Why the Classics matter:
Ancient Greece and the modern university

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Focus on the hub

An exploration into understanding who we are

What do we (here, now) have in common?
My argument

- We share a western academic culture grounded in humanism
- Modern university is fragmented, unbalanced
- Need to rediscover humanist core
- Classical culture shows how
  - Beautiful, memorable, inspiring
  - Balance familiar and alien
  - Older than our divisive assumptions
  - Very, very easy to lose
a little parable
Once upon a time...

Sheep were scary.
Some had big horns.
We drew pictures and
told stories about them.
And kept our distance.
Then we built a hedge.
It was easier to grow and catch the sheep!
Some sheep weren’t so scary after all!
Yummy, yummy sheep...
We neglected the hedges.
Tasty sheep wandered off.
Wooly ones ran away.
Scary ones disappeared.
We were hungry and cold.
And sad.
So, we built new hedges, to separate the flocks.
Now, we could shear some.
Eat others.
And just look at some.
But the sheep got lazy.
So, we added little gaps, all over the place.
Too small for sheep.
Some ran away.
Some stood very, very still.
An elder suggested, let’s...

Rebuild the ancient hedge.
Bring all the sheep together.
Put yummy greens in the middle.
Let all the sheep mingle.

Let the sheep be sheep.
History of the western university

- **Prehistory**: “Europeans” told stories
- **Classical Greece**: Enter the Academy
- **Middle ages**: Long periods of neglect
- **Renaissance**:
  - Classics (re)discovered
  - Science (re)emerges
  - Universitas Magistorum et Scholarium
- **Today**: Intellectual fracking
- **Tomorrow(?)**: Restore the classical academy, based on our common western heritage
“Man is the measure of all things” (Πρωταγόρας/Protagoras)

Reason    Passion    Community

✧ We share specific “excellences” with which we can
   • understand the world (Science)
   • understand war and peace (History)
   • live together (Democracy)
I write clear verse about dark matters...
To rim the lesson, as it were, with honey,
Hoping, this way, to hold your mind with verses
While you are learning all that form, that pattern
Of the way things are. (Lucretius)
(my) Researches are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples, and of how they came into conflict. (Ἡροδότου/Herodotus)
Living together

Justice will not come to Athens until those who are not injured are as indignant as those who are injured. (Θουκυδίδης/Thucydides)
Why the **Greek** classics?

- Students will understand more
- Our graduates will be better citizens
- Invite research into **big** questions
- Promote university-wide academic discourse
- Obligation to ancestors and progeny

1. Epicurus
2. Pythagorus
3. Xenophon
4. Socrates
5. Heraklitus (Michelangelo)
6. Plato (Leonardo da Vinci)
7. Aristotle
8. Diogenes

School of Athens (Rafael). In the Vatican.
Remember the sheep

Ignorant people don’t know what good they hold in their hands until they’ve flung it away. (Σοφοκλῆς/Sophocles)
Thank you, to my teachers

- Leon Kass
- Amy Kass
- Cecelia Luschnig
- Rosanna Lauriola
- Larry Forney
- Holly Wichman
Suggested readings

- *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Homer. Richard Lattimore’s translation
- *The Swerve: How the world became modern*, Greenblatt
- *The Trial of Socrates*, IF Stone
- *The forgotten revolution: how science was born in 300 BC and why it had to be reborn*, L Russo
- *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thudydides
- *Histories*, Herodotus
- *On the nature of things*, Lucretius. Humphrey’s translation