

## **COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT REMARKS 2020**

**John M. McCardell, Jr., Vice-Chancellor**

**May 10, 2020**

**“Nunc Age”**

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.

We have missed you over these last six weeks. We have really missed you. Yes, we have tried to approximate the classroom experience—my faculty colleagues have actually done a remarkable job in adapting on short notice to unprecedented conditions—but it just hasn’t quite been the same. And yet, distance has not diminished the value of our time together. Separation has, in peculiar ways, drawn us closer. Though we have not had the chance to celebrate senior spring or senior week, we have come to discover that our friendships remain close, that our bonds remain strong, that our love for this place Sewanee has deepened, and that our affection for it and loyalty to it have sustained us in this time of trial and reminded us of the simple truth of the aphorism, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him about your plans.”

Yes, we had plans, you and I both. We were going to go out together, graduating classmates, with pomp and ceremony and happy memories, food and drink and encomia. Well, it didn’t quite turn out that way. But that’s an important life lesson. And even though our expectations appeared to have been dashed, in fact they have simply been postponed. It gives me great pleasure to announce that the Commencement for the Class of 2020 has been set for Sunday, May 16, 2021. We are planning a full schedule of events that will seek to replicate, as closely as possible, the senior week experience, beginning with a reception for families on Wednesday, May 12, and including Baccalaureate on Saturday, May 15, complete with honorary degrees, and Commencement on Sunday morning.

Many more details to follow, but we wanted to get this on your calendars now, a full year in advance. One of many distinctions you will be able to claim is that your graduation ceremony, the Class of 2020, will take place one week after that for the Class of 2021. I doubt any other classes will be able to claim they graduated a year and a week after their successors. Indeed, the

only comparison I can make, as an historian, is to Grover Cleveland, who was both the 22nd and the 24th president of the United States, the only president who succeeded his successor. Perhaps he can be your mascot. And so we will indeed be together again, on campus, with your families and friends. We'll read your names and we'll sing the *alma mater*, you'll step on the seal, process through the faculty gauntlet, and remember the day forever.

But today we certify you as graduates of the University of the South. You begin today the next chapter of your lives, equipped with many tools: the tools of language and expression, both oral and written, including the vocabulary of mathematics and art, and music, and science. You have developed your sense of critical analysis, and you are, we hope, more willing to put to the proof of hard evidence assertions that too often consist of little more than inflated rhetoric.

When a class of students received its diplomas, it often hears a "valedictory" address. You'll hear that too, from your own valedictorian, next May. "Valedictory," taken from its Latin roots, means literally "farewell speech." And the most famous valedictories contain what we often refer to as "famous last words."

Now some of you may just now be harboring thoughts similar to those of the French writer Rabelais as he lay on his deathbed in 1553. "Bring down the curtain," Rabelais reportedly uttered, "the farce is played out."

On his deathbed, just before he died, the famous hotel magnate Conrad Hilton was asked if he had any final words of advice or wisdom to impart to the world. He replied, "Always leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub."

And so let's think today about "Famous Last Words." I will confess that, as the day of my own departure from office draws nearer, I have given a great deal of thought to this subject and pondered at some length whether, when that moment arrives, I will have any "famous last words" to offer appropriate to the occasion. Since you have now arrived at such a point in your own lives, I thought I might try out some possibilities with you and ask you to consider what, if some day you are asked to utter any famous last words yourselves, what those utterances might be.

On this as on so many subjects, the internet is a great place to start. Indeed, there is a website entitled "Famous Last Words." From that site I have found many examples—some touching,

some clever, most eloquent—of famous last words, of documented statements made by famous individuals just before they died. I offer a few of these by way of introduction.

For instance, the famous horticulturalist Luther Burbank's famous last words were, supposedly, "I don't feel good." While the actor Douglas Fairbanks Sr., when asked by an attending nurse how he felt, responded "never felt better," and then died.

The leader of the famous Green Mountain Boys, Ethan Allen, heard his physician, keeping a death watch, whisper soothingly, "General, I fear the angels are waiting for you," to which the cranky Vermonter replied, "Waiting are they? Waiting are they? Well—let 'em wait!"

The French Jesuit Dominique Bouhours, a renowned grammarian who insisted upon correctness in the use of the French language, stated, "I am about to—or I am going to—die; either expression is correct."

But my favorite, and you will probably understand why, is the famous last statement offered by Union General John Sedgwick of the Army of the Potomac. During the battle of Spotsylvania in 1864, Sedgwick was inspecting his troops. As the website reports, "he approached a parapet and peered over the top ... His officers urged him to take cover from small arms fire. But Sedgwick scoffed at their concerns. 'What! What men!' he shouted. 'They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist----.'"

Famous Last Words.

One of the great yet now infrequently read works of American autobiography is *The Education of Henry Adams*. This book represents a great historian's "famous last words." And not just any historian, but an Adams. Near the end of his long life, Adams, a self-described 18th-century man who, born in 1838, had lived through the momentous events of the transforming 19th century, wrote this account. It is the chronicle of a lifetime spent in pursuit of education and ends with the author's sad conclusion—his famous last words—that he had been poorly educated indeed for the times through which he had passed. The volume charts the movement of American society, in Adams's words, from unity to multiplicity, from country to city, from 18th century to 20th. "The typical American," he wrote, "had his hand on a lever and his eye on a curve in the road; his living depended on his keeping up an average speed of forty miles an hour, tensing always to

become sixty, eighty, or a hundred, and he could not admit emotions or anxieties or subconscious distractions ... without breaking his neck.”

One of the most vividly descriptive passages in the entire book occurs in the final chapter entitled “Nunc Age,” which translated from the Latin means “Now go,” a most appropriate valedictory for a senior class. In it, Adams recounts his return from a European sojourn in 1904. As he sailed into New York harbor, he mused:

Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new forces must, at any cost, be brought under control. Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable, and afraid.

“The child born in 1900,” Henry Adams writes, “would be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple. Adams tried to imagine it and an education that would fit it.” If that statement accurately described the world awaiting the child born in 1900, it no less accurately describes the world awaiting the child born in 1998—the Class of 2020: a world of even greater multiplicity, a world that will not permit you, if you mean to make your way through it, comprehend it, and prosper in it, to remain a perpetual collegian. And yet—and yet—as Adams himself concludes, in pursuing education, and in continuing to allow oneself to be educated even after one’s formal education may have ended, “one sought no absolute truth. One sought only a spool on which to wind the thread of history without breaking it.”

Our modest hope is that over the last four years we have provided you with a spool, shaped by the liberal arts, rimmed with the edges, the boundaries, of civil behavior and discourse, and made strong and durable by a commitment to honorable behavior. These things know no race or gender or nationality or religion. They are not the exclusive property of any particular group or class. They are our—they are your—markings, forever, as one of Sewanee’s own. Around this spool each of you will wind the thread of your own history, without breaking, connecting what you see and hear and read with your own critical faculties and imposing upon you the obligation, before you praise or condemn, first to understand.

Having given you this spool, we now give you our blessing and let go of your hand. As he closes the story of his own life, Adams concludes, “One walks with one’s own friends up to the portal of life, and bids good-bye with a smile.” And so, as each of you walks up to a different kind of portal today, there to begin the next chapter of your own education, let us for one more brief moment consider “famous last words.” What might yours be? What will they be when your days on this earth have run their course?

I am still not certain about mine, though I hear Father Time’s footsteps getting ever closer. But if I had to pronounce, at this moment and on the spot, my own “valedictory,” my own farewell words of wisdom, my own accompaniment to the charge “Nunc Age”–“Now Go”–I might turn first, and perhaps improbably, to a country song made popular by Lee Ann Womack. Perhaps you know it. Its title is “I Hope You Dance.” It goes as follows:

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder/  
You get your fill to eat, but  
always keep that hunger;/  
May you never take one single breath for granted;/  
God forbid love ever leave you empty-handed./  
I hope you still feel small when you  
stand beside the ocean;/  
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens./  
Promise me that you’ll give fate a fighting chance,/  
And when you get the choice  
to sit it out or dance – I hope you dance.

Time is a wheel in constant motion always rolling us along./  
Tell me who wants to look back on their youth/  
And wonder where those years have gone.

I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance,/  
Never settle for the path of least resistance./  
Living might mean taking chances, but they’re worth  
taking./  
Loving might be a mistake, but it’s worth making./  
Don’t let some hell-bent heart leave you bitter./  
When you come close to selling out, reconsider./  
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance,/  
And when you get the choice  
to sit it out or dance,

I hope you dance. Dance. Dance. I hope you dance.

These words from a contemporary artist. But they are someone else's words And so, to conclude, these valedictory words of my own:

"Nunc Age," Now go—softly yet confidently forth. Know that our thoughts and our prayers go with you. Know too that you are always welcome here. For you are now part of the thread of this University, a spool around which more than 150 years of history have been wound, without breaking.

"Nunc Age," Now go—and though you may now believe yourselves to be educated, may you never take yourselves too seriously. And may you always retain a sense of humor which is, after all, nothing more than a sense of perspective.

"Nunc Age," Now go—may you continue for the rest of your lives to strive to broaden the limited reach of your own understanding, and may you be granted wisdom and courage to set your feet on lofty places.

"Nunc Age," Now go—and as you spin out the thread of your lives, may you find strength in your life's labors, love in its homing, and peace at the end of the day.

"Nunc Age," Now go—time like an ever-rolling stream bears all our years away. We bid you goodbye with a smile. We shall not forget you. And we wish you well, until we meet again. And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance, keep in mind these famous last words, which one year from now we will do, together—I hope you dance.

Godspeed, Class of 2020.

Please now rise for the charge, after which, wherever you may be, I invite you to join in singing the *alma mater*.