

Vice-Chancellor's Welcome

“Finding Your Place”

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Good afternoon, and welcome.

It is a pleasure to welcome all of you here this afternoon, to this mountain. I begin with a story: ten years ago, the evening before I was to be elected as vice-chancellor by the Board of Trustees, I discovered, to my horror, that each Trustee had been given a copy of a chapter from my book, published in 1979, about the founding of Sewanee. Who knew? Think about that each time you submit a paper in class – it may come back to haunt you!

Well, I survived! A caring Trustee came up to me afterward and said, “Welcome and congratulations; however,” she continued, “we’re **2,000** feet above sea level.” As you can tell, I have never forgotten that fact. And each time I am also mindful of what it means to ascend a mountain, and what, in particular, it means to ascend this mountain. It means the ability to see farther, to glimpse more distant horizons. It is also humbling. For, as others have written, “You climb the mountain so you can see the world. You don’t climb the mountain so the world can see you.”

So here you now are, on this mountain and in a place called Sewanee. No one is quite sure where the name “Sewanee” comes from. To the founders, this was the University of the South, and its location on early maps was designated as “University Place.” To be sure, a generous grant of 5,000 acres by the Sewanee Mining Company in 1858 forever associated the name “Sewanee” with the University. But what does – what did – “Sewanee” mean?

Now I suspect many of you have already had conversations along these lines. Where is that place again? How is it spelled? Didn’t Stephen Foster write a song about a river there? Do you get to watch the Falcons during pre-season training? Or most irritating of all, hearing some wise guy do a poor Al Jolson imitation and bellow out “Swanee!”

But what does the name actually mean? Some have speculated it is the name of an Indian tribe or perhaps a specific word in a Native American vocabulary. But it seems that, in the mid-1880s, hoping to solve the mystery once and for all, Vice-Chancellor Hodgson had several exchanges with the American Bureau of Ethnology. The final word came from an eminent anthropologist named Samuel Hinman, who wrote: “Reverend and dear Sir: I have now the further information that ‘Sewanee’ in the Shawnee tongue means ‘lost,’ ‘said of a person who starts for a given place and unexpectedly arrives at a different one.’”

Now I do not know to how many of you that explanation may apply in terms of your own college aspirations. But you are all here now and may perhaps be wondering how this story might apply to you. For surely this is the place you set out to find. And most surely you are here. And we are delighted this afternoon to welcome you, and to welcome you – here.

But – and this is the point of the story – “here” has many layers of meaning. To begin, most literally, “here” means All Saints’ Chapel, the center of campus, where we are reminded, as our founders put it, of the union – indeed the interdependence – of the intellectual and the spiritual. At the University of the South we do not recoil from or seek to deny or try to sever that union, which has been a fundamental part of this University’s existence from the day of its birth. To say this is to say that we have high expectations of each of you – expectations of academic accomplishment and also expectations of honorable behavior, both within and beyond the classroom.

This Chapel, this “here,” reminds us also of the simple truth that history did not begin on the day we were born or on the day we arrived – “here.” Take some time during these early weeks to look around this Chapel. Read the plaques on the walls, and understand that you are now joining, as our liturgy would have it, Sewanee’s own communion of saints, great and small, famous and those who have no memorial.

My favorite plaque of all is the one that appears along the north wall of the Chapel memorializing Mary Josephine Tidball. About her, it is simply recorded, “she hath done what she could.” Would that as much could, in the end, be said of all of us.

And so “here,” in this Chapel, you are made aware of history, reminded that this University knows from its own experience what it means to live in a fallen world, and thus made to acknowledge our own human imperfections.

We also welcome you “here,” to this campus (or, as we call it, the Domain), all 13,000 acres of it. By it we are reminded daily of the infinite variety of the natural order but also of distinctive species that flourish in particular here:

- For example, mosquitoes and ticks and snakes (reminders of our own human vulnerability and the unfathomable depths of Divine providence);
- And a profuse herd of garden-devouring deer (reminders even to those with the greenest of thumbs not to succumb to the sin of pride);
- And the ubiquitous Sewanee dogs.

But more, much more: the maples and ginkgoes that will soon turn majestic fall colors; the redbud and dogwood that will herald spring; and the tulip poplar, our state tree, which flowers each year around Commencement.

Or the cardinals and titmice, wrens and chickadees and nuthatches, bluebirds and towhees, woodpeckers of all sorts, jays, doves, and hawks, which fill our world here with color and song. Or the trails, the caves, the cliffs, the dazzling vistas from the Cross and Morgan’s Steep and Green’s View, reminders of our own human insignificance and also that indeed one can, from a mountaintop, glimpse ever more distant horizons.

All of which reminds us to be good stewards of this environment we have inherited and to leave for our successors, as the ancient Athenians also pledged, a place not less beautiful, but more beautiful, than it was when we received it.

So “here” also means this place we call Sewanee.

But “here” means still more. It means a Plateau peopled by all sorts and conditions: our local merchants and farmers (who will have supplied much of what we will soon be enjoying at our Chen Hall picnic – our menu is almost entirely local), young and old, rich and poor, hopeful and those who have abandoned hope, a Plateau where life is and often has been hard and unforgiving and yet where the lives of those who stay on, work hard, harbor no resentment, pray, and hope.

You will come to know these people, and they you, and this Plateau, with its rich history, its many traditions, its sometimes peculiar customs, and its immense possibilities. “Here” means a community that extends far beyond the University gates.

You begin, I hope, to grasp my point, which is simply this: place matters. Place shapes and directs. Place roots. Place makes us what we are. And only after we have discovered our own sense of place can we dare to presume to use that term “other,” which takes on real meaning only when we know what it is other than. “Here,” then is our place, and now it is also yours.

For all these reasons, then, you will soon learn that “here” has many meanings and merits the descriptive word “unique.” At its core is a firm and unyielding belief in the intrinsic worth of all persons and, in the words of our baptismal liturgy, a prayer that we may always “strive for justice among all peoples and respect the dignity of every human being.”

A word or two more on this subject – respect. In a diverse community, it can sometimes be a challenge to live more fully into a culture of respect – respect for self, respect for others, respect for property, respect for the community we inhabit. But we must, we simply must, rise to that challenge.

In joining this community, you are taking upon yourselves, each of you, an obligation to demonstrate that respect – again, respect for self, respect for others, respect for property, respect for community. At times this will require you to ask difficult questions of yourselves – and to understand that we expect you to accept personal responsibility for your actions. It will not do to blame someone else, or some other setting, or some other source for actions in hindsight

regretted. These are strong words, but they need to be said and understood, for a willingness to accept personal responsibility is one of the marks of a truly educated human being.

The great statesman, orator, and political philosopher, Edmund Burke, put it this way:

“Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. ... Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. ... Men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”

Or, put another way, Daniel Webster, the equally great American orator and statesman, declared, “Liberty cannot exist without wholesome restraint.”

Think about these words. You will encounter here a degree of freedom you have probably never before experienced. Without restraint, however, freedom risks becoming every bit as tyrannical as restraint, in the absence of freedom, can be.

Finally, I ask you to think from time to time about humility. I'll have more to say about this later in Orientation, but for now, let me simply quote a few wise words offered by a very wise commentator, David Brooks, almost exactly one year ago. Brooks prefers the term “modesty.” Whether we choose “modesty” or “humility,” we mean essentially the same thing. And what that is, as Brooks puts it, is “having the courage to understand that the world is too complicated to fit into one political belief system. It means understanding there are no easy answers or malevolent conspiracies that can explain the big ... questions. ... Progress is not made by crushing some swarm of malevolent foes; it's made by finding balance between competing truths. ... There is always going to be counter-evidence and mystery. There is no final arrangement that will end conflict, just endless searching and adjustment.”

Modesty, or humility, he continues, “means having the courage to rest in anxiety and not try to quickly escape it.” It “means being tough enough to endure the pain of uncertainty,” which “throws you off the smug island of certainty and forces you into the free waters of creativity and warning.”

The world today is buffeted by what Brooks calls “spiraling purity movements.” When you encounter these, or are tempted to join them, may humility, modesty, temper your eagerness and your certitude and make you skeptical of anyone who tells you that you are wrong – temper those things and also help you to learn self-discipline. The late Toni Morrison, one of this country’s greatest writers, was once asked about anger, an emotion she might reasonably have been expected to possess and display. Here is what she said in response: “Anger ... it's a paralyzing emotion ... you can't get anything done. People sort of think it's an interesting, passionate, and igniting feeling – I don't think it's any of that – it's helpless ... it's absence of control – and I need all of my skills, all of the control, all of my powers ... and anger doesn't provide any of that – I have no use for it whatsoever.”

My hope for you, then, as you begin your careers at this University, is simply this – that you will find that balance between liberty and restraint, that you will find it not by having it imposed from without or from above, but that you will find it, and nurture it, from within. And that humility will remind you that there is always more to learn and thus, in the words of Benjamin Franklin, that you, and we, might all of us doubt a little in our own infallibility. Then, and only then, can we be truly free. And years from now, as you discern in your own hearts what Abraham Lincoln once called “the better angels of our nature,” you will remember that you caught your first glimpses of those angels here.

Joan Didion has written, in *The White Album*, “A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.”

Of this place, this place that you will come to know and to love and to treasure, this place that you will claim, and remember obsessively, of this place the poet William A. Percy, Class of 1901, once wrote:

“I must go

Back where the breakers of deep sunlight roll

Across flat fields that love and touch the sky;

Back to the more of earth, the less of man,
Where there is still a plain simplicity,
And friendship, poor in everything but love,
And faith, unwise, unquestioned, but a star.

...

And when the marvelous wide evenings come
Across the molten river, one can see
The misty willow-green of Arcady.”

And so, welcome – welcome to the University of the South. Welcome to a very special place. Of the journey on which you are about to embark, the poet T.S. Eliot wrote, “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

Welcome to a place of which you are now, beginning at this very moment, becoming an integral part; a place that loves and touches the sky; a place of plain simplicity, and friendship, and faith. Welcome to the “misty willow-green of Arcady.” Welcome to Sewanee.