



Gavin S. Fort
M.A. History

Although his B.A. was in modern literature (Biola University, 2005), Gavin Fort completed his M.A. in history focusing on medieval religious thought in England and France. He is a member of the Medieval Academy of America, the American Historical Association, and Phi Alpha Theta, and has presented papers at numerous conferences, most notably at the largest annual medieval conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 2011. Gavin was also selected as the Lawrence B. de Graaf Outstanding Graduate Student in the history department for 2009, and was inducted into the academic honor society of Phi Kappa Phi in April, 2011. He has been accepted to the Ph.D. program at Northwestern University, and will continue his research there beginning in the fall. He and his wife Rebecca, admittedly his intellectual superior, are expecting their first child this November.

Commencement Speech

Distinguished professors, fellow students, family, friends. I am here today with the charge of recalling for you my experience as a graduate student in the history department, and it strikes me that such recollection is a fitting task for a historian who has been trained to study the past and relate it to his audience.

My most notable memories come from the classroom. In History and Theory, Dr. Fitch challenged me not simply to read about different historical theories, but to read works that actually employed those theories, and to embrace the multiple ways of constructing the past. Dr. Mikhail, when he wasn't extolling the magnificence of UCLA sports or bemoaning the utter incompetence of certain TV writers, introduced me to the early centuries of Islam, and continually reminded me that historical arguments demand a careful attention to detail. Dr. Brunelle allowed me to be a part of the teaching process

during a teaching internship, and encouraged me to think about my educational career in practical and professional terms.

Dr. Burgtorf demanded the growth of my reading and writing skills during two graduate seminars as I was required to read one book, and produce a six-page response to it, each week. In addition, by requiring all students in these seminars to read articles outside of their subfields, he challenged the class to learn from each other rather than simply look to him for all the answers—although, we all agree, you *do* have all the answers anyway.

Still, no other experience has so greatly prepared me as a historian than the completion of my Master's thesis. I was graciously guided through the whole process, and have never worked so hard to produce a piece of my own intellectual effort. I could never have imagined a more thoughtful, gracious, and enjoyable group of committee members—Dr. Burgtorf, Dr. Mikhail, and Dr. Brunelle—and the success of that work is just as much yours as it is mine.

I dare not continue here without noting the inestimable gift of all these faculty members. As students, we are thankful that they did not kick us out of their offices when office hours ended, or refrain from asking that last question which helped us put all of our thoughts together, or, in my case, even use up the ink of more than one pen to grade my work. Your efforts have made me, and all your students, not only better learners but better humans.

And now, for some closing remarks to my fellow students: Do not abandon the pursuit of knowledge. Do not let college be the intellectual high point of your life; let it be the thing that catapults you into a lifetime of inquiry. Always follow your intellectual interests even if they, like Alice's rabbit, lead you down a dark hole to a strange and backwards world. Yet, do not be compelled by the mere possession of knowledge. For knowledge also sets men free, and true scholars are servants of society—as our professors have modeled.

Remember that the study of history is always the study of ourselves, since humanity remains unchanged throughout the ages. Thus, it is only through the study of the past, the record of humankind's successes and failures, that we can arrive at a more

hopeful future. In this way, we as historians are poised to achieve, and to contribute, great things.

And so, at this moment of graduation, when we pass from being students who learn to citizens who serve, let us not consider this the end, but the beginning. For as T.S. Eliot says,

“What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
Congratulations on a job well done.

Gavin S. Fort
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