

History Department Reception Comments, June 2012
Catherine Jones

Thank you to Ashley and Elizabeth for their reflections. They demonstrate, more eloquently than I can say, why getting to teach at UCSC is such a great gig. The curiosity, generosity, and reflection our students bring to the classroom makes teaching here a genuine pleasure.

I'm honored to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the faculty and staff this morning. We're here to congratulate those of you who have completed your degrees in History, Classical Studies, German Studies, and Jewish Studies this year. We're also here to reflect on what it is you've been doing over the past few years and why it matters for what you might do next.

To that end, I want to make the case for why studying history can make your life better, if you let it.

At this point you all know that history is not an inert body of dead facts, but a dynamic set of narrative possibilities that emerge and take shape as we find new evidence, listen to new voices, ask new questions, and reconsider old assumptions. Giving up the idea that history is a collection of details to memorize is both bracing and terrifying: bracing because it holds out endless possibilities for change and refinement and terrifying because it means mastery is impossible.

So why do I suggest that contending with the devastating, dazzling, and often muddy past can make your life better? When you study history, you're liable to develop a historical sensibility, by no means reserved for professional historians. It entails certain habits of mind, including curiosity and a kind of dogged optimism that there are always new ways of seeing and understanding the world bequeathed to us by the past.

I want to offer you five specific reasons why I think embracing a historical sensibility and taking it with you even after you've left history classes far behind is a good thing.

*1. Thinking historically opens up space to see possibilities and alternatives where others see only a static set of givens. When we investigate why things happened the way they did—why slavery survived the American Revolution, why the Civil War brought it to an end (if not its ultimate end)—we have to consider what else *might* have happened. Contingency can be scary, but it can also be liberating. Recognizing that there are paths not taken enables us to see alternatives in the present that others overlook. Ultimately, this has the potential to offer us a way out of deadlock and endemic pessimism.

*2. Thinking historically also requires empathy. If you're serious about trying to understand the past, you have to begin with an understanding that different historical actors living in the same place and time, even in the same house, may have had radically different views of the circumstances around them. Trying to understand what shaped these different views and how they informed the meaning actors imparted to the same events demands making imaginative leaps that put you, even if always partially, in the shoes of people who may differ from you in every particular. Being able to do that in your work and in your life will enrich your experiences beyond measure.

*3. Thinking historically demands humility. Diving into the muck of the past entails acknowledging that you cannot possibly know everything. It often also means figuring out that what you think you know is actually wrong. Unlike law, for example, where rules of evidence exist to help exclude and include potentially pertinent information, historians have to take on board whatever they find, even if it requires them to jettison cherished ideas. Having the humility to acknowledge when it's time to set aside an old way of understanding things and embrace a new alternative is invaluable.

But history is not just about all the things we don't know. It also offers us both the means to better understand the world around us and the tools to engage each other in trying to figure out where we go from here.

*4. Thinking historically offers us ways of knowing about the world that enable us to make judgments with more than passion and prejudice to guide us. It invites us to weigh evidence, to consider a range of views, to keep asking questions in order to help us make choices with confidence. Not all assertions are equally true, not all options are equally desirable, and thinking historically offers us ways to make those determinations.

*5. Finally, thinking historically requires collaboration. When you set out to learn about the past, you do so in confidence that you cannot, and will not, go it alone. Every book you consult, every source you consider, has been touched by someone else, shaped by someone else. Scholars, despite all evidence to the contrary, do not live mole-like existences, growing pale and beady-eyed from months in archival basements. Well, they *do* do that. But they also seek each other out because it's only in trying to convey our ideas to others that they become clear. Building knowledge requires conversation, in texts, in voice, and sometimes just in imagination. It is an error to imagine that self-sufficiency is feasible. History refuses to let us forget that our lives depend on our shared labor and our shared knowledge.

Ultimately, thinking historically means engaging the world with a kind of awareness that gives you options—options to see other possibilities, to think beyond yourself, and to recognize that your incapacity to do everything, to know everything, is not a failing, but an opportunity to build something with those around you.

We all live in dialogue with the living and the dead, but thinking historically can make you intensely, beautifully, and powerfully aware of these conversations.

Wherever you go, whatever you do, you will take your mind with you. Thinking historically can help that feel like a gift rather than a burden.

Congratulations to you all!