

Claire Smith
Valedictory Address
May 8, 2022

Chancellor Skirving, Vice-Chancellor Berner, Provost Wilson, Deans, Faculty, Staff, family, and friends, thank you for being here to celebrate the class of 2022, and thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. And most of all, congratulations to my fellow classmates.

Over the last few days, I've been thinking about my first visit to Sewanee. It was February of my senior year of high school, and I was still undecided about where I would go the next fall. After applying to Sewanee on a whim— thank you, no application fee— it was finally time for me to actually visit campus. It was a cold and foggy day, which I would soon learn is pretty standard for Sewanee, not unlike our current commencement weekend in May.

The fog was so heavy the night we drove in that I had to stick my head out of the window to look for the University of the South sign and direct my mom's driving to avoid passing cars on the highway.

We had no idea what lay ahead of us.

Looking back, I realize how little I really knew about going to college, especially to a place like Sewanee. I think about how charmed I was by the sight of the sandstone buildings through the fog and the snow, by students walking to class in their gowns. I'm surprised at how readily I felt after my first visit that Sewanee was where I wanted to be. Of course, in hindsight, all of the class of 2022 entered this campus with no idea what was ahead of us the next four years.

Our class spent over half of our time at Sewanee during a pandemic. We tried to find our footing in the constantly shifting terrain of campus as policies and leadership continued to change. We left behind our dorms, our books, and our clothes at Sewanee in March of 2020, unsure of when we could return. When we reentered campus, we didn't know if Sewanee as we knew it could ever return. I'm sure many of us wondered if we could join together for a graduation in All Saints', like we are today.

In our little community on the Mountain, we also responded to a nation caught in crisis. Across the country, people protested racial injustice and participated in a contentious presidential election. The climate crisis continued and the wealth gap widened globally and nationally. Most recently, as our graduates enter adulthood and plan for our futures, we face fear and uncertainty regarding our reproductive rights under Roe v. Wade.

We had no idea what lay ahead of us. And yet, we still made plans for the future and found ways to forge ahead. At Sewanee, each of us found people to hold onto—our friends, our teammates, our professors, our families and communities back home. We continued growing, together.

I want to thank our loved ones, our parents, friends, and our chosen families, for being a source of encouragement and stability to many of us during this time. And our administrators who worked swiftly to respond to the pandemic. I especially want to thank our professors, with whom we figured out how to learn and teach all over again. They suffered alongside us through Zoom classes and technology mishaps, in tent classrooms that met in the wind and rain, and in stuffy classrooms made stuffier by masks.

But most importantly, I want to congratulate everyone in front of me for not only making it through this time and achieving your degree, but continuing to pursue your passions and make plans for your future, even when uncertainty always loomed. Whether you know the next step after graduation or you're still searching, you have already demonstrated true dedication and resilience. I hope that each of us will hold on to that long after we leave Sewanee.

At the same time that we all tried to plan for an uncertain future, we were also increasingly confronted with Sewanee's past.

Only one year ago, members of our student body yelled racial slurs at a visiting lacrosse team. As the Editor of the Sewanee Purple, I encountered so many thoughtful and dedicated students during this time who organized protests, committed acts of civil disobedience, and voiced their own experiences of racism on this campus. I'm grateful to all of the students who shared their stories and demanded more accountability from the University. We certainly have much more to do as a community to make Sewanee a safe and welcoming place for BIPOC students.

One thing that we learned from this incident is that Sewanee's past—our connections to slavery, the Confederacy, and racial segregation—still reverberates in the present. There is still so much that we don't know about our history and the images, names, and monuments Sewanee students live and study around every day. My hope is that as we investigate our past, we will discover that the history of our University does not have to control our present. That there are so many paths that our University can take, together, if we have the courage to do so. The better we are able to do this at Sewanee, the more courageous and curious our students will be beyond the gates.

In *Night Train to Lisbon*, the philosopher Pascal Mercier asks, “*What could, what should be done with all the time now before us, open and unshaped, feather-light in its freedom and lead-heavy in its uncertainty?*”

Even as I look forward to the future beyond this place, leaving Sewanee still feels like sticking my head out of the window into the foggy night. *Feather-light in its freedom and lead-heavy in its uncertainty*. We still really have no idea what lies ahead of us. But if there is anything that I know all of us have learned at Sewanee, it is how to survive in uncertainty, and how to find guidance for our futures by looking at our past. It is how to enter the world knowing that there is a community of people behind us, even as we strike out on our own road.

I’m confident that the members of the Class of 2022 will go on to do great things. I hope that we will continue to listen to and learn from each other for years to come.

Lastly, graduates, I’ll leave you with a bit of Walt Whitman:

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.*

*Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.*