

Thank you Mark for that introduction and thank you all for that wonderful welcome. Let me first offer my congratulations to the History Department Class of 2016. Being here to celebrate with you today is in all honesty one of the highlights of this academic year for me. I never would have imagined that such a privilege would be bestowed upon me.

And, of course, students, congratulations on joining the proud cadre of UCSC History Department graduates—Yes, I think it is safe to now consider yourselves alumni of UCSC—So, again, many congratulations and *felicidades*.

But before I begin, I'd be remiss if I did not take the opportunity to thank Stephanie Sawyer and Dr. Catherine Jones and the members of the Undergraduate Education Committee (UEC) for inviting me to speak with you this morning. This is, indeed, a special opportunity for me, not only because I get to see in one place most of our undergraduate majors, but also because it is a rare occasion for a faculty member to speak to an audience comprised of their colleagues and undergraduate students who are accompanied by their family and friends. So thank you, again, Stephanie and Kate, for extending this opportunity to me

I stand before you this morning nearly 23 years after graduating from UCLA with a double major in History and Classics. As I recall, it was an anxiety-filled time for me, but it was also a time when I felt exhilarated at what awaited me in the near future, even though at that time I really did not know with any certainty what I was going to do with myself. And, to be quite honest, my mother, who headed our household, expressed some concern

about my choices of study, but not in the same way I had reserved for myself. She, with a high school degree and some vocational training, believed what most parents believe with or without a college education: that a clear and unequivocal career path would be supernaturally bestowed to those who earned a bachelor's degree.

And in a very real way, there was a strong basis for my mother's expectations. After all, as students of history, we possess a medley of highfalutin, market-able skills. But first let me be clear about what you are NOT as history majors. You are not—and thank goodness for this—bearers or containers of facts. Here I'm referring to how history knowledge used to be taught and understood: as a linear and progressive list of tedious dates, or as a linear and progressive list of benevolent emperors, or of necessary wars, or of heroic explorers, or of unimpeachable presidents, or of idyllic California missions. Rather, you possess a depth of selective historical knowledge that accompanies a set of skills and habits of mind that history students should have. You have the ability to sift information, read with a critical eye, assess evidence from the past, write with precision, and are able to tell stories that analyze and narrate the past effectively. With these skills and insights you probably could have, for example, spared the Gap clothing company some embarrassment by advising them against using "Manifest Destiny" as a T-shirt slogan back in 2012. You would have undoubtedly impressed upon the Gap that this otherwise catchy slogan was used euphemistically to refer to the removal and subsequent genocide of Native Americans, and later, to justify a war with Mexico. You would have certainly reminded the Gap that the term "Manifest Destiny" was and still is their shorthand for US imperialism. Your strong history education might

have prevailed against the marketing and sale of Manifest Destiny T-shirts, and the backlash a company faced by profiting from an ugly chapter in U.S. history.

But when I graduated from UCLA, I did not realize I was equipped with such intellectual armory and neither did my mother. Needless to say, she puzzled over my stint of unemployment following graduation, but she never once questioned my decision to study history and classics preferring, instead, to place the onus of my employment on an economy that was in recession.

But I also had an unbending faith in my liberal arts education and the courage of my convictions to eventually take up a teaching post in Long Beach, California, at Washington Middle School—a career path many in this room are probably deliberating. Of course, I had no way of understanding what awaited me at this particular middle school located in one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in southern California. I also had no way of anticipating what it would take to teach 35 students in grades 6th, 7th and 8th grades, all in the same classroom at the same time, and who were from disparate parts of the world: Mexico, Central America, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. As if this was not challenging enough, all of my students were illiterate or semi-literate in their primary language. Teaching them English was suddenly an indulgence; literacy in their primary language was the urgent goal. I nonetheless blissfully (and may even natively) accepted my assignment which involved teaching all subject matters to them: math; social studies, art, and health—and literacy in and through these subjects. Needless to say, this was the most challenging job I have ever had. Everyday, it evoked in me simultaneous excitement, fear, and gratification. But I drew on my strong

liberal arts education to create a curriculum for these students, and to use history to trigger the curiosities of my students. I also used it to quell racial tensions that at times percolated among my students.

My history education also helped me understand what was going on before me. I was exposed first-hand to the daily struggles of my students' parents including their abject poverty—I'm talking about poverty that I had otherwise associated with the developing world: dark hovels with corroding bathtubs, toilets, and kitchens that passed for decent housing; and hungry children who depended on school for getting the only full meals they would eat that day.

I also witnessed a public school staff who tried mightily to assist these students and their families in ways that many of our public schools are not set up to do. I also witnessed the power of parent participation and activism in schools; most of these parents were single mothers who advocated for school uniforms to equalize the material playing field for their children. This effort was actually the first of its kind in public schools, and for this distinction, President Bill Clinton visited our school to congratulate our parents and our school for pioneering what would later become a common practice in US public schools.

After 3.5 years of this, I was absolutely exhausted from the day-to-day struggles in the classroom and the political climate in California at that time when its voters passed Proposition 187—a piece of legislation that would have banned all undocumented students from receiving a public education and would have forced teachers like myself to report the unauthorized status

of my students to law enforcement. In retrospect, I think I withdrew from this tumultuous environment for the cushy world of graduate school to pursue a Ph.D. in American history; a course of action I never had to take since. But my history degree equipped me with necessary tools to deal with the complicated terrain of life as a teacher in urban, middle school: an experience that made me more human, more compassionate, and more determined to make a difference in the world whenever I had the opportunity.

So here is what I want to impart to you today.

History is not like some disciplines in the social sciences or hard sciences that one encumbers upon a problem or medico-scientific need in contemporary life. History, in contrast, is both directly instrumental and contemplative, more meditative. Thus, history it helps us uncover our humanity and is a window into what we want and can be as a society of individuals.

No doubt the study of history stokes our souls. We are strangely and psychically fortified by studying dead people and even dead languages; we also internally erupt at the viciousness of past injustices as if these incidents occurred in our immediate present.

History also invites us to step out into the world to fulfill our curiosities about peoples and places that are very different from us. And in this way, we know that studying history had made us less chauvinistic, less nationalistic, and more willing to see the logic and beauty of how other people in world—and even in parts of our country are that remote to us—construct their lives and their relationships in marked contrast to our own.

In total, I think study history demands that we seek a truth in ourselves and in others.

So this is what I wish for all of you: Allow life to take you where it may—and you know, it will anyway! Let those intellectual curiosities that you have cultivated thus far grow even more; and indulge your curiosities by traveling even if it's to the beach, a local museum, a festival, or a neighborhood not your own. Pull yourself away from Netflix and Vimeo and create a reading list of wonderful historical novels that you have always wanted to read, and read them.

Don't make the mistake of thinking you can master life, just as you master a piece of literature or knowledge of a topic. Life will, at times, bewixt you, leave you astonished, and in these moments of challenge, practice patience, cultivate kindness, directly help those less-fortunate than you; and always remember that studying history is a gift you gave to yourself.