

Elizabeth Weidner

History Graduation Celebration Speech

Good morning. My name is Elizabeth Weidner, and I am a Classical Studies student here at UC Santa Cruz. Before I begin, I have a confession to make. Unlike some of you I did not start my academic career with the pursuit of history in mind, and especially not Ancient Greek and Roman history, something I knew little about four years ago. I meandered, somewhat aimlessly, through several majors before falling into the one I find myself graduating from this weekend, but I am grateful for journey that led me here today. If I am being honest, I was dragged kicking and screaming into history. I knew the clichés, and I had heard all the jokes; I was not going to get a job, and the only thing less useful than a History Major was a History Major with a Minor in Philosophy.

So, what changed? There was no specific “ah-ha!” moment where I realized that I was destined to be a historian. I did not have a fantastic movie-montage with clips of me studying with my colleagues, spending late nights wandering the stacks of McHenry Library, or falling asleep at my computer adorably, while inspirational music played in the background. And there was no point at any time when someone pulled me aside and said “Elizabeth, you’re on the right track. You are meant to do history.” I genuinely cannot decide if that would have been nice to hear, or just creepy, but it did not happen in either event.

What I do know — what changed — was that every now and then, usually at the eleventh hour, late in the night (or, to be fair, early in the morning) before an essay was due, I would feel the briefest, momentary connection with what I was writing on. For me, as a Classicist, Cicero and Aristotle, Pliny and Tacitus, and others stopped simply being text on a page and started being the voices of actual people, telling me important things. And between the lines of their speeches and histories, there was one underlying message, which all the students graduating with me this weekend have heard whispered to them from their books and articles; “Remember me,” these voices say. And we do.

The cultures of the History, Classical Studies, Jewish Studies and German Studies groups are all vastly different, but we all have something in common. We all hold in our hands and in our minds a piece of the past, that would otherwise be forgotten. We preserve what is ancient; what is old and antiquated, and revitalize it to make it new again. There is little difference

between us and those who memorized the religious texts in Ancient Israel; the dark-cloaked scholars in the universities of Germany making theses from ancient texts in stony halls; the men and women who printed new and old works alike on the printing press in order that they might be shared with others; or the philosophers who journeyed to the Library of Alexandria where all the knowledge of the world was once held. How different is it that we find ourselves memorizing dates, talking with professors, writing essays, or stalking the stacks at McHenry?

We are the rememberers. Though we may not all go on to graduate school or other post-baccalaureate programs, and continue pursuing history academically, history is something we, as scholars of this discipline, can never forget. We have heard the voices from the pages asking to be remembered, and by being History majors, we have made a silent promise to those voices. Maybe that was why I was unwilling to be a history major as a freshman here; that responsibility and that promise was a daunting one. And as we continue on in our lives, and our years spent here at UC Santa Cruz become distant and faded, because we are historians, we will look back on this time, and try and learn from it. This is because we know better than anyone that one day we too will be just soft voices coming from the pages, if that at all, and we have a message for those who follow us year after year here at UC Santa Cruz, and for those who remain behind. Remember us, like you remember the voices from the pages, because we will always remember you.