

Luis M. Valdez
Pomona College Commencement 2009
May 17, 2009

Thank you, David, President Oxtoby and my colleague Alma Martinez, thank you.

Colleagues of the faculty and honored graduates of the class of 2009. I want to thank you for this honor. I pass it on to all the colleagues I have worked with.

I want to share with you a little story. When I was in high school, way back in the mid-'50s, it's quite a time ago, I lived on a dirt street in a barrio in East San Jose and I used to carry my books home from high school. And there was our gang, our local gang, in that neighborhood. They were called the Blue Velvets. They wore blue velvet jean jackets [with] a heart with a knife through it, three drops from the tip of the knife. Very cool. I wanted one of those, but I didn't want to be a member of the gang.

In any case, I brought my books home to study every day, and these gang members used to watch me. And one day, they got fed up and stopped me, right in the middle of the street, and said, "Oye, pues, ¿qué te traes? What's up with you, dude? What are you carrying all those books for? What are you doing? You showing off? You think you're smart? You think you're better than us? ¿Qué te traes, cabrón?"

And I said, "No, no, no. I'm studying."

"You lifting weights?"

I said, "No, I'm studying. I wanna finish high school. When I finish high school, I want to go on to college."

And, you know, they wouldn't believe me. They were scoffing at me. I was sure they were going to beat me up. And so I had to change tactics.

So, I began to speak in pachuco slang. "Órale vatos, ahúítele un poco.... Cool it, cool it," I said. "You know why I carry these books?"

"Why?"

I said, "Because I'm going to college and when I go to college, I'm going to graduate. And you know what I'm going to do then?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna go to law school. And when I go to law school, I'm gonna come out and I'm gonna be an attorney for the defense. And you know who I'm gonna defend? You guys!" [laughter]

And the gang looked at each other and said, "Odelay, vato, leave him alone. He's our lawyer!" [laughter]



They never bugged me again. [laughter]

The fact is, I didn't become a lawyer, but I did become a playwright. And I wrote in defense of pachucos then and pachucos forever. It was a piece of American history that needed revision, that needed re-study. It needed to be dramatized and put before the public as an appeal, really, to our better conscience.

And it was in that same spirit that in 1965, I went to Cesar Chavez and pitched him an idea. You know ... a professor of mine had moved to Brandeis University and he said, "Come to Brandeis. We can get an MFA and you can direct your first play," which I had already done at San Jose State College, called "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa." He said, "I have a producer interested off-Broadway in New York, and you can get an MFA for directing it, writing a thesis."

I thought, this is heady stuff. This was heady stuff for a Chicano in 1965. But then, I thought of Cesar Chavez and what was going on in the Valley. So I went to Cesar and I pitched him an idea [for a theatre] of, by and for farm workers. He said, "You know, that's fine, but you know there's no money to do theatre in Delano. There are no actors in Delano. There isn't even time to rehearse; we're in the picket line. You still want to do it?"

And I said, "Absolutely!" He said, "What an opportunity."

The fact is, I dedicated myself to the spirit of the movement that this man started. He and Dolores Huerta started this movement on strength and spirit alone because farm workers needed that attention.

I know that it's hot. I know that some of you are chafing under the hot sun. I want you to think for a moment what it's like for farm workers today that are out in those fields without benefit of water or shade. Some of them are dropping dead, believe me.

So this is something, an appeal to your conscience. Yes, you have a degree, but yes, you must continue to work on your conscience. Because the question that is before us at all times is the nature of the human being and how can you become more complete as human beings. You have to develop a mind, a heart, a body and a spirit, and somewhere in all of that is your conscience.

I appeal to your conscience. Pomona is a beautiful place. The Claremont Colleges are unbelievable. What an incredible institution. How proud you must be and your parents must be to graduate from this institution.

But you must know the history of this place. One hundred years ago, there were orange groves out here--orange groves that, at one point, experimented with Agent Orange. This is where pesticides were developed that were eventually used in Vietnam.

You've got to understand the history that surrounds you. You've got to understand that, yes, you are an educated class now, but that around you are people who haven't had the benefit of coming to Pomona or any of the universities, yet they live. The service workers who work here and are struggling also to maintain their jobs. You must think of them. [applause]

You must square the circle. The Mayans believed the symbol of the creator was a square inside a circle, and you must square the circle.

You must work to maintain your body. You're young now and full of spirit and gumption and so forth, but you must take care of that body. You are responsible for your own health. Maintain it.

Maintain your heart. Don't betray yourself at any time. Maintain your mind. Keep it sharp. And, above all, maintain your spirit because that is what will eventually make it transcend.

The Mayans believed that zero was really a spiral, and so they believed that zero was the power to graduate. So you are at zero today. If you don't believe me, take a "1" and put zeroes behind it. That's how you graduated from one to 10 to 100 to 1,000 to 1,000,000. Put your zeroes behind you and graduate every moment of your lives.

You will graduate to greater heights only if you pay attention to the essentials. But above all, the question becomes then: To whom does the future belong? ¿A quién le pertenece el futuro? Use your heart you, use your body, use your spirit and use your mind because the future belongs to those that can imagine it. Thank you.

About Luis M. Valdez

Luis Valdez is regarded as one of the most important and influential American playwrights. His play *Zoot Suit*, which had a successful run here at Pomona in both 2008 and 2009, is considered a masterpiece of the American theater as well as the first Chicano play to appear on Broadway and the first Chicano major feature film.

His company, El Teatro Campesino (The Farm Workers' Theatre), was founded in 1965 and is the most distinguished and longest-running Chicano theatre in the United States. He has never strayed far from his own farm worker roots. His involvement with Cesar Chavez, the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the early Chicano movement have left an indelible mark that has remained embodied in all his work. His short plays encourage campesinos to leave the fields and join the UFW; his mythic plays gave Chicanos their urban life.

His many feature films and television credits include the hit film *La Bamba*, *Cisco Kid* and *Corridos: Tales of Passion and Revolution*. He has won countless awards, including the prestigious Peabody Award for excellence in television, the Presidential Medal of Arts, the Governor's Award from the California Arts Council, and, from Mexico, the Aguila Azteca Award given to individuals whose work promotes cultural excellence and exchange between the U.S. and Mexico. In 2007 he was one of 50 artists to be awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship. His latest anthology, *Mummified Deer and Other Plays*, was recently published.