

Why (Dusty Old) Languages Matter

30th Brierley Award Presentation

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Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you, Greg, for those too kind words. And, of course, everyone should know that Greg himself was the recipient of this award in 2016, and it reminds me of a line from an ancient playwright that most of you have probably never heard of named Naevius. In it, the Trojan hero Hector exclaims to his father, Priam: *laetus sum laudari me abs te, pater, a laudato viro*, “I’m overjoyed to be praised by you, father, by a man who has himself been praised.” And that I was nominated by my colleague and friend, Stephen Trzaskoma, and introduced by Greg, both of whom I consider to be teachers of the highest caliber—well, let’s just say that I’m overjoyed to be praised by you, colleagues, who are yourselves praiseworthy. It is quite an honor to be placed among such a gallery of stars, many of whom I’ve had the pleasure of working with closely: Chris Bauer, Carole Barnett, Marc Herold, Gale Carey and last year’s winner Jo Laird on the senate, Vasu in the provost’s office, and a dear friend Stephen Hardy whose class *Hockey: The Coolest Sport?* I very much wish I had had the chance to take.

I’m incredibly humbled by all of this and I’m deeply thankful that so many people have found the time to join this event. As those of you who know me know, I consider myself, first and foremost, a teacher. I enjoy research and publishing, and do a lot of it, but my identity is still based, firmly, in my role in- and outside of the classroom. I’m energized by students, and my life has been made immeasurably richer by the generations of students that have passed through the halls of Murkland and—for that strange year in 2002, through the halls of Nesmith, and for this strangest of years, 2020 and 2021, through the halls of Zoom. And so, the Brierley Award I consider to be pinnacle of a career purposefully dedicated to teaching and grounded in intellectual curiosity and camaraderie. And to share it with so many of my current and former students, and with so many of my colleagues—well, I feel blessed indeed. I do not know what the future holds for me, but I will carry this honor with me forever, and despite the challenges ahead, I choose to carry on optimistically—because, if nothing else, this ceremony reminds us that the teaching mission of the university remains, and must remain, a priority even as we push the reputation of being the flagship research institution of our fine state.

I confess that when I learned of the award, I found myself casting about, trying to come up with something profound or inspirational to say, or at least something vaguely bordering on the coherent. When I was the chair of the Faculty Senate a few years ago and learned that I had to speak at Commencement, I really did spend nine months obsessing about it, and that was a five minute speech. So, what could I say for some 30 minutes, and how could I summarize my thoughts about teaching, developed now over thirty years of experience, into something compelling and something of interest to such a wide audience of current and former students, distinguished colleagues, university leaders, friends and family? There have been many nights that I've brooded over this challenge with coffee and scotch, and it became a very powerful exercise in introspection, always ending with some basic and fundamental questions: what is a university for, and what is *our* university for? To put it another way, what are the university and its faculty supposed to be the stewards *of*? And, on a more personal level, is there still room at a modern university for what I do, which is basically study and teach dusty old languages to a generation of students who have generally been trained to think about higher education in mostly if not purely practical terms?

I. A Personal Journey to Teaching

I've had tremendous luck in my own education and was profoundly impacted by incredibly generous people who went out of their way to make sure that I could make something of my limited potential. We all have, I suspect, in both formal and informal ways. From my youngest days I recall my grandfather pa-pa teaching me, in his modest Richmond, VA, home, the beauty of games, of checkers and double solitaire. Just a few years later, at one summer camp, a high school student went out of his way to teach me chess, encouraging me by lying about the quality of my first game. Even though I did not become a Beth Harmon or Bobby Fischer—and thank goodness for that—I've never relinquished the joy of games, puzzles and intellectual competition, and I now look forward to the chess problems posted online by my colleague in Math, John Gibson, and the occasional games with other colleagues.

A lot changed in 7th grade, the last year of elementary school before I headed to middle school. Brought into the counsellor's office to choose my courses, I vividly recall sitting in front of that old giant computer paper, with alternating green and white rows, and those perforated edges lined with holes for feeding it into the printer, and the distinctive dot matrix lettering on the page. After being told what English and Math courses I should take, I was to choose a language as an elective. Now, I'm not kidding when I say I really had no knowledge of any of the four languages offered by my school—Spanish, French, German and Latin—except for the very limited Spanish I had learned on Sesame Street. So, when presented with the choice, I basically chose the dead one because, well, I was a punk kid with a rebellious attitude. I would love to say that my affair with Latin was love

at first sight, but I had *zero* interest in traditional academics at the time, and so I did not very much pay attention or open the book for the first exam—just three weeks in. It was a Thursday—every other Thursday was a test day—and she passed out a two page exam copied in that distinctive but slightly blurry blue ditto-machine ink. I had no idea, none, what any of the questions meant—what is *amō*? Is there an *em* missing? So I cheated, blatantly, by copying what was on my friend’s test, that is, until Mrs T. V. Pomfrey asked me to come sit in the desk in front of her. It was matter-of-fact, no judgment, just moving me away from my salvation. For the next 35 minutes or so I had to stew in my own ignorance, alternating between embarrassment and very misplaced rage. It was all so very teenage-y and angsty.

Mrs T.V. Pomfrey was a firebrand of a teacher, something of an irresistible force with seemingly unlimited energy and enthusiasm for her subject, always pushing what seemed to be impossibly high standards even higher. From that miserable test day I made it a point to prove myself—even if my parents did not quite understand why I was digging into this old language so intensely. I recall bringing my note cards into my parents’ room and asking my mom to quiz me on the first set of vocabulary items while I played Pong on one of those really early Atari video game consoles. At her first attempt to pronounce the word for girl, *puella*, I realized that *that* wasn’t going to work, but she nevertheless supported her very weird child’s interest in old and musty stuff. My father was equally supportive, although he recoiled at the memory of *his* run-in with Latin. As he put it, recalling the jingle that many a Latin student of his day must have said often, “first it killed the Romans, and then it killed me.” Unsurprisingly, my father, an accountant and financial advisor by trade, perhaps envisioning penury and poverty in his poor son’s future, urged me to take “some business classes” while I explored the things I wanted to explore. Even so, they allowed me to chart my own course, to find fulfillment or fall flat in the intellectual choices that *I* made.

My own interest in the ancient world was based in part on my fascination with the language and history but it was my teacher’s boundless energy that sealed the deal. This brings me to an anecdote. Mrs T. V. Pomfrey thought that experiences outside the classroom were deeply important; in addition to encouraging us to take part in the numerous Saturday Latin quiz bowls offered in the state of Virginia, she made museum visits a constant opportunity. But these were no ordinary, free-spirited go-see-what-they-have type of jaunts. No, we had worksheets, with an emphasis on *work*. Now, one could go it alone and visit things solo, but you could also just follow her around and she’d give you the answers. I’ll take that option, I said to myself, thinking it was an easy way to complete the assignment without a whole lot of thought. At our first item, a statue of the emperor Caligula, she fired away: who he was, when he ruled, and why this statue was important. It was one of only two such statues in the United States. Why? Because the

ancient Roman senate voted to destroy all public records, images and inscriptions of Caligula after his death because of his well-documented awfulness. So, I looked down at the sheet and started writing down the answer, and when I looked up to get the spelling of the technical term she used, *damnatio memoriae*—and I *swear* it was only a few seconds later—whoosh, she was already gone. She was already at the next piece ready to go. It was *eerie*, her ninja-like ability to move through the shadows. But, she was the prime reason that I decided to teach—to emulate her in her energy and love for what she did. And I never did forget what a *damnatio memoriae* was and why there were so few Caligula statues out there. So I have to smile when, on the evaluations from the J-Term in Rome, students comment on the exhausting energy and enthusiasm I try to show as we race around Rome. One year, I took a pedometer with me and students averaged, if they took advantage of the optional afternoon tour, over 22,000 steps a day. That was Mrs. T. V. Pomfrey out there.

2. An Ode to Intellectual Curiosity

Looking back at my career here at UNH, one of the things that has struck me is that I've never dreaded a day of teaching. Administrative matters, sure, those are nothing to sing about, but teaching has always energized me even as I feel completely spent after being in class, whether a large 50-minute lecture class on Classical Myth or 8 hours in Pompeii. And, to a large extent I've modeled my own teaching on the likes of Mrs T. V. Pomfrey and my high-school psychology teacher and quiz bowl guru Carlene Bass, as well as my two undergraduate professors at Mary Washington College, Diane Hatch and Bob Boughner—all of whom visibly showed that they loved what they did and always made themselves available to me when I needed counsel or just wanted to shoot the breeze. Although I'm loath to use such a metaphor in these days of Covid, their joy for and dedication to their subject was, well, infectious. And so, if I had to adopt a sort of motto for my basic principle of teaching, it is Horace's statement on what makes a successful poet, *qui miscuit utile dulci*, someone who blends what is useful with something pleasant, who at one and the same time delights *and* instructs the reader. And good teaching can be like poetry: underlying the day's instruction is the content, the beat, the rhythm, the meter, inexorable in its tempo and time, while the lyric and melodic overlay charms and delights, flexible and fungible in its mode of delivery, but enchanting nonetheless. It's something I've striven for my whole career: not only to make sure students *know* something, but also to give them a sense *why* they should know it and—this is the ultimate goal—why they should *care about it*, and if possible *love it*. *Qui miscuit utile dulci*. For, if they care about it, chances are they will do more to learn it.

It's probably not often that someone compares teaching to poetry, but I firmly believe that our campus culture could use a little more poetry and a little less practicality. Now, it's not lost on me that the cost of a university education has tripled in the last x-number

of years, and that there is a need to consider a student's ROI, but I'm more than a little concerned that the—dare I say vocational?—direction of our university reinforces the mechanical and pedestrian prose rhythms of practicality rather than the poetic heights of possibility, of creativity, of intellectual curiosity. The rhythm of our campus has become, for many undergraduates, about checking off the next item. The so-called technological advances like Canvas—for my former students and retired colleagues, that's the thing that replaced Blackboard—reinforce this idea: students wake up, check what is due that day on the Canvas calendar, and work toward checking off the next item, clearing the cue so as to start over the next day—a sort of Groundhog Day but without Bill Murray and Andie McDowell. One rather chronic pet peeve of mine is the “Powerpoint” slide culture, where slide decks are used as text-heavy information dumps, as if students can read it all in class *and* listen to the instructor *and* think about the bigger picture while trying to write it all down—and they do try. But the slide deck is now a rather expected part of a class, to the point that some instructors are penalized in evaluations for *not* using one, and woe be unto the one who fails to post grades on Canvas.

Now, early in this presentation I made a claim that I'd choose to be something of an optimist, but I do think that there is something short-sighted about the reduction of the university experience to tasks to be completed rather than ideas to be contemplated. One of my great teaching experiences was to join forces with Nick Smith from philosophy to offer an overnight summer high school camp focusing on big ideas for a couple of years. At this camp, we combined Classics and Philosophy and addressed big questions like money, greed and inequality, as well as the potential and pitfalls of technological progress. The energy that the over 20 students each year brought to these topics was remarkable; debates that started in the classroom continued into the evenings at the dorm. Although there was no test or expectation that they would memorize lots of facts, they worked tirelessly to produce outstanding final debates and presentations—all because they loved probing the big ideas, creating policy decisions based on principles drawn from ideas past and present, and seeking out answers to tricky problems that rely on nuance and judgment.

We did not know it at the time, but this camp proved to be a boon for university recruitment of really good students. One of these is now finishing up her degree in Theater, another in Philosophy and Political Science, and a third in Astrophysics—all very much in the top tier of their high school classes and who chose to come to UNH, in part, because of that camp where they had ample room for their intellectual curiosity to roam. And on a personal note, I'm deeply happy to say that the Theater major, Julia Sommer, is a major contributor to our podcast *The Greek Myth Files*, and our budding Astrophysicist, Audrey Coleman, has been a participant in my undergraduate research group on myth that meets weekly on Friday afternoons along with other amazing students

like Ari Toumpas, Jake Compagna, Christian Rhoads, Victoria Leonard, Kennis Barker, Jack Vachon and so many more. This group, in turn, has helped make possible a major new digital project called MANTO that allows users to explore Greek myth in cool new ways, including an interactive map that has just been launched. Another group has helped bring to completion, at over 130 manuscript pages, a major translation project of two texts that have not yet been systematically translated into English. I would be remiss if I did not thank those who established and still support the Brierley Award, for the monies that accompany the award I was able to put into bringing both MANTO and *The Greek Myth Files* to fruition.

3. Dusty Old Languages

The title of my remarks promised something about dusty old languages and their importance, but to this point those languages have been the invisible objects beneath my personal journey and ode to intellectual curiosity. To make it explicit, here's my thought: they really don't matter. Now, I don't mean that in the sense that they are useless, profitless or pointless. Quite the opposite; they offer quite a lot to those who choose to study them even if the direct pathway to a specific job is not evident. What I mean is that, when taking a broad view, higher education is, or at least should be in part, geared toward those activities that transcend the necessary and allow the fullness of human potential to be realized. To reduce what we do to the "practical" limits our mission unnecessarily and, I think, has the unintended consequence of grossly misleading the student body into conventional thinking about what's valuable in the education at *our* university. And students do follow the lead of the wider university culture. When I point out that, on average, a philosophy major outperforms other non-engineering majors in mid-career salary, when I note that Classics and History are competitive with or outperform many science and business degrees at the same point in time, or that a German major who goes on to get an MBA is as productive as getting an undergraduate degree in business, I get looks ranging from disbelief to outright disdain. And it's hard not to be deflated when I think how often I hear my students report the bafflement of their peers: why would you ever want to study *that*, and why on earth would you give up Friday afternoons to read ancient mythical narratives in old dusty texts? I find it disconcerting—that's not the exact word I want, but I'll use it—that it takes a special sort of courage to major in a language at UNH.

Now, Latin and ancient Greek are not for everyone. Learning a language is hard, and learning an ancient one has its own peculiar difficulties. Ancient Greek has a different alphabet and the endings on the nouns change depending on whether it is the subject, the object, or something else. I don't even want to tell you about the verb system, which involves changes in form for seven tenses, three voices—yes, active, passive and a middle voice—three moods of finite verbs—indicative, subjunctive and optative—, and

to add insult to injury there is a very strong aspectual value represented in the stem, there are two distinct classes of verbs and, heck, why not throw in a series of contractions that take place in the most important of the dialects, of which there were several. I was frankly relieved when I took Hittite, another lesser-known ancient language, from Greg McMahon many years ago and discovered that they only had two verb tenses, present and preterite, though admittedly you do have to deal with the cuneiform writing system and a whole host of other issues like logograms taken from Sumerian and Akkadian, completely unrelated languages. Ok, so I *did* want to tell you all about that, because it requires a distinct sort of discipline and commitment to achieve even a basic competency. But the rewards of such a course of study are legion, not least because wrestling with a foreign language forces you to take your own language and your own cultural norms seriously, reflect on them, and perhaps refine them because you're being forced to think *differently*. Even if momentarily, even if imperfectly, you have to stand outside yourself and consider another perspective.

My colleague Stephen Trzaskoma is fond of reminding us that ideas are bound neither by geography nor by time. Even though we have better technology today, we have not figured out the whole human existence thing very well at all. Anyone who carefully reads the histories of Thucydides and his portrait of the power of demagoguery in Athens would be completely unsurprised at what has happened here, to us, over the past decade. It would have been predicatable. In fact, one of the benefits of studying debates in other cultures and other times is that one can do so from a somewhat neutral stance. I'll give you one example. This semester my intermediate Greek class is reading a tragedy, the *Alcestis* by Euripides. It's somewhat mean, in fact, to ask a second year student to read a highly literary work—a comparison might be to ask a second year English student to read Shakespeare. Anyways, that story, in which a king is allowed to avoid his early death if he can find someone willing to die for him, revolves around his wife's decision to do just that—but only *after* the king's elderly parents refuse to die for their son. Throughout the play there is an undercurrent of exasperation about the situation—even Alcestis, the wife, complains that she has to die because her in-laws were selfishly clinging to the few years they had left. Though set in what might be called a fictional universe of mythical storytelling, and presented nearly 2500 years ago, this play treats situations similar to those we confront today: as the Lt. Governor of Texas argued early in the pandemic, shouldn't the old be willing to risk infection and death to keep the economy going, to ensure that their grandchildren can have the same America as they did? The play also grapples with the fate of the king, Admetus, who will suffer untold grief precisely because he chose to live—imagine the countless young people who over the past year inadvertently infected their grandparents and who have to live with that knowledge now. And his grief is encapsulated beautifully in a single line of poetry containing—wait for it—a contrary-to-fact conditional statement with a participle acting as the protasis of that

clause. That line, artfully wrought, was the start of a very robust, student-led discussion of the nature of death, the ethics of choice, and the question of whether lives or years of life mattered more.

No, Latin and Greek are not for everyone, but they should be for someone. Italian, French, German and Spanish are not for everyone, but they should be for someone, and more students should be studying them and benefitting from their presence on campus. Chinese and Japanese are not for everyone, but they should be for someone, especially as we rightfully try to shake off our narrow US- and Eurocentric viewpoints. Arabic and Portuguese are not for everyone, but they should be for someone, not least to dispel entrenched but erroneous notions about the Arabic world or to recognize the increasing number of immigrant communities that speak Portuguese right here in New Hampshire. And yet, in the past years we have lost two of the languages I've just mentioned, and a third stands on a razor's edge.

At the beginning of my remarks I posed the question: what is the university the steward *of*? Now, to reduce the university to one thing is something of a silly exercise, for the whole point of a university is to collect and hold onto faculty from various fields, who embody and communicate what we—*we*—hold as important for realizing the full human potential of our students. Collectively we represent the multiple pathways to understanding the world in its fullness, its complexity, and its marvels, past and present. And if we are, as a whole, the stewards of this complex matrix of the human experience, then the following is an especially important question:

Who are the stewards specifically of those pathways that do not seem to be, according to conventional thinking, but in fact are part of the university's mission of higher education?

This is an even more pressing question as the university puts increased attention on professional schools, Business, Nursing, Homeland Security—none of which have a language requirement as a B.S. degree. Now, I'm not so naïve as to ignore declining demographics in the Northeast or the areas of student demand, but if those units are unwilling to push students to explore the “impractical,” then the math becomes brutally simple: if more students choose professional training and they are not required or encouraged to study a language and other impractical fields, is the inevitable not obvious?

Now, the outcome need not be inevitable, but it will require *other* units on campus to recognize the importance of their stewardship of such subjects of study. In the spirit of optimism, let me offer a potential place to start with a concrete example. Although I am

hesitant to call out a specific college, I think it is emblematic of the problem I'm trying to get at. In the Paul School there is an International Business option. You might be surprised to find out that the International Business degree does not require a single language course in order to fulfill the requirements for the major. Not one class. You can Google it. Students are asked to take a class in International Economics and choose between courses on Innovation in the Global Economy, International Finance, International Management, and International Marketing—all total the degree eats up 87 of the 128 credits needed to graduate. But nowhere in there is the requirement or even the encouragement to study a foreign language—even at the most basic level, much less at a level of proficiency. When I asked whether a language requirement for all business majors would be helpful in job prospects, I was told that it would not help the rankings. I know that there are some Paul faculty here, so I want to emphasize that I very much encourage students to take especially economics and explore other courses in that college, but I do wonder why what is so obviously a complement to their line of study is not a part of the requirements. Are we serving them well by *not* insisting they take a language—or at least a robust set of cultural courses? Won't they be better at a potential job if they can read *Il Messaggero* or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, speak with knowledge about Noh theater in Japan, can talk about Flamenco dancing in Spain or Fado in Portugal, have learned about the health care disparity in South Africa from faculty in Anthropology, studied the broad theatrical tradition with David Richman, or studied history with Janet Polasky, both recent winners of this award? And wouldn't their lives be fuller if they studied more art and read more poetry, traditional and decolonized, or took an unconventional geology class because it sounded cool, or plumbed the depths of applied Mathematics simply because they were curious?

4. Last Thoughts

I had not, when I started to craft these remarks, expected them to result in a *cri de coeur*, but I find myself in a most remarkable situation. I've had a marvelous career, one that frankly has depended a great deal on luck. I finished my PhD at a time when the job market was good. I happened into a job here where teaching was considered an important part of the university's mission, where one could form a positive research-teaching balance. I could not have asked for a better program, one full of supportive faculty committed to teaching: Stephen Trzaskoma, Stephen Brunet, Harriet Fertik, Sue Curry, Richard Clairmont, Anna Newman, Greg McMahon. I've had the opportunity to meet and work with so many talented and committed students, both here and in my year leading a program in Rome, where I was part of a particularly talented staff of teachers whom I admire greatly. On the heels of that experience, I've been able to take UNH students to Italy every January for nearly a decade, always a wonderful experience even if exhausting. I've been able to pursue the research I've wanted and to devote some of that to scholarly outreach. My colleagues put their trust in me to lead the Faculty Senate

and to chair important committees, and I was asked to add my voice to the most recent presidential strategic planning sessions. I love Exeter, where I live. I have a particularly amazing wife, Maggie, who is herself a formidable businesswoman and talented teacher in her own right. Every year—well, not last year—I’ve been able to take a tour of minor league baseball teams with my college roommate, Dean. And here I am, receiving what I consider to be the highest honor that this university bestows.

And yet, I find myself in a most remarkable situation, where my career stands at something of a crossroads as I contemplate the future of our institution. I have plenty of fight left in me, remnants of that rebellious spirit instilled by my equally fiery mother. And I’ll keep teaching with every ounce of energy I have, trying to blend the useful with something pleasant, seeking every opportunity to engage with students inside of class and out. But, in order for the so-called impractical to survive, we need allies, stewards of the rich curriculum we currently offer, advocates even. Otherwise, parts of our diverse ecosystem of courses, already diminished, will continue to go extinct.

I want to end by introducing you to an old philosophical idea—one that was not fully understood until we found in 1901 a papyrus in Hermopolis, Egypt, with the writings of one Hierocles, who lived over 1800 years ago. It’s a concept that was developed in the Stoic philosophical school; the technical term is *oikeiosis*, or “belongingness,” and it is the basis for the idea of Cosmopolitanism, that is, that all humans are citizens of, belong to, and therefore should care about the whole world. Hierocles argues that Cosmopolitanism is the natural outgrowth and the fullest expression of human development, described as a series of concentric circles of belonging. First, an infant becomes aware, and cares about, his body; then his parents fall into his circle of belonging; next comes his wider family, then his community, then the region, and finally the whole wide world, the *kosmos*. The end result is that the consciousness of the individual becomes co-extensive with the universe such that the individual cares about the whole because it in fact belongs to her and is no less important to her than her body was in infancy. It’s heady stuff but a powerful image, and I want to apply that idea of the cosmic body to our university. If we are to maintain a diverse ecosystem of programs that add value to students’ lives in a variety of ways that reflect the human experience, then I need to care just as much about maintaining Geology, Engineering needs to care about Art History, and Nursing and Business should advocate for Languages. But students are not necessarily going to seek these unconventional routes unless they are told, constantly, unrelentingly, of their value. And when we get them, we’d better *teach* them with the vim and vigor of a 1000 T. V. Pomfreys.