



## Graduation Remarks 2002

Some of you were members of the last ancient history class I taught, and you were the last class to read *The Odyssey* in the Fitzgerald translation. You may remember that as the poem concludes there is the sense of an age passing, an important transition worth marking and worth remembering. After Odysseus and Penelope have reunited, Book XIV takes us to the underworld, where the shade of Agamemnon, leader of the expedition against Troy, speaks with Akhilleus' ghost. Agamemnon describes to his former rival the funeral they held and the tomb they built for him after his death at Troy. The tomb, like Troy, overlooked the Hellespont, the strait that divided Europe from Asia, and through which Greeks sailing toward the Black Sea left familiar places, where their speech was intelligible, for unknown lands, strange tongues, and alien ways. Sounds a bit like going off to college. Here are Agamemnon's words:

*We of the Old Army*

*we who were spearmen, heaped a tomb for these (your bones)  
upon a foreland over Hellê's waters,  
to be a mark against the sky for voyagers  
in this generation and those to come...*

*You perished, but your name will never die.  
It lives to keep all men in mind of honor  
forever, Akhilleus.*

This is a wonderful moment when the poem brings the attentive listener to the recognition that the imagined tale—Akhilleus' funeral and tomb—touches the present moment of reading or performance. We are listening now, so Akhilleus' name does not die, and we are kept in mind of honor. The distance between Akhilleus' story and our own collapses: his song becomes ours. In this way, like the tomb, the epic poems guide "voyagers in this generation and those to come" into the new era.

I think it's fair to compare this passage to our years of work together. For a few centuries after their composition the Homeric poems were, after all, the closest thing there was to an educational curriculum. They furnished the lessons by which Greeks lived. Because any school by what it asks of its students makes clear what it thinks important, it is fair to talk about the "marks against the sky" we've established, what we want to keep you "in mind of." (Though some of us may feel ready to expire, we will not rely on any funerals to make our case.)

You've learned to work hard and been pushed to do things you did not think you could—especially, some of you, this past month. In this I hope you've learned the dangers of believing too strongly in your own ideas about what you can and can't do, and I hope you've learned how substantial achievement satisfies much more fully than feel-good praise. I hope you have learned this despite the pressures, the setbacks, the frustrations that have been, and will be, part of any experience in which you are challenged to step over self-imposed limits.

Second, you've learned a great deal of history, science, math, language, literature, and art because we think it's important to know what you're talking about. We think it equally important to recognize when you don't know what you're talking about. So we hope we have shown and encouraged an openness to ongoing inquiry and questioning, and a suspicion of any claim to having learned the last word on anything. I once had a teacher who would say about a poem

we'd read, "The thing you need to know about this piece is..." and go on to impart a few interesting observations that we could mentally fold and file with the text, retrievable for any future occasion requiring a demonstration of our expertise. We want you to know the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Empress Wu, *L'Etranger*, Othello, and thermodynamics, but also to be willing to give them fresh looks and reconsideration whenever you meet them. The willingness to set aside claims to knowing and be open to new insight is the foundation of intellectual honesty. The failure to do so is intellectual arrogance. The Kena Upanishad, composed in India at about the same time as the Homeric poems were taking shape, put it sharply. "Who claims he knows, knows nothing. Who claims nothing, knows." Socrates couldn't have put it better.

We've worked hard to persuade you that effort given to the good of the community is far more richly rewarded than the effort put into getting "what I want." We've tried to run classes where conversations were too good to miss, and which the bell couldn't stop. When we've lined the school up the five flights from the Dartmouth lobby to pass heavy boxes of clay, fire-brigade-style, up to the studio, we've been lifted a bit, touched by satisfaction finer for the effort's having been shared. Shirkers missed something special. Moments like these are special, I think, because they remind us of something fundamental about ourselves, that we are fully human only to the extent that we recognize our deep connection to others. As we read in the *Grand Inquisitor*, the response to Ivan's lonely despair lies in the Eastern Church's conviction that "there is no personal salvation, but only salvation for creation as a whole, and our only hope for salvation lies in self-forgetfulness and active love in the world."

The year has provided us with striking images to drive home the importance of these lessons. At the south tip of Manhattan last fall, on the West Bank, and in Kashmir we see vividly the costs of schools hijacked by ideologues who have all the answers, of the arrogance of power, and of the hatred fueled by the division of the world into us and other. In Enron and other recent corporate scandals, we've seen the extraordinary destructiveness of unfettered greed, under which the hope for quick winnings supplants honest effort. It appears that these executives who've taken nine-figure sums away from collapsing companies justify their action with the view that it's an every-one-for-himself world, one divided into winners and suckers. These disasters signal massive failure of moral imagination, rooted in the misguided expectation that we can fare well within the sharply delineated boundaries of ego, community, or even nation, without regard to the well-being of those beyond our circle.

It's not uncommon for recent graduates to come back saying that they miss Commonwealth. College lacks something. This is by no means a universal experience, but even some older alumni/ae have told me that intellectually Commonwealth was the most exciting time in their lives. Such comments always leave me unsettled. While we are flattered, I also wonder how good a job we've done cultivating the openness I've spoken of.

Next year you will find professors ready to engage with eager students, you will find students looking for people who share their enthusiasms – academic and artistic. But you won't find them crowded into a 20,000-square-foot brownstone. You will have to find them and work to bring them together. You'll do it by living these and other lessons you've learned at Commonwealth. And the broader you extend your efforts, the richer the rewards you'll find.

As a class you possess an extraordinary array of talents, dispositions, and interests. We have delighted in your successes—and you've had some great ones—and marveled as we have watched you grow in overcoming setbacks. We cannot say specifically what awaits each of you beyond this passage, but we are proud to have helped set the marks by which you'll sail, and we are confident of your success. So fare you well, and come back often to tell us what you find.