

## REMARKS TO THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 2019

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*“Cancellarie, licetne anglice loqui?”*

*“Licet.”*

In a moment I will pronounce, as our ritual requires, a charge to each of you as graduates of the University. But first, a word or two – in English.

“... [I]n the importance and noise of tomorrow,” writes the poet Auden “a few thousand will think of this day as one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.”

As we entered this chapel this morning, we sang the familiar words of a beloved hymn: “For all the saints.” Here, in All Saints’ Chapel, we are surrounded by the names and accomplishments, the memorials, of those men and women who have been a part of the life of this University for the past 150 years—lives that remind us that history didn’t begin on the day we were born, lives often of great accomplishment, yes, but also lives summarized in such simple statements as “she did what she could.” To put it another way, here, today, we are surrounded by memory.

And, because this is Commencement morning, memory is not simply on the walls and in the liturgy; it is also in our hearts and in our minds: memories of things seen and done and learned here, of friends made here, of challenges large and small encountered here.

Memory can easily become nostalgia, if you let it, and nostalgia can turn you into either a sentimental fool or a hopeless crank at far too early an age, for it will prompt you to measure an uncertain present against a known and selectively remembered past and lead you in unguarded moments to write me letters and emails bemoaning what Sewanee has become compared to what it once was.

And so, alongside memory, we place today nostalgia’s antidote, which is hope. It is hope, after all, that first brought you to this Mountain, hope that allowed your families to commit you confidently to this University’s charge, and hope that is borne by the Sewanee angel that will go before you as you tap the roof of your car one last time when you pass through our gates.

Memory—and hope. In time to come you will reflect on this day and on your time spent here, and, as the angle of vision changes, shaped by the passage of time, you may think of the words of the poet:

*“The days gone by return upon me,  
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,  
May scarcely see at all; and I would give ...  
...as far as words can give,  
Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining ...  
... the spirit of the Past for future restoration.”*

These lines come, as some of you will recognize, from William Wordsworth’s “The Prelude.” They speak about memory, and the many ways memory can impart “substance and life” to even the most humdrum and routine events, fixing and enriching a moment, a person, a place. These he calls “spots of time,” and he defines this term in an eloquent and well-known passage:

*“There are in our existence spots of time,  
That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence ... our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;  
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,  
That penetrates, enables us to mount,  
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.  
... Such moments  
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date  
From our first childhood.”*

“Spots of time.” Moments when, as one critic has noted, “mere seeing gives way to vision.” Places—many of them ordinary. “Scattered everywhere.” Possessing a “renovating virtue,” the power to nourish and make new. Raising us “when high, more high. [Lifting] us up when fallen.” Such is the power of memory as defined by the poet. Memory matters.

But note the poet’s carefully chosen words—“nourish,” “renovate,” “enables,” words that make clear the proper role of memory over the course of a lifetime of highs and lows. For without enablement one goes stale; without renovation things fall into disrepair or disuse; without nourishment the mind and spirit starve; there can be no hope.

To think of memory in this way, as lifetime learning, as “spots of time” giving meaning to the past and inspiring hope for what is to come is, it seems to me, the best way to think of this particular moment of ending and beginning in your own lives. You have done well, and accomplished much, but of those to whom much is given, much is expected. The power to remember, and to articulate the significance of memory, is a special gift, which the University now presents you, along with the power and influence, in the form of your degree, to put that gift to use—responsibly, thoughtfully, creatively, wisely, well—and to serve ends that are not in the interest of self, not petty, but noble.

Because finally, with this gift comes an obligation, a duty: to be honest with yourself and with others, and to turn your particular talents and gifts to lofty purposes. George Bernard Shaw put it this way: “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.... the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.” As you go forth from this place bearing the mark of this University, my prayer for you on this Commencement morning, then, is a hope I confidently believe is shared not only by my faculty colleagues but also by your families, and especially by those mothers whose day this also is. It is simply this: that memory and hope will temper pride with humility so that your works, in the words of St. Paul, show “thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

Now, lest we close on too somber or pious a note, quick and, I hope, applicable, story. It involves Lyndon Johnson, a giant of a man, a true character, and a president whose reputation will someday rise to match his extraordinary achievement. LBJ was, by all accounts, a tough man to work for. The phone might ring at any time, day or night, with a voice at the other end asking a question, issuing a directive, registering a complaint.

Finally, one of Johnson’s speechwriters had had enough. LBJ’s habit was to speak from a stack of 3 x 5 index cards, which his writers would prepare for him. These would contain specific “talking points,” from which the president could expound on the topic at hand. One day, as he passed through the Oval Office en route to a Rose Garden press conference, Johnson was handed a stack of cards by a staff member and proceeded to the podium to deliver his opening remarks. Glancing down at the first card, Johnson read the words, pronouncing, “There are those who say

that we cannot balance the federal budget and maintain expanded defense costs, but I believe we can, and I will tell you how.”

Flipping to the next card, he continued, “There are those who say we cannot maintain law and order in the streets and, at the same time, guarantee individual rights, but I believe we can, and I will tell you how.”

Then, on to the third card: “There are those who say that we cannot fight a war abroad and continue the war on poverty at home, but I believe we can, and I will tell you how.”

Then, the next card. On it was written, “OK Lyndon, you’re on your own now.”

OK, Class of 2019; you’re on your own. We shall follow the progress of your lives and careers with deep and genuine and abiding interest. We shall not forget you. And we wish you well, until we meet again.

Please rise for the charge to the class.