I feel honored to be here: honored to have an opportunity to speak in the name of a university that has enriched my life in more ways that I can easily describe; and honored also to share a stage with one of my most beloved teachers, David Kennedy. I am further gratified to be standing in the shoes of another former teacher of mine, the late Don Fehrenbacher, who spoke on a similar occasion thirty years ago, when Stanford was celebrating the centenary of the Founding Grant. In addition to being one of the world's most distinguished Lincoln scholars, Professor Fehrenbacher was a very droll man, just the person to puncture the portentousness and self-congratulation that anniversary celebrations like this one inevitably incite. Thus did he begin his account of the university's Gilded Age founding not with Leland or Jane Stanford, David Starr Jordan, Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant or any of the other usual suspects but rather with a scene from Anatole France's satirical novel *Penguin Island*, in which "a celestial assembly wrestles with the question of what to do about the accidental baptism of a colony of penguins."

So when I was invited to speak on the occasion of Stanford's 125th anniversary, I immediately began to search for something similarly deflating with which to begin. But I just couldn't come up with anything. The voice I kept hearing in my head -- honestly -- was that of Ted Baxter, the pompous anchorman from the Mary Tyler Moore Show, who was forever
polishing the Emmy Award speech he would never get to give: "It all began in a 5,000 watt radio station in Fresno, California..."

I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am that you actually laughed at that reference. One of the small indignities of being a middle-aged professor is having one's cultural references greeted by students' blank stares. I should talk to groups like this more often.

Anyway, I remained at a complete loss until last week, when one of those impossibly young students walked in to my office hours doing something I have not seen a student do in a very long time: she was reading a Kurt Vonnegut novel. And I realized in an instant that I had found my penguins.

As with Ted Baxter and Mary Tyler Moore, I don't imagine that referencing Kurt Vonnegut will buy me much credibility with the students I teach today. But I suspect that his name will evoke some memories -- and cloudy memories at that -- for those of you who are of my vintage or slightly older: those whose lives and imaginations were shaped by things like the counterculture, the Civil Rights Movement, and the war in Vietnam. And this got me to thinking, as I am prone to do, about that most perplexing and poignant of human conditions: our experience of the passage of time.

One of the themes Vonnegut explores in his work is our relationship to time, with all that relationship entails in terms of identity, memory, responsibility. The classic example, of
course, is *Slaughterhouse Five*, whose protagonist catapults uncontrollably back and forth across his own lifespan. The novel commences with one of American literature's truly unforgettable lines: "Listen. Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time."

I love that line for many reasons, not least because it expresses what I seek to do in my classroom: to free students' imaginations to roam across time and place and, in the process, to see their own time and place and in fresh, sometimes unsettling ways. With your permission, I'd like to do something akin to that today, to wander across time, not, as in the case of Billy Pilgrim, along the axis of a single human life but rather along the axis of a single institution. I want to consider the relationship between the Stanford that we inhabit today and the one that was created in this place 125 years ago; and, though it is beyond my pay grade as an historian, to reflect a bit on what this institution might look like in the future, that hill beyond yon hill that we, unlike Billy Pilgrim, cannot yet see.

But before I do, let me introduce one other theme, also by way of Vonnegut. It is in the nature of occasions like this one that we celebrate progress: behold this mighty oak, sprung from the acorn sown by our founders. It is hard to imagine an institution more prone to that posture than Stanford, an institution that, with all respect, was always as much a monument to 19th century ideals of progress as to the late, lamented Leland, Jr. But progress, as Vonnegut reminds us, as the whole history of the 20th century reminds us, can be a mixed bag. The traumatic event that sent Billy Pilgrim careering across time, after all, was the Allied firebombing of Dresden, a triumph of technological innovation. Vonnegut was in Dresden in
February, 1945 as a prisoner of war; he survived the inferno, with other American POWs, in a meat locker three stories below ground. Entombed for three days, the soldiers and their captors emerged into a world of ash, and spent the ensuing weeks engaged in what Vonnegut described as a kind of gruesome Easter egg hunt, searching for corpses hidden amidst the rubble. He never forgot the experience, nor the lesson that he took from it: that human progress is a story of darkness as well as of light, that in claiming the capacity for flight, the dream of ancients, human beings had also claimed the capacity to rain fire on cities.

My point here is obviously not to suggest some kind of simple-minded parallel between Stanford's history and the immolation of Dresden. But our institution's history is not without its darkness. The fortune that created this university was accumulated not only through flagrant political corruption but also through the exploitation of thousands of Chinese railroad workers. The land on which the campus sits was not always the Stanford stock farm; it became that through serial acts of dispossession. One of the things I admire about the program assembled by the organizers of the Stanford 125 celebration is the way it engages with such previously neglected chapters of the university's history; save for a few obligatory references to "robber barons," the 100th anniversary commemoration was completely innocent of such concerns. But we are only at the beginning of the process of institutional reckoning.

I bring all this up not because I wish to spit in the proverbial punch bowl, or still less to indulge in the familiar professorial pastime of biting the hand that feeds me. I bring it up, rather, because these questions are animating the campus today, particularly our students.
And if our purpose here is to foster a conversation across generations, then we should start by introducing ourselves. I do not know if Professor Kennedy intends to mention this in his remarks, but he is currently chairing a provostial committee to clarify Stanford's policies in regard to the re-naming of campus streets, buildings, and landmarks, a committee appointed in response to a student government resolution demanding the removal of all campus references to Junipero Serra. A similar proposal to re-name facilities associated with Stanford's first president, David Starr Jordan, because of his involvement with the early 20th century eugenics movement was not passed by the undergraduate senate but we have surely not heard the last of the issue. In fact, there is a town meeting in Palo Alto a few weeks from now to consider the renaming of Jordan Middle School.

Stanford, it should be noted, is hardly alone in grappling with previously neglected chapters of its history. Over the last decade or two, more than twenty of our peer institutions, including Brown, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, the University of Maryland, the University of Virginia, William and Mary, and Georgetown, have undertaken to investigate, acknowledge, and, in some cases, offer amends for their complicity in slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Other institutions have taken similar steps in regard to historical entanglements with racial segregation, eugenics, and the massacre of Native Americans. Last Fall, students at Princeton occupied the office of the president to demand the expunging of the name of Woodrow Wilson from all university facilities and programs; while administrators at Yale recently decided, in the face of student protests, to re-instate a university worker who had
been fired after destroying a stained-glass window in Calhoun College depicting enslaved workers.

What all these campus conversations and controversies portend -- whether they are harbingers of a new, more inclusive period in American higher education, as some would have it, or simply the latest proof of our society's baleful descent into balkanization, political correctness, and the culture of victimhood, as others allege -- is a subject that I am sure we could debate. I have my own thoughts on the matter, though I confess that they tend to change depending on the particular question and context. My point, simply, is that we find ourselves at an interesting time, a moment in which many universities, including our own, are looking anew at their pasts, struggling to fashion more honest and inclusive accounts of their institutional histories, accounts that do justice not only to the gracious but also the grievous. In at least a few instances, institutions are using such struggles to think anew about their identities and missions in the present, to redefine their responsibilities in light of what they now understand about their histories. How Stanford navigates these challenges is, I suspect, a matter that will interest those who look back at us at future anniversary celebrations.

Which brings me back to Billy Pilgrim. What do we see when we travel back to the early days of Stanford, and what, if anything, does the experience tell us about our own time and place? As with any excursion into the past, the journey evokes feelings of both familiarity and strangeness. Some of the issues with which the founding generation grappled seem so remote as to be almost quaint. We no longer debate whether to charge tuition or to record grades --
Stanford originally did neither. International students are permitted to live on campus. We no longer require gym class, though students can still take athletics courses for academic credit. (One professor decried the university's 1957 decision to abolish the gym requirement as "a craven desertion of the Greek ideal.") We admit women on an equal base with men, a departure from the early years, when female enrollment was capped at five hundred -- a policy enacted in the early 1900s at the behest of Jane Stanford, who, for all her commitment to women's education, feared the growing preponderance of women in the student body would undermine the university's academic reputation.

In terms of curriculum, early Stanford was very different from the Stanford of today. As I'm sure many here know, Stanford was one of the first universities to adopt the "major system," which emerged in the late nineteenth century as an alternative to the classical curriculum that still prevailed at most institutions. Students declared their majors on arrival and proceeded immediately into specialized instruction in their chosen departments, most of which consisted of single professors, who established their own curricula and graduation requirements. Imagine that: you got your degree when your "major professor" decided you deserved it.

If our excursion included exploring the campus after dark, we might find ourselves at a seance. Spiritualist beliefs, the idea not simply of an afterlife or "spirit world" but of the possibility of communicating with those who inhabited it, were extremely widespread in the decades around Stanford's founding, with millions of adherents -- many, even most, of them
wealthy and well-educated -- catered to by so-called "spirit mediums," some of whom became international celebrities. It is clear that a grief-stricken Jane Stanford consulted mediums in a desperate effort to reconnect with her lost son, and Leland, Sr. probably did so as well, at least for a time. But the real spiritualist in the family was Thomas Welton Stanford, Leland Sr.’s brother, who, having made his fortune marketing Singer sewing machines in Australia, became one of the premier promoters of spiritualism in the English speaking world. T.W. too made strenuous efforts to communicate with the late Leland, Jr., and with some apparent success. Among the holdings in Stanford Library’s Special Collections are two dozen boxes of materials from T.W.’s spiritualist endeavors, including various "apports" -- objects transported from the spirit world -- as well as slates containing chalked messages, still legible, purportedly written by the late Leland, Jr. Though he never visited the campus, T.W. Stanford was a trustee of the university and an important early benefactor. He funded the construction of what we today call Wallenberg Hall, Building 160 on the Main Quad, and on his death he left a very large gift to support "Psychical Research," a gift whose terms, thanks to a different sort of conjuring by university lawyers, were amended to specify "Psychical Research and related interests" -- a change that made it possible for the money to be used to endow a Department of Psychology.

Probably the most obvious difference we would see in our journey back to the past would be in the appearance of the Quad. It probably isn’t news to most of the people in this room, but students in my classes are stunned to learn that today’s postcard view of Stanford -- looking up from Palm Drive, through the front of the Quad to the gleaming mosaic of Memorial Church, with golden foothills as the backdrop -- was not the view that greeted visitors in the
university’s early days. For starters, Memorial Church was topped by a towering, utterly incongruous steeple. That steeple, moreover, was virtually the only part of the church visible from Palm Drive, since the front of the Quad was dominated a massive Memorial Arch. Vaguely modeled on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the arch was ringed at the top by a sandstone frieze, designed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens and depicting the progress of civilization, culminating with the Stanford family guiding the transcontinental railroad over the Rocky Mountains. Both arch and steeple were casualties of the 1906 earthquake. Thankfully, the university did not rebuild them.

Given my earlier remarks about acknowledging dark corners of our history, let me mention one other bit of housekeeping accomplished by the 1906 quake. As you have doubtless observed, the front of the Quad is graced by a series of white statues, perched along the second floor. In keeping with the university’s foundational values, the statues depict Johannes Gutenberg, Alexander Von Humboldt, and America’s own Benjamin Franklin, figures associated not simply with scientific discovery but with the harnessing of knowledge and technique to human progress. Initially, the roster also included Louis Agassiz, a professor of zoology and geology at Harvard and the mentor of President David Starr Jordan. I daresay that we would not think to enshrine Agassiz on our campus today; indeed, it’s rather shocking that they did then. Not only was he an outspoken opponent of the idea of evolution, he was also, even by the standards of his time, a rabid racist, a man who dedicated a substantial part of his career to proving that black and white people were not just distinct races but separate species. Along came the 1906 earthquake and Agassiz was tumbled from his perch and planted head
first in the pavement below, buried right up to his collar. The episode produced not only the greatest photograph in Stanford history but also what is for my money the most brilliant bon mot, often attributed to Harvard philosopher William James, Agassiz's one-time student, though probably more properly credited to Frank Angell, a Stanford professor of psychology: "I've always preferred Agassiz in the concrete to Agassiz in the abstract."

Traveling Billy Pilgrim-like back to Stanford's early days would thus confront us with much that seemed odd and unfamiliar. But I suspect that such feelings would be more than matched by our sense of recognition, not only of familiar buildings but also of the university's fundamental character. A Stanford education, Leland Stanford famously declared, would be "practical"; it would prepare students "to go out into the world equipped for useful labor, with such knowledge as will be of service to them in the battle for bread." Knowing as we do some of the ways in which Leland secured his own bread, some of us may find those words hard to swallow, but we all certainly recognize the sentiment. To put the matter in the parlance of the Founding Grant, Stanford continues today to equip its students for lives of "personal success" and "direct usefulness."

This is certainly not to suggest that the Stanfords were philistines. The Founding Grant spoke not only of utility but also of liberty, humanity, public welfare. The university Leland and Jane envisioned included not only departments of chemistry and engineering but also of philosophy, history, and literature, not only mechanical institutes and laboratories but also conservatories, museums, and galleries of art. We have all these things today; they are jewels
in the university's crown. But the fact remains that Stanford was and is a very practical place, an institution dedicated not simply to the creation but to the application of knowledge -- to "seeking solutions," as the university put it in its most recent endowment campaign.

Lord knows, I am not averse to solving the world's problems, but the emphasis on practicality does present challenges -- challenges that have stalked Stanford throughout its history and become especially acute today. As recently as a decade ago, roughly 20% of undergraduates took their degrees within the School of Engineering. Today that figure is well over 40%, thanks primarily to extravagant growth in the number of students majoring in Computer Science. If surveys of the incoming first-year class can be believed, the figure will soon exceed 50%. Students interested in pursuing degrees in Humanities and Social Sciences routinely report being challenged by their more "techie" classmates. "What are you going to do with that?" they're asked, as if the pursuit of knowledge and inspiration unfettered by application were somehow risible. This barren instrumentalism converges all too easily with another signature characteristic of Stanford culture: our relentless pursuit of the new, of what we today call "innovation," a term that has become as much a shibboleth for our generation as "progress" was for the generation of the founders. The result of this convergence is not simply the routine discounting of that which is neither new nor practical but also a chronic tendency to forget the essentially conservative role of the university, its function not simply as a seedbed of new knowledge but also as a repository of the accumulated experience of humankind. "For poetry makes nothing happen," W.H. Auden wrote in his homage to W.B. Yeats. "It survives in the valley of its making..." The same might be said of Sanskrit and Schubert, the travel writing
of Ibn Battuta and the films of Ernst Lubitsch, the Ghent Altarpiece and the cave paintings of Lascaux. But a world without these things would be a desolate place. They are essential elements of our shared humanity, and if they are not cherished in universities it is hard to imagine where they will be.

We need, in short, to defend the non-useful. But in doing so, I hope that we will not (and here I am addressing colleagues in Humanities and Social Science departments) succumb to self-disparagement and doom-saying, nor lose sight of all that is marvelous about Stanford. The very qualities about which I have been expressing concerns -- the emphasis on practicality, the inventive turn of mind, the impatience with inherited ways of doing things -- have produced an institution that is wonderfully open, dynamic, and small d democratic. For all its national and international eminence, Stanford remains an utterly irreverent place. It welcomes interesting ideas, and doesn't care overmuch whether the people proposing them are Nobel laureates or sophomores. It resolutely rejects the role of ivory tower, embracing rather than turning its back on the world. These qualities are bred in the bone of the institution, and we are -- mostly -- better for them.

Before I close, permit me to do one more thing. Let me offer the same opportunity to time travel, Billy Pilgrim-like, to our founders. What would our founders think if given an opportunity to wander our campus today? What would they make of us?
i suspect that their first response would be something akin to astonishment. How could they possibly have anticipated the behemoth sprawling out before them? But I would like to believe -- I do believe -- that they would find much that they recognized and, broadly speaking, approved. Leland and Jane Stanford sought to create a university that would equip students for direct usefulness and personal success and they certainly got it. They imagined a residential university and they got that too: Stanford today is the most emphatically residential university in the country, with over 98% of undergraduate students living on campus for all four years, in any of more than 80 individual houses and dormitories. They sought to ensure close proximity of faculty and students, marrying the virtues of the German research university, with its commitment to rigorous scholarship, with the virtues of a small liberal arts college, where faculty and students "know one another by name." Achieving such a union was and is no easy task, but to a remarkable extent Stanford has managed to do it.

Doubtless they would be surprised by the composition of the student body, though I think, on reflection, they would approve it. In contrast to Woodrow Wilson's Princeton, Stanford was never a Jim Crow institution. The "Pioneer Class" of 1895 included an African American student, and the university graduated its first Native American student three years later. In the era of Chinese exclusion, Stanford enrolled students of Asian descent, including at least a few children of the Chinese workers who had built Leland's Central Pacific Railroad. But notwithstanding such impressive (and oft-cited) facts, Stanford in its early years was, for practical purposes, a white institution, and it remained so right through the early 1960s. Today it is very different. Indeed, according to a recent ranking in U.S. News and World Report,
Stanford is the third most diverse university in the country. Classifying students along racial and ethnic lines is a hazardous business, both practically and ethically, but our best estimates are that about 42% of undergraduate students today are white Americans, a figure identical to the proportion of whites in the population of California. "We will make the children of California our children," Leland is alleged to have told his grieving wife, and they did.

Were our travelers to visit a few classes or student residences, they would see abundant evidence of the value of Stanford's changing demography. The increased presence of students of color and international students on our campus has transformed more than the photos in the brochures we send out to prospective applicants; it has also wrought profound changes in the character, culture, and curriculum of the institution. Were the Stanfords to visit the Psychology Department, for example, they would find no spiritualists, but they might meet Professor Jennifer Eberhardt, a recent recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, whose exploration of the subtle, often unconscious processes by which we classify and evaluate one another racially -- and of the impact of these processes on the operation of our nation's policing and criminal justice systems -- has given us new tools to address one of most urgent problems of our age. Professor Eberhardt is probably not what the Stanfords and David Starr Jordan had in mind when they began to recruit faculty for the new university, but it is hard to imagine a scholar whose work is more in keeping with the principles of the Founding Grant, with its commitments not just to "usefulness" but also to promoting public welfare, serving the interests of humanity and civilization, and preserving the values of liberty under law.
One might make a similar argument about gender. The idea that women and men should study and learn together is such a commonplace today that it takes an effort of imagination to remember just how unusual the founders of this university were in their commitment to "co-education." David Starr Jordan made the point emphatically in a 1904 speech, appropriately entitled "The College of the West." "In the natural order of things, in the long run, the American university and every other real university will be a school for men and women, opening its doors to all who can use its advantages or who can share its ideals."

Visiting the campus today, I am sure that Jordan and the Stanfords would be gratified to see their faith confirmed (and also to learn that the unrestricted admission of women has in no way damaged the university's reputation for academic rigor.) At the same time, I suspect that they would be nonplussed to learn that there are many people in the Stanford community today who reject Jordan's division of the human species into two genders, who experience and represent themselves in ways not encompassed by the man/woman binary. And they would certainly be surprised -- as I suspect some in this audience may be surprised -- to learn that students on this campus, in introducing themselves to one another, now routinely specify the pronouns, gendered or otherwise, by which they wish to be addressed and characterized. But on this matter too, I think our founders would come around, as I hope and expect that our generation will as well. The burden of the Jordan quotation above was not, after all, that one had to be a self-identified man or woman to attend Stanford, but rather that the university should throw open its doors to all who can use its advantages and share its ideals. If you meet those criteria, then you are welcome here.
Familiar or strange? The answer, no matter which direction we travel in time, is both. And that is precisely as it should be. "A wise system of education will develop as much in advance of that of our present as ours in advance of the condition of the savage," Leland Stanford declared in his speech opening the university in 1891. Today, of course, we would put the matter differently; we would certainly not use the word "savage," a term with specific historical and philosophical meanings in the nineteenth century, meanings thankfully lost to us. But the insight lying beneath the locution is a profound one. It is in the nature of universities to outgrow the visions and expectations of their founders. They surprise us. In the best cases -- and, for these purposes, I think Stanford is indeed a best case -- they do so not because subsequent generations went astray or turned their back on institutional values but precisely because they honored those values and lived out their logic.

In the same spirit, I believe -- I trust -- that the institution that our successors will survey at Stanford's 150th or 250th or 350th anniversary commemorations will defy our own imaginings. The students who follow us will inhabit a different universe of possibility than ours. They will not necessarily value the things that we value. They will ask unsettling questions, and disdain things that we consider precious. They will turn a condescending eye on us, lamenting our blinkered moral imaginations, decrying our comfortable acquiescence to systems of gross injustice. They will get a good chuckle when our idols are toppled and planted upside down in the pavement. They will, in short, behave in every way like Stanford students.

I, for one, find that comforting.