

Upon Being a (Public) Historian

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Thank you, Dr. Steen. And to this amazing history faculty, the history department staff, families, friends, and graduates:

Thank you for allowing me some of your time today. It's an honor to be here to enjoy your august day of celebration.

Look at you! Look around, take in the powerful symbols of your success—those graduation robes of triumph—note the glowing and tolerant family members, some of them with thinner wallets and hair than when you started; smile at the friends who know just how close of a shave it sometimes was. Breathe in the scent of the glory around you. Yes, success smells a little sweaty.

Congratulations to you all on all that you have learned, the skills you have developed, and the methods you have learned for deploying those skills.

Robes

As graduates, as degree recipients today, you wear one of the symbols of your achievement—academic robes. Reflecting the pale light from the past of Oxford and Cambridge bounced through the prism of American universities and colleges, the robes carry a fair amount of symbolism—you can see the faculty's robes here and the layers of design and color that mostly indicate the institutions that awarded the degrees. There is a hierarchy of authority, of course, the bachelors robes plainer than the masters, which are in turn less ornate than those of the PhD recipients.

For the past 15 years, we have seen on the page and on the screen, people wearing robes saving the world repeatedly. We should all aspire to be those people. Not wizards, necessarily, but people who will stand up to be counted, to use our knowledge for good, to not stand passively by, but to participate. And to do it while wearing robes.

¹ Sandia is a multiprogram laboratory operated by Sandia Corporation, a Lockheed Martin Company, for the United States Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration under contract DE-AC04-94AL85000.

As we know from *The Wizard of Oz*, if nowhere else, it is not the symbols that give you your power. Rather, they reflect and remind you of your power. Your robes are like a superhero's cape, in that they don't actually add much functionality, but they mark the distinction earned or owned.

Your capes will be mostly metaphor, of course. In part because they don't look like they're going to hold up to a lot of washings. And because, as we learned from *The Incredibles*, capes are not practical as superhero, or frankly, even as business wear. But they are there, nonetheless, with you always. You have become historians and whatever you actually do in your lives from here on, you will always be historians with the historian's skill set.

Your capes of perception represent many things. Mostly they represent your success in achieving a given level of expertise in your subject area. In this case, history. You are historians—congratulations! And you should never be afraid to share that expertise, to wield it like the power it is. There are different elements to it, of course, and you may not all have the same superpower within it, but your powers all fit within the general model of historian.

Being a Historian

I am myself a historian. My training was in the history of science. And I am currently a practitioner of what is known as public history. Public history is a broad sub-category within the profession, it covers a lot of practices. In general, it's taken to be non-academic history, not focused on teaching and the production of scholarly research, but rather emphasizing the outreach efforts of history to interact directly with a broader public, to support historical activities in the non-academic realm. This includes all kinds of work—historians who work in museums, for the Federal government (for example, the historians at the State Department who produce those huge volumes of released, declassified materials collected on specific topics within State's history, are all considered public historians), folks working in local historical societies, those endeavoring to record oral histories of communities, people concerned with historic preservation, and the list goes on.

As Dr. Steen indicated, I am the corporate historian at Sandia National Laboratories. Sandia is a U.S. Department of Energy/National Nuclear Security Administration laboratory. Owned by the Federal government, it is managed by Sandia Corporation, currently a Lockheed Martin company. I am an employee of Sandia Corporation.

I do a variety of things as Sandia's historian—the standard research and writing that is the core of our profession, of course, but also answering reference questions about

Sandia's past, providing text for historical exhibits, giving individuals and groups background on the area of research they're in and/or the history of Sandia's work in that area, maintaining an internal blog on the Lab's history, and so on. My goal: to get Sandia's portion of the story out and into the overall story.

When I throw on my cape of historical practice, my superpower is large-scale pattern recognition. I like big rambling disparate stories that take awhile to piece together and where causality is so not obvious as to be irrelevant. I'm a historian of science by training, my own work was on 19th-century British voyages of exploration, specifically the government support of scientific research within those voyages—the presence of people like Charles Darwin on the ships during their exploratory and cartographic endeavors. Big, wallowing, disconnected elements resulting in science in service of the state even though that was the intent of very few actors in the story. I love that.

And now I'm a historian at a government laboratory. It suits me well, story-wise, because Sandia's history lies primarily within the period of the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War period. The majority of its history sits specifically within the nuclear weapons arms race piece of the Cold War. Thus, the Lab's very focused purpose and activities over the years fit within the broader, complex history of U.S. nuclear weapon policy, practice, purpose, and production. Again, I am dealing with a history of science in support of government needs, and it is big and complicated enough to keep me interested.

Place Matters

The biggest single activity in which I'm engaged is support of cultural resources management. The U.S. Department of Energy, as a federal agency, has an obligation not to harm or allow any harm to historic properties. As a result, it has to know if any of its properties are historic. I conduct assessments of the built environment at the Lab and make recommendations regarding the historic significance of individual and groups of buildings. That is, I spend a lot of time looking at and evaluating buildings.

As a result, I spend a lot of time thinking about how much place matters, how much work is affected by place, and how the culture of the Lab reflects and is influenced by the specifics of place. A lot of the older buildings at the lab (it was established in the 1940s) are concrete or metal boxes providing shelter for the work or equipment they house. While there were design choices being made, they are neither dominant nor, usually, decorative. Sandia was and remains largely an engineering lab; it has been a very practical place. And so it takes some effort in understanding the history of the individual buildings to see the workmanship, the effort, the decision-making that went into the designs to support the specific work housed within them. But, what is apparent, is how much place matters. How much the selection of the particular site here in New Mexico,

of the placing of the Lab within an Air Force Base, of the design choices that reflect and enable the specific work done, matter to the work that was done and the history that was generated.

This place, the University of New Mexico, is specific and matters as such. It is not “Harvard on the Rio Grande”. It is not just another large, Western, state university. When the mariachis played this morning to celebrate your commencement, your launch into a new phase of life, they honored your triumph here, not just somewhere.

This university has one of the most diverse student bodies you can find. Not just ethnically or racially diverse, although it is that. But diverse in age, in background, in income, in experience, in perspective, in the very distinct journeys you’ve each taken to get here. You have had an opportunity to learn from and with people radically different from yourselves. Most people receiving bachelor’s, master’s, and PhD degrees at institutions across the country this month and next have not had such an opportunity.

You have honored this institution in choosing to study here. It has honored you in return by offering an excellent education in a distinct setting. Remember that and take it with you.

Be Excellent

And as you move forward, deploying the expertise you have acquired and that is now part of you, always, to quote Bill & Ted, “Be Excellent.” You’ve worked hard to become good at what you do, keep being good at it.

In my own work, specifically with the buildings, once they have been assessed for their historic significance, I make a recommendation, which is passed on to the Department of Energy. DOE then makes a determination, in consultation with the State of New Mexico, as to whether the buildings are historic. For those found to be historic, Sandia maintains their historic elements, or, if they are facing significant renovations or demolition (it is an active scientific research and development facility), we document them—this is called preservation through recordation. There is a written report and large-format photography, all meeting Federal requirements and guidelines. This entails a historian working with a photographer to capture the overall building design and fabric, paying particular attention to those elements that contribute to its historic status. Over the past 15 years, I have spent a considerable amount of time in the field with a photographer, deciding which photos are needed and witnessing the work, the effort, the expertise of the photographers who then take the pictures. Working with the photographers is entrancing, even enchanting. I am completely absorbed by their skills, the techniques they deploy automatically, because it is their area of expertise. And the resulting photos are gorgeous, in addition to including what’s needed for our purposes.

And, as it turns out, it is one of the great things about working on the history of living people. Within the Lab, I often get to speak with the people who have done the work that I'm writing about. In going through their records, their published papers and their correspondence and notes, the level of focus, of reaching for their own expertise and that of others, the push to solve whatever the problem to hand is, is amazing. How complex technical and scientific problems are defined, approached, parsed, and solved fascinates me, as do the skills brought to bear in the activity.

Expertise sometimes does not seem to garner the respect I think it should have. There is, as the U.S. historians would tell us, a tension always in American culture between the democratic impulse, the individual striving, and the creation of expertise and the potential for a resulting elite. I would suggest that the internet has exacerbated this tension to some extent, in that everyone can have and express opinions on any subject. And we do not always take care to consider the expertise wielded by the source of those opinions. You, however, have the research and critical thinking expertise to bring to bear on those opinions and to judge what is useful and what is not among them. Keep on using your expertise. Wear your thinking cape always. (Or, as the internet itself would tell us in one of those floating clichés: "Follow your heart, but take your brain with you.")

I was particularly struck these past two weeks, while reading reviews of Robert Caro's latest volume in his biography of Lyndon Johnson, with the curiosity regarding the length of time and amount of labor he's brought to bear in understanding and producing the volumes on Johnson. Caro has been working on the Johnson biography for 36 years. *The Passage of Power*, which was just published, is the fourth volume of the biography. It covers just 6 years of Johnson's life, 1958-1964, and it took Caro about 10 years to produce it. But it was a critical 6 years, taking Johnson from the Senate to the Presidency. In other words, Caro spent longer writing about this part of Johnson's life than Johnson spent living it—and Johnson got the Civil Rights Act passed.

So the wondering in some of the discussions is about imagining spending half your life writing about one guy. Why do that? And I'm thinking, "Why not?" Wouldn't you, if you had the opportunity to produce a definitive work on a critical historical figure, in the process bringing depth and breadth to the understanding of the striving for power and how power may be used once achieved, wouldn't you do so? Wouldn't you be proud to have written the books Robert Caro has written?

Well, if you would be proud to have done something, do it. Don't write a biography of Johnson, because Caro has it covered. But, stand up and do what needs doing. Through on your cape of usefulness and bring your expertise to bear on the problems to hand. The world has a great need for people who can conduct research, who can think critically, who can read, and who can write. You don't have to practice history, to be paid as

professional historians, to use those skills. But whatever you do, believe in it, live it, make it worthwhile.

Courage

So, in the words of that excellent commencement speech by Bob Dylan, “Forever Young,” “may you always be courageous, stand upright and be strong.”

It sometimes takes great courage to maintain excellence, to apply your expertise in areas that do not welcome you, to find it in yourself to keep moving forward in your life when there is chaos, shambles, depression, failure. Let your success now be something you draw upon later. When you pull on your cape of courage, realize that your power comes from what you have already done and become.

My examples in this are all personal, not professional. And I’m not going to tell you that when I sat with my dying mother, her body emaciated and curled fetal from cancer; or when I stood next to our extremely premature son’s bed in the newborn intensive care unit watching a machine breathe for him and hoping that a child could emerge intact from that; or when I saw my husband die on the soft sparkling sands of a gorgeous Oahu beach, that I thought of the day I received my college degree up in the green lush of Oregon, a soft rain falling and my parents beaming at me—my Dad in a brown leisure suit, my Mom with the Instamatic camera with a blinding white flash. It would be a false memory to tell you that.

But, as my friends and family propped me up and set me back on my path each time—and the propping was extensive, in fact, I would say, and some people here were undoubtedly say, that it is still going on. But as they set my feet back on the path, and there was some expectation of stepping forward and I didn’t know what forward was, I found myself wrapped in somewhat tattered cape of confidence, woven out of what I already knew how to do and to do well. Falling back on my work, on my understanding of my world through the skills I’d long since honed and wielded almost automatically, left me able to allow my son’s needs to pull me forward, to confront my changed reality each time.

Conclusion

I see articles and hear conversations about whether a college degree is worth it. Some of that stems from the soaring costs of college and the debt that many students are carrying as they graduate. This is worth being concerned about and needs to be addressed. But, related to the debt discussions and taking on a much larger share of the conversation, is a questioning of college’s value. The argument is that success is not dependent on having one; the examples that are thrown up are of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg and what they have achieved. Nobody would disagree that they have achieved much and that they

each did so after dropping out of college. But, the evidence is presented as though it is an argument for not getting a college degree.

It is true that those two individuals, and many others, have done very well in life and have contributed a great deal without completing college. Everything achieved prior to the 11th century and most of what was achieved since, was done by people without college degrees.

But, does anybody believe that Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg wouldn't have achieved as much with a college degree? If Mark Zuckerberg decided to go back and finish at Harvard, would Facebook be erased from history? If he'd even finished while creating Facebook, would the effort have been undercut?

There's an implication that a college degree somehow stifles creativity, productivity, broad-thinking, or just wherewithal in general. Who thinks that? All evidence is to the contrary in the discipline of History.

Now, you do not really need to assess the value of a college degree at this point—you already went and got one. But, you can prove its worth to yourself and all the doubters. Be creative, solve problems, be productive and useful.

And be so in an excellent fashion. Mediocrity is easy and we have plenty of it. You have a higher calling. You have serious expertise gained through hard work—on everybody in this room's part—and you need to share it with the world. When you are needed, when you are puzzled, when there are quandaries—throw on your cape of critical thinking and bring your well-honed powers to bear.

Thank you for your time and attention today. Congratulations to you all!