and clarity, and telling stories effectively.

Some of you have already landed good jobs and internships or have secured admission to graduate or professional schools for the fall. If this is the case, congratulations, and know that your work in our majors has prepared you to succeed in these endeavors.

And, if you don't have anything lined up, please maintain the confidence that you will eventually figure it out, and know that the perspectives you've developed studying history can help.

I graduated with an undergraduate history degree some decades ago, at another moment of great uncertainty in the world. We were worried about, among other things, the AIDS epidemic, the ways mandatory minimum sentencing policies were filling prisons with young people of color, and the possibility of nuclear war between the US and USSR. And the job market wasn't great either.

I spent a few years bouncing around between odd jobs before figuring out what was coming next. Some of that work involved crawling around under houses and digging ditches on construction crews, and some of it involved endless filing, form filling, and photocopying in a law firm office.

Such jobs didn't seem to offer much promise at the time, and I still have memories of wondering aloud— in the ditch or at the photo copying machine, in the company of other recent college-graduate co-workers—about the value of a University of California degree.

But at other moments, we reminded ourselves that our degrees were valuable because we were set up to do something different at some point (whether in construction, law, or another field) because of the academic skills we had obtained and because we had developed critical perspectives that would help us understand the world better and would inform the way we took action in it.

Studying history in particular helped me understand that while the world was shaped by historically unfolding patterns and trends, there were often lots of contingencies. There were always alternative futures in every past we studied, different ways the story might have played out.

Applying this lesson to my own life helped me understand that there were many possible paths forward and not simply one prescribed or correct future. Which is something that often gave me comfort as I thought about what would come next.

Such lessons can also be applied to how we address the current political, economic, and social conjuncture that we are all trying to survive.

Sometimes thinking about the future world while being attentive to historical patterns or precedent, and the ways people reproduce things we thought were consigned to the past or intentionally and cynically revisit them, can be deeply troubling and discouraging.

But thinking historically can also keep us going and inspire us in the present.

We can take solace in thinking about the many millions who have survived, persevered, and effectively transformed their lives, communities, and even their

societies while facing harsher, more dangerous circumstances than most of us are likely to encounter.

And through historical investigation we can consider how people have approached the challenges and dilemmas they faced in the past, reflect on what strategies worked and didn't work, and consider what lessons from these efforts might be brought to the present.

Good historical thinking compels us to keep in mind that the circumstances of the past were different from those today, but it is from a place of such recognition that we can begin to draw productive lessons from the successes and failures of past thinking, social movements, and so on.

Again, history is full of possibilities. There were always multiple futures in every past we study. Some of those futures that became our present might have been worse, but some might have been better. And we can draw on knowledge of those alternative futures for imagining and striving towards better futures than the troubling ones we might see on the horizon.

So, with that, History and Classical Studies majors, I applaud you on your accomplishments and wish you futures full of joy, personal fulfillment, contemplation, and curiosity. And I hope that many of you can use your power, privilege, and responsibility as educated people to help to repair our world and make it thrive. Congratulations and please remember to share with us some of the *good news* about you as your lives unfold!