

Songs About Me: Why the Humanities Matter More than Ever
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I want to speak with you tonight about the past, present, and future of the Humanities. I will begin, strange as it may seem given my subject matter, with some numbers. A hundred years ago about 75% of the bachelors degrees awarded in the United States were given to students whose studies focused on the Humanities. By the late 1960s that figure had declined from 75% to 18%. In the past forty years it has gone from 18% to 8%. 8%, 8% of our undergraduates now choose to concentrate on the study of the Humanities. That is a number that should concentrate the mind. And the situation is little better at the secondary level. As I'm sure all of us in this room are painfully aware, education budgets are being slashed all over the country, and Humanities teachers and courses all too frequently bear the brunt of those cuts.

These are painful realities that we all face, and no one does decline and fall like a classicist, but what I have to offer you is not despair but hope, hope because I believe that the Humanities can have a bright future and play a vibrant and expanding role in America's schools. But that, in a sense, is only the start because I also believe that what we do as teachers of the Humanities can play an essential role in ensuring the wellbeing of our students, of our nation, and of our world.

You will in all probability have noted my use of the conative. That was not accidental. There have been many reasons for the long-term decline of the Humanities. Not least among them, especially in the past few decades, has been a collective failure of nerve among those of us who teach the Humanities. We have taken our own scholarship too much to heart and have become increasingly unable to offer our students anything beyond doubt, cynicism, and despair. Our students have, as a result, deserted us in ever increasing numbers. If we want the Humanities to thrive, we need to change the way we operate. We need to speak clearly and boldly about the importance of studying the Humanities, and we need to teach in a way that realizes the Humanities' vast potential to transform peoples' lives for the better. We need, by our teaching and our conduct in the classroom, to help our students understand the importance of eschewing a self-interested, self-centered atomized individualism and of committing themselves instead to becoming active members of communities. And we need to be unabashed about showing and sharing our enthusiasm and love for the material we teach and for the students that we teach. If we do these things regularly and consistently the Humanities can take their rightful place in the American educational system and, in the process, regenerate and vastly improve that system. But that will not happen

without people like us doing what needs to be done. There are extraordinary possibilities but no guarantees.

The rest of my talk tonight consists of two basic parts. The first part is about why what we do matters. I begin with why because self-respect is a necessary condition for self-improvement. If we don't believe in ourselves, we cannot begin the hard work of getting better at what we do, and we cannot ask others to give us the resources we need to do our jobs the right way. I have since I was an undergraduate been repeatedly struck by what I can only describe as the Humanities' self-esteem problem. Too many of us who teach the Humanities are too often willing to be complicit in our marginalization because we do not at our core believe in the overriding importance of what we do, or, if we do believe that, we are unable or unwilling to articulate that belief clearly and strongly. When a biologist stands up and makes a case for privileged access to limited resources, we should be ready, willing, and able to stand up and say, I hear and understand you, but what I do is equally important and here's why. Clarity about why what we do matters is, therefore, essential, and I will begin with that. I will then move on to the more mundane question of how, of how we need to teach and to conduct ourselves in the classroom in order to realize the Humanities' potential. What I have to say applies equally to all of the subject areas that fall under the heading of the Humanities. However, my assumption is that all of us here tonight are classicists of one variety or another and that most of us specialize in literature, and I will frame my remarks accordingly. I will also spend a fair amount of time talking about my own teaching, not because I want to hold it up as a model of perfection, which I assure you it is not, but because all I have to offer you is my own thinking about why the Humanities are important, and my teaching conforms closely to that thinking. I have left space for discussion at the end and look forward to hearing and benefiting from your comments and critiques.

But before moving forward I want to pause for a moment and say what an honor and privilege it is to deliver the first Edward Bradley lecture at the CANE summer institute. I have delivered named lectures before, but never for someone who is alive and well and sitting in front of me. I come, therefore, not to bury Caesar but to praise him. On a more serious note, for many years Edward and I had adjoining offices, and as a young faculty member I benefited more times than I count from Edward's experience, knowledge, and advice. My choice to focus this iteration of the Edward Bradley lecture on the past, present, and future of the Humanities is by no means coincidental because like all good classicists I see the past as a source of insight about the present and future, and I see the way Edward teaches as offering invaluable lessons for what we ought to do ourselves. I recently came across

George Santayana's description of William James' teaching, and it seemed to apply perfectly to Edward's teaching as well:

Leaning his head on his hand, he would let fall golden words, picturesque, fresh from the heart, full of the knowledge of good and evil.

I have done my best to craft a talk that reflects and builds on Edward's achievements and my respect and admiration for him.

So, why do the Humanities matter? I will discuss four reasons why the Humanities matter, in ascending order of importance. First, we teach essential skills that students are unlikely to learn anywhere else. On the top of the list of skills that we teach I would put the ability to write clearly, concisely, and persuasively, but I would also include critical thinking, the ability to do basic research, and the ability to speak competently in front of a group. Our colleagues who teach the hard sciences and to a lesser extent those who teach social sciences have a tendency to focus on transmitting information to their students at the expense of working on their students' skill sets. That is fine insofar as it goes, but there is a good case to be made for the idea that in our teaching we should emphasize skills rather than information. Students generally do not retain much of the factual information they memorize, and the sheer amount of available information, which is increasing at an extraordinary pace, means that the ability to find information, to critique sources, to solve problems, and to report the results of that work either orally or in writing is essential.

I taught at Rice University in Houston last semester, and I began the semester by telling my students about the importance of the skills I just discussed. They looked skeptical, and I told them about receiving a phone call a couple of years ago from one of my former students who now works on Wall Street. He gave me his news then said that he called mostly because he wanted to tell me that of all the classes he took at Dartmouth, it was the class he took with me on historical theories and methods that had proven to be the most useful to him, not any of the dozen or so economics classes he took. He makes his living researching stocks, and he said the ability to track down and assess information and to write and speak clearly had been absolutely invaluable to him. My Rice students were not convinced by this lovely anecdote, but I pressed on anyway in my plans to teach them the skills for which I had claimed great importance. At the end of the semester one of the students came to see me in my office. He was the U.S. national champion in Tae Kwon Do in his weight class and was busy raising money to train for and go to the 2012 Olympics. He said that he just wanted to let me know that he felt that he had learned a great deal about how to write that semester and that it had made an

obvious positive difference in his success in fundraising. His solicitation letters had gotten much sharper and the response rate had gone up noticeably.

I'd be willing to bet that all of us in this room have their own collection of similar stories, which is to say that there is nothing special about my experience, and that is exactly the point. One of the criticisms of the Humanities that one hears quite a bit is that they don't teach anything that is of use in the real world, but that could not be more wrong. On the contrary, the practical utility of the skills we teach is much more immediate than the information students memorize in a chemistry class.

The second reason why the Humanities matter takes us to a somewhat more rarified realm. The Humanities matter because they are by far the best place for our students to learn epistemological humility. All of us in this room have spent countless hours teaching teenagers, and all of us have, I suspect, discovered that they have a strong tendency to overestimate how much they know. In saying that I am perhaps being unfair to teenagers, because human beings in general seem to have a propensity to misapprehend the true complexity of the world around them.

Nonetheless, education is absolutely critical here, both in a negative and a positive sense. The lesson that many of our students take away from their classes in the hard sciences and social sciences, a lesson which is taught implicitly rather than explicitly, is that the universe is an orderly place that obeys laws that we can learn through careful study and then consistently and successfully apply. The implication is that human behavior also obeys laws that can be divined and applied. Whether or not most scientists and social scientists would subscribe to this view if put in those terms, what they teach and how they teach it that encourage students to overestimate how much we know. If you think I exaggerate, I encourage you to consider the events of the past few years. A large number of people on Wall Street became absolutely convinced that financial markets behave in regular and to a large extent predictable ways. They borrowed and staked huge sums of money based on those ostensible regularities. They confused their Value-at-Risk models with reality and behaved accordingly. The result was, to say the least, unfortunate. The problem was that Wall Street's financial geniuses failed to appreciate the sheer, baffling complexity of the world in which we live.

This is where the Humanities faculty has a critical role to play. The material we teach and the way we teach drive home the point that human beings and any institution or system that involves human beings defy simple analysis. This is perhaps most evident in the case of literature. Why does Achilles refuse to return

to battle in Book 9 of the *Iliad*? Did Aeneas really love Dido? To read Homer and Vergil is to confront the problem of grasping the thoughts and motivations of another person. But it goes far beyond that, in no small part because we also regularly impart hard-earned insights into why a clear and complete understanding of the world always eludes us. To take but one example, post-modernism has taught the invaluable lesson that language is never a transparent medium and that words are, in all senses of the word, inevitably partial. A Humanities student who has been properly taught knows that things are almost never nearly as simple as they might seem at first glance and has a finely-honed appreciation for uncertainty and nuance and hence is much less prone to the kind of intellectual hybris that so easily leads to disaster.

A third reason why the study of the Humanities matters is that we lay the basis for a tolerant and pluralistic society by helping our students come to understand the overriding importance of culture in shaping identity and worldview. Let me do that again. A second reason why the study of the Humanities matters is that we lay the basis for a tolerant and pluralistic society by helping our students come to understand the overriding importance of culture in shaping identity and worldview.

It is all-too convenient for the members of any given society to conflate *nomos* and *physis*, to take their own social conventions as biological destiny, and to view other cultures as deviating from that biological destiny. Here again our colleagues in the sciences frequently do our students no favors by concentrating their attention on the limited subset of human behaviors which is to a large extent biologically determined. The Humanities do exactly the opposite by inviting, even compelling, students to confront head-on the extraordinary extent of human diversity and to encourage them to ponder the origins and meaning of that diversity. There is of course nothing new in this. Herodotus put the case succinctly when he described a probably fictional encounter of Greeks and Indians at the Persian Court:

If anyone should command all of mankind, bidding them to choose the most attractive customs of all customs, upon examining the matter carefully each of these would choose their own customs. Thus each considers their own customs to be rather by a lot the most attractive...That all mankind thus reckon matters concerning customs, it is possible to judge by many proofs and in particular in regard to this one. Darius during the period of his rule, upon summoning those Greeks being present, asked for how much money they would wish to eat their dead fathers. They said that they would do this thing for no sum of money. Darius then, upon summoning those of the Indians being called Kallatiae, who eat their parents, asked, with the Greeks being present and learning the things being said through an interpreter, for

what sum of money they would agree to burn their dead fathers with fire. They raising a great outcry bid him to not speak blasphemy. Thus these things are reckoned, and Pindar seems to me to write properly, saying that custom is the king of all. (Herodotus *The Histories* 3.38)

It is important to remember that what is so familiar as to seem completely obvious to someone with years of training and experience in the Humanities frequently comes as a revelation to a startlingly high percentage of each new generation of students. I regularly teach the basic introductory course for Dartmouth's Classics' department, CLST 1. One of the stated goals of this course is:

To help you learn about the extraordinary importance of culture in shaping human beings, individually and collectively.

And I spend a considerable amount of time on this issue over the course of the semester. For instance, I take the students through the Greek and Roman systems of categorizing and evaluating sexual behavior and ask them to compare them to our own.

If you think that the importance of culture is obvious to pretty much any smart high school or college student, I urge you to consider the following responses from the course evaluations from the last time I taught CLST 1. One of the questions on the course evaluation is:

What is, for you, the take-away from this class? Put another way, what, if any, valuable information, ideas, lessons, etc. have you learned that will be important to you going forward?

Here are some of the responses to that question...

For me, the key takeaway, at least in a practical sense, is that much of the characteristics which I believed to be biologically determined may in fact be cultural.

That just because we look at something one way doesn't make it right, or the way another culture views something isn't necessarily wrong.

Recognize and own your own categories. Categories are inevitable, but awareness of them is a vital part of education and cultural understanding. Be conscious of your own cultural bias when understanding reality, other people, your experiences. Try to keep track of how your culture shapes you as an individual.

Culture dictates behavior, perspectives, and expectation. Culture is arbitrary, therefore mine is not better than any other.

It was just the realization that these cultures approached some of the societal topics we face in an extremely different manner. It challenged what we think are universal, absolute truths.

That you have to constantly reevaluate how you evaluate other cultures, because your culture affects how you see/act/think about/towards others.

American culture is not "right." Our ideas are sometimes common, but sometimes historically deviant.

Be conscious of your own cultural bias when understanding reality, other people, your experiences.

I think I know now that I shouldn't consider what my culture takes as normal, to be normal for everyone else. That's an assumption that we all tend to make and that can keep us from being discerning thinkers.

Let me say right off the bat that these are verbatim quotes from student evaluations. I promise I didn't write them myself.

I urge you to consider that I have the privilege of teaching some of the brightest college students in the world, most of whom received a much-better-than-average high-school education. And yet the idea that culture is determinative of behavior and that no one culture is better than any other came as a revelation to a significant number of my students.

Furthermore, I make no claims to being a better-than-average teacher. The power to transform the way people see and understand themselves and other people is vested in the material itself—all we need to do is to present it properly and let it do its work. I did my Ph.D. at Columbia University in New York, and during my time there I taught Literature Humanities in the Core Curriculum for two years. The students in that course spend a year reading some of the greatest hits of Western literature, ranging from Homer to Virginia Woolf. The first time I taught Literature Humanities was an epiphany. Over the course of the year, I watched virtually every student in my section undergo a profound intellectual transformation, not because of anything I said or did, but simply from the experience of reading and talking and writing about books.

That experience has stayed with me ever since because it taught me that the children in every generation, no matter how naturally bright they may or may not be, need to learn about the extraordinary effect of culture on their identity and worldview. Nowadays I tell my students that culture is like oxygen—invisible and rarely a matter of overt concern but absolutely vital to our existence.

A few years ago we had some incidents at Dartmouth that spoke to a lack of tolerance on the part of many members of the student body. Our response was to form a panel to design a few hours of what I can only call indoctrination in the importance of tolerance that was to be administered to all incoming first-year students during orientation. I happened to know the chair of the panel, and he asked me if I wanted to come speak to them and share my thoughts on how best to proceed. I responded that it would be better for everyone involved if I didn't because I thought the whole thing was fundamentally misguided. Tolerance cannot be enforced by dictate from above. It can, however, be fostered by the simple expedient of helping people come to understand culture and its effects and for that reason to expect and respect differences. That project is something that the Humanities are uniquely equipped to undertake, and the importance of that project, and hence the study of the Humanities, cannot be easily exaggerated. If we want to live in a pluralistic and tolerant society, we have to, have to teach to our children about culture and its effects, and if we want to do that we need to teach them Humanities.

And I'd like to point out that I'm not done yet, because I've yet to discuss the last and most important reason why studying the Humanities matters. That reason is based on a simple assumption, that the point of the whole exercise, the ultimate motivation for doing what we do, is to be happy. I am aware that there are many people who would be willing to debate the validity of that assumption, but I don't want to spend much time here today doing that. I will, therefore, content myself with quoting an authority whose opinion is likely to be influential for many of us. Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with trying to identify what he calls *to ariston*, the Supreme Good. After a fair amount of discussion, he settles on happiness:

Now such a thing happiness (*eudaimonia*), above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for

the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself...Happiness, therefore, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the End at which all actions aim. (1.7.5-8)

That leads directly to my third and last reason why the study of Humanities matters. The study of the Humanities matters because it regularly helps people learn how to be happy. That's important, so I'll say it again. The study of the Humanities matters because it regularly helps people learn how to be happy.

I realize that my thinking here may not be entirely obvious, so I'll elaborate at some length. This is a subject about which I speak to my students all the time, and they regularly retort that it is not possible to learn how to be happy or to seek happiness. Many of my students see happiness as roughly the same as the weather, it comes and goes without any ability on our part to influence it. I expect that at least some of you here tonight share that opinion.

I am not unaware of the research that shows that there is a strong genetic component in individuals' temperaments and hence likelihood of being happy. However, genetics is no more than a single relevant factor, it does not determine our fate. I am perhaps a naïve Humanist, but it seems to me at least that when it comes to happiness our decisions and actions are profoundly important. But even if you agree with that, you may wonder what any of this has to do with the Humanities.

The connection is to be found, unsurprisingly enough, in culture. Every culture is built around a limited number of what Charles Taylor has called "hypergoods." Taylor defines hypergoods as goods:

which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about.
(*Sources of the Self*, 63)

If we take ancient Greece as an example, we would identify *timê* as a hypergood. If we take modern-day America as an example, we would identify wealth as a hypergood.

What is critical for our purposes is that there is always an implicit assumption that successful pursuit of the hypergoods of the society in which an individual lives will make her or him happy.

This is most easily seen in Americans' attitude toward money. There is a line in David Mamet's movie *Heist* in which a character played by Danny Devito says,

“Everybody needs money. That’s why they call it money.” I suspect that Mamet’s point was that money is so fundamentally important that its pursuit requires no explanation. A few years ago I had a conversation with a student who was about to graduate and had a Wall Street job waiting for him. I asked him why he had taken the job, and he said without hesitation that he had taken the job because it paid very well. I then asked him if he could explain why the money was important to him. And he looked completely baffled. It was David Mamet all over again. I asked him if he thought that making a great deal of money would make him happy, and he said, of course, as if I had asked him if the sky is blue or if water is wet.

It’s a reasonable assumption that that student is now indeed making a great deal of money, but it is not a reasonable assumption that making a great deal of money has made him happy. I say that in part because a great deal of recent research, carried out by people like Daniel Kahneman at Princeton, has shown that incomes beyond about \$60,000 have virtually no measurable effect on peoples’ happiness. Put another way, based purely on their incomes, a Dartmouth professor is about as likely to be happy as a Wall Street banker who makes \$4 million a year.

I have delved into the subject of money because it illustrates a simple but important fact: people tend to unreflectively pursue the hypergoods of the society into which they were born. The problem is that there is no guarantee whatsoever that acquiring large amounts of a society’s hypergoods will make any given individual happy. And here again I’m not saying anything that would have come as a surprise to at least some Greeks. There is an argument to be made that this is one of the basic issues being played out in the *Iliad*. Achilles is the ultimate warrior in a society in which the supreme hypergood was *time* won on the battlefield. Put another way, the character of Achilles in the *Iliad* is constructed as being ideally suited to pursuing his society’s supreme hypergood. And then things fall apart in Book 1 and by Book 9 Achilles is in the midst of the first existentialist crisis in Western literature. Consider what he says:

What lasting thanks in the long run for warring with our enemies, on and on, no end? One and the same lot for the man who hangs back and the man who battles hard. The same *timê* waits for the coward and the brave. They both go down to Death, the fighter who shirks, the one who works to exhaustion. (*Iliad* 9.316-20)

I don’t pretend to understand the *Iliad* in all its immense and wonderful complexity, but it seems to me that Achilles has had the shattering realization that the successful pursuit of his society’s hypergood might not actually work out all that well for him and that he is going to die no matter what he does.

I would suggest to you that the study of the Humanities can contribute meaningfully to individuals' happiness by helping them come to precisely the same realizations as Achilles, to wit, that successful pursuit of a society's hypergoods might not actually work out all that well and that everyone is going to die no matter what she or he does.

Here again you might feel like these realizations are so elementary as to be immediately apparent to pretty much everyone. These are issues we talk about at some length in CLST 1 and so I'll return, briefly, to the evaluations from that course and to the students' responses to the question of what they took away from the course:

Going after our society's hypergoods simply because you can doesn't mean you should. I used to think that was the goal, and now I think it is the coward's way out a little...

It was interesting to learn about the concept of hypergoods and then its effect upon society's shape. I think I will constantly be classifying all of my own expectations of myself into certain hypergood categories. I will also make sure my own hypergoods are placed higher than those of society.

The idea that society is effectively a game whose rules we choose to play by, and that these rules are not absolute and will not necessarily make me happy. A culture's hypergoods may not necessarily be your own. In my case, this is absolutely true.

For me, I got the most from the section on hypergoods, Achilles, and the note of the ultimate end being happiness, not simply what society had said I was best equipped to do. I had always thought about pursuing life using the latter maxim but I had always had certain reservations about it. Though I don't have the answer to my life (I doubt many do) I feel as if I am now equipped to ask the appropriate questions.

So the Humanities can help lead our students to some critical realizations about what may *not* make them happy, but they can do even more because they can also help them harvest the rich fruits of thousands of years of people thinking about what actually does make human beings happy. When it comes to thinking about what is important and what might make us happy we don't have to re-invent the wheel. We can benefit from the insights of some of the smartest people who ever lived simply by opening a book. What this means in practice is that we can indeed

learn how to be happy, or at least greatly increase our chances of being happy. This in fact is the conclusion that Aristotle reaches in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He argues that we can consciously pursue happiness and that:

To entrust to chance what is greatest and most noble would be a very defective arrangement. (Nicomachean Ethics 1.9.6)

The conscious exploration of happiness is perhaps the single most profound and important element of studying the Humanities. That said, I won't discuss it at length, simply because I'm sure that it is obvious to everyone here.

However, I do want to say more about one insight which I think is absolutely crucial and which has the added charm of having roots in classical antiquity. For this insight I return yet again to Aristotle. In the *Politics* Aristotle argues that human beings are by nature meant to live in a community:

From these things therefore it is clear that the *polis* is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal (*politikon zôon*), and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless (*apolis*) is either low in the scale of humanity or above it...And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear... (Politics 1.1.9-10)

I want to dwell on this particular point because I have become increasingly convinced over the past few years that one of the single biggest problems with which Americans are currently wrestling is a commitment to individualism that has been taken to an almost pathological extreme.

I think it is fair to say that America is a country that since its inception has had an unusually strong commitment to individualism. And there are many reasons for seeing that as a good thing. For example, individualism helps ensure that people have the freedom to make a life that suits themselves and strong incentives for achievement. But there has also from the outset been the potential for Americans to push individualism so far as to become completely alienated from the communities and society in which they live. De Tocqueville wrote in his famous *Democracy in America* that:

I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not

got a fatherland. (Alexis de Tocqueville., *Democracy in America*. Ed. J. P. Mayer. Trans. George Lawrence. New York: Anchor, 1969, pg. 692)

De Tocqueville saw this as an emergent problem that was to a large extent mitigated by the importance of local government and voluntary associations in the United States. However, his concerns about the dangers of American individualism turned out to be justified. By the end of the nineteenth century there was a widespread feeling that American society was literally disintegrating because individuals were pursuing their own interests without any regard for the well-being of others. That feeling gave rise to the Progressive movement, which was based on the belief that individualism needed to be balanced by a concern for others that was expressed not just in words but in action and which produced nearly 75 years of highly effective social reform.

There is a general consensus that Progressivist impulses collapsed during the Vietnam War, which was followed by a shift back towards a more individualistic society, a shift that gathered force with time. That shift is evident in the contrast between the visions of America articulated by LBJ and Ronald Reagan. One could make a good case that Reaganite individualism represented a necessary corrective to a collectivism that had lost its bearings, but it seems clear to me at least that the correction went too far and that we ended up with an America in which individuals were taught implicitly and explicitly that the only rational and intelligent course of action in any given situation was pursuing one's self interest. Residual collectivist impulses were assuaged by appeal to Adam Smith's idea that individuals pursuing their self interest unwittingly but assuredly produce the best possible outcome for society as a whole. There are, however, major theoretical and practical flaws in that idea, which assumed an importance which Smith never intended it to have.

The rampant, unchecked individualism that came into being in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America proved in fact to be detrimental both to individuals and to society. Our most recent financial crisis was in part the result of the fact that individuals on Wall Street had every incentive to make potentially catastrophic bets because it was in their self-interest to do so. If the bets paid off, they made huge amounts of money in bonuses. If the bets did not pay off, the company for which they worked lost huge amounts of money and in some cases, like Lehman Brothers, went bankrupt. It was a simple game of heads I win, tails you lose, which Wall Street bankers were more than happy to play. In the aftermath, Alan Greenspan expressed shock at what he called the irresponsible behavior of many people working in the American financial system. There was,

however, nothing shocking about the behavior of those people. They were simply pursuing their self-interest without any serious concern for the wellbeing of others. Rampant individualism also led to an extraordinary, widespread social alienation that has been the subject of much discussion, in books like Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. I am something of an inveterate optimist, and I think that the tide began to change some time ago. This is perhaps most obvious in the growing strength of the environmentalist movement, which puts great emphasis on collectivist concerns.

The Humanities have much to contribute on this front. The simple act of encountering via the Humanities other societies both past and present that have very different visions of the relationship between individual and community can be crucial for students used to hearing only the gospel of individualism. This is especially true in regard to the Classics. While I was writing this talk I spoke briefly with Edward about what he saw as the benefits of studying the ancient world, and one of his comments that I found particularly striking was this: he said that reading Greek and Roman literature was beneficial because the Greeks and Romans were ethically obsessed. Virtually all systems of ethics are grounded in the assumption that we matter as much as I and that individuals need to concern themselves with the well-being of others. For students who have been taught that self-interest is the be all and end all, encountering the Greeks and Romans, with their deep-seated interest in ethics and belief in the necessity of community can be transformative.

Equally importantly, one of the basic models by which the Humanities are taught, active discussion among a group consisting of an instructor and 20 or so students, can become a living demonstration of the joys of being a member of a vibrant community and a source of understanding that there may be more to life than self-interest.

The Humanities, therefore, are a great place for students to learn about the importance of being active and responsible members of communities. That is a lesson which carries immense significance both for individual students, because it significantly increases their chances of living a happy and productive life, and for the communities and society in which we all live.

We have already traveled a fairly long road in outlining the reasons why the study of the Humanities is of great importance—we teach essential skills, lay the basis for a tolerant and pluralistic society by helping our students come to understand the

overriding importance of culture in shaping identity and worldview, and help them learn how to be happy.

I will work more quickly in the final part of the talk, which is about the more mundane question of how we need to teach and to conduct ourselves in the classroom in order to realize the Humanities' vast potential. It is critical to not neglect the how end of things, because if the Humanities are taught badly, as they frequently are, they can very quickly lose their utility and appeal.

I won't offer a cookbook recipe for how to teach the Humanities because there is no one pattern that works for all teachers in all circumstances. There are, however, some things which I believe that most of us should be doing most of the time, and I'll concentrate on those.

First, we need to be clear to ourselves and to our students about our goals for any given course. If we don't have clear goals, the likelihood of accomplishing anything significant in the classroom is pretty slim.

Second, those goals need to play to the Humanities' strengths and extend beyond the simple fact of "covering the material." For instance, I would consider a course on ancient Greek history in which the only goal was for the students to walk away with some knowledge of the basic facts of what happened when to be a complete disaster. The Humanities have an awful lot to offer, and we need to make sure that we consistently teach courses that focus on doing what we're good at doing, such as teaching skills like writing. I spend a considerable amount of time in the first class session of every course I teach outlining and discussing the course goals and how we are going to work toward achieving them. To give you a specific example, I regularly run Dartmouth's Off-Campus Program in Greece, which takes students to Greece for three months of travel and study. The students are made aware before they apply, after they've been accepted, and on the first day of the program that it has six goals:

- develop a high level of familiarity with ancient Greek material culture
- develop your critical thinking skills
- develop your ability to work productively in groups
- develop your ability to speak in public
- develop your leadership skills

- give you an opportunity for reflection

Third, we need to actually make good on our promises and design and teach our courses in a way that maximizes the possibility of achieving the goals we have set. That means thinking very carefully about the kind and amount of material we cover, crafting assignments that are overtly intended to give students opportunities to develop appropriate skills and insights, and grading those assignments in ways that incentivize students to work hard on achieving the course's goals.

In the early part of each course I teach I try to spend a few minutes discussing each graded assignment with the students in advance and explaining how it relates to the course's goals. Eventually the students can figure that out on their own and it becomes superfluous, but it can be very useful in the beginning of the semester.

Fourth, we need to be unabashed about showing and sharing the enthusiasm and love which I hope we all have for our material. This seems like a simple point, but it is going to require some explanation. I said at the beginning of this talk that we have taken our own scholarship too much to heart and have become increasingly unable to offer our students anything beyond doubt, cynicism, and despair, and it's time for me to explain what I mean by that. In the beginning there was Matthew Arnold and New Criticism and the belief that literature should be read for universals, for insight into verities about humanity that were true in all times and places. Context and medium were pushed aside as unimportant. Then came Post-Modernism and New Criticism was no more. Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and others taught us that context and medium were everything and that the quest for universal verities was at best delusional. And their ideas were true and good, up to a point. They aroused a justifiable suspicion that many ostensible verities served hegemonic aspirations, they generated a healthy skepticism about projecting the ideas of white European males of the past couple of centuries onto the entire human race, and they helped create space for other voices to be heard.

But I would argue that in the past couple of decades we have taken Postmodernism too much to heart. All too frequently we put our students on a diet that consists entirely of viewpoints that spring purely from Postmodernism and that encourage them to adopt a corrosively radical skepticism about any and all truth claims, to see every statement and action as a subtle attempt at domination, to understand all societies as ruthlessly and inevitably oppressive. That is, what we offer our students is doubt, cynicism, and despair.

At the same time, the impulses enshrined in New Criticism have been repressed to the point of non-existence. The focus on truth claims, power plays, and context

tends to turn texts into hopelessly foreign objects that require painstaking analysis, not sources of insight or inspiration that speak to the here and now. We have fallen instead into what Richard Rorty calls knowingness, which he defines as a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe and makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm. Rorty agrees with Harold Bloom that many teachers of literature can ridicule anything but can hope for nothing, and he quotes with approval the following passage from Dorothy Allison's "Believing in Literature":

There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto—God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we ever imagined.

This is a much more inspirational, New Criticism sort of view of literature than any card-carrying Postmodernist is likely to subscribe to, but it is I suspect a view that we all share, at least to some extent, in the secret recesses of our hearts. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand why we would have chosen to build our lives around the Humanities.

There is more to say about that, but first let me make my fifth and final point about how we need to teach the Humanities. We need to focus our courses on exploring questions that have resonance with our students. I realize that Postmodernism suggests that texts are foreign objects and that seeking connections between literature and our own lives is a fool's game, and I am not suggesting that we return wholeheartedly to New Criticism and pretend that Postmodernism never happened. That is to put the choice in overly stark terms. The solution, I would suggest, is finding a balance between the two. The political scientist John Dunn (not the homonymous seventeenth-century author) suggests that we can ask four questions of any text about political theory:

- 1-What does an author mean by his or her text?
- 2-What does the composition of a given text by an author in a particular historical setting show us about the setting itself, or about the broader historical context within which it subsisted? What does that text show us about its author's own society?
- 3-What has that text meant to others, reading it then or subsequently, and why has it meant that and not something else?
- 4-What do the great texts of the history of political theory mean today, and mean for us?

These questions are equally valid for texts of all kinds, and all four questions are equally important. We might characterize questions 1 and 4 as being inspired by New Criticism and questions 2 and 3 as being inspired by Postmodernism. The two sets of questions balance and inform each other. I am particularly interested in the fourth question because it is one that used to be the focus of study in the Humanities but now gets asked rarely if at all. To ask only question 4 is to invite textual readings that are solipsistic to the point of being pointless, but that question is in many ways the most important of the four questions because without it the study of the Humanities rapidly loses interest to all but a small percentage of our students. If what we tell our students is that texts are foreign objects that require painstaking study, they not unnaturally reach the conclusion that studying those texts does not offer much in the way of obvious reward. During the last Off-Campus Program I ran in Greece, I had the students read the *Iliad*, and I structured our approach to the text around Dunn's four questions. At the end of the program, I asked the students to read the *Odyssey* and focus only on the fourth question. When we sat down for the first time to talk about the *Odyssey*, I began by asking the students what they had taken away from the text. The first student to raise his hand was majoring in literary theory, and immediately attacked the premise of the question on the grounds that the ancient Greeks were so foreign that the *Odyssey* could not possibly have any meaning for us today, or if it could we could never understand what that might be. That struck me then and still strikes me now as an incredibly impoverished approach to literature.

The need to read texts in ways that resonate with our students is of particular importance to Classicists because an increasingly small percentage of our students have any real knowledge of the ancient world, and they are dubious that it has much relevance to their lives or their concerns. To prove my point, I return once more to the CLST 1 evaluations, this time with just a single illustrative example:

While I was skeptical about the relevance of classical studies coming into the course, the idea that it is a wonderful opportunity to examine our own culture took me by surprise. I suppose that would be my one take-away.

What this student learned from taking CLST 1 is something that all classicists know perfectly well, but which comes as a revelation to almost everyone else. And it is absolutely critical that we construct our courses in ways that invite our students to use what they learn about the ancient world to think more insightfully about the world in which they live and the issues that they face in their own lives.

For those of you who have been wondering, this is why I started with the Trace Adkins song, "Songs About Me." You didn't think I forgot about that, did you?

Adkins says that this song is based on a true story, and it has obvious relevance to the situation in which classicists find themselves. OK, maybe not so obvious, but really, it is relevant. Someone asks Adkins what he does for a living, and when Adkins replies that he sings country music, they ask Adkins, “whatever made you want sing stuff like that?”, with the clear implication that country music is slightly odd and not something that holds much interest. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been at non-academic social occasions, and when someone asks what I do for living, and I tell them that I teach classics, they say pretty much the same thing. Why would want to teach stuff like that? Adkins replies that he sings country music because the songs are about him, and that strikes me as exactly the right answer. If we want classics to flourish in the years and decades ahead, we need to find ways to make what we study into songs about our students, while remaining true to the material.

I don’t underestimate the difficulty involved in doing that. It is not just a matter of asking the right questions. It also requires that we adopt at least part of the time the sort of romantic, New Criticism approach that is very much out of fashion right now. And that is not all, because in order to make this approach to teaching the Humanities work we need to talk frankly with our students about what the material in question means to us and what it means to them and how it relates to the ideas, beliefs, and priorities that they brought to the classroom with them, and that is no easy task. It means opening cans of worms on a regular basis and dealing with the fallout, it means managing the passions that are generated when people talk about what is important to them, it means treading a fine line between expressing our own thoughts and overstepping our bounds and trying to impose our beliefs on our students.

And there is more, because the very best Humanities classes are small groups that over the course of the semester develop into tightly-knit communities built around the shared experience of an absorbing intellectual journey. These classroom communities, like all communities, are built around the affection their members feel for each other, and they usually come into being because the teacher feels and shows a real affection for each and every student. I know that can be a real challenge when it comes to some individual students, but over the years I have become convinced that the simplest way of finding out whether someone is or is not a good teacher is to ask someone how they feel about their students. Good teachers find a way to appreciate and love each of their students, and bad teachers spend a great deal of time complaining about their students’ shortcomings.

However, all of us are aware that it is rarely easy to stand up in front of a group of people and speak frankly about our love for the material that we study, to be unabashed about our enthusiasms, to show our affection. James Dean once remarked that the most difficult thing about being an actor was acting naturally in front of the camera. For teachers, being yourself in front of a class is equally challenging. Put succinctly, taking the approach to teaching the Humanities which I have just outlined is an act of courage. But the rewards it offers when done properly are extraordinary.

And that brings us to the end of what I have to say about the why and how of teaching the Humanities. In closing, I want to encourage each and every one of you to take immense pride in what you do. We all know that teaching is not necessarily the most prestigious career in the modern-day United States, and that the members of the Humanities faculty at many institutions feel as if the scientists and social scientists get more than their fair share of what prestige there is to go around. That might be true, but I nonetheless firmly believe that we have the greatest job in the world. We give our students valuable skills, lay the foundations for a tolerant and pluralistic society, and help people learn how to lead productive and happy lives. We have built our lives around caring about and for other people. What we do for a living unquestionably changes peoples' lives for the better. Those are wonderful and wondrous things, and I hope that each and every one of you is immensely proud that you make those things happen. Thank you.