

“2020 VISION:” Remarks to the Class of 2020 at the Celebration of their Commencement

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Well, we made it! Took a little longer than we might have thought, back when we were last all together in this Chapel in August of 2016. And not everything turned out exactly as we might have planned. Your world, and that of this University, changed abruptly, forcefully, in March 2020. Those in the classes behind you certainly felt the pain and loss and uncertainty of the separation forced upon us by the scourge called COVID. But they knew they would be returning, one way or another, that they might have to adapt to the realities of a worldwide pandemic. But that adaptation would at least be here, and there was always the chance that something resembling the “old normal” would return.

But not for you. For you the door slammed shut. You headed off on Spring Break looking forward to the final weeks of your college careers, to Comps and party weekend, and Scholarship Sewanee, and a final round of plays and performances and lectures and athletic contests capped off by a memorable Senior Week. One of the saddest days of your life – and, you should know, also of mine – was delivering and receiving the news that we would not be holding Commencement on campus for the Class of 2020. I had hoped we might all go out together that May, my last as VC, and that we would always be bonded by that experience.

My colleagues John Gatta and Bran Potter and Chaplain Tom Macfie, all of whom were retiring that spring, also heard that door slam. No closure for them, for us, and none for you. We grieved.

The predictions were dire and the weapons for dealing with COVID few. We kept our social distance, wore our masks, avoided public places. Today, more than two years later, we pass flags flying at half staff in memory of those 1 million of our countrymen laid low in COVID’s unforgiving wake. For them, too, we grieve.

And yet the spirit of this University did not waver. Our work – the only reason we were founded and the only reason what we do here matters – our work of education, of broadening the limited reach of our own understanding, of preparing ourselves and you to meet not simply the difficulties of the present moment but the challenges that would not subside even after COVID was subdued – our work, and our souls, pressed with vigor on. We finished the semester. We quickly mastered new if imperfect ways to teach and to learn. And you, too, never wavered. You completed your studies and earned your degrees and set off to begin the next chapter of your lives, disappointed, perhaps even bitterly disappointed, but understanding, if only in part, that life can sometimes deal us a poor hand.

We made you a promise that spring – that sometime, somehow, we would bring you together again, together with the classmates whose friendship you treasure, together with faculty and staff who missed you terribly and longed to be with you again.

So yes, here we are: a remarkable number of the Class of 2020 returning, a Chapel full of those who love you, respect you, admire you and who will follow the progress of your lives and careers with deep and genuine and abiding interest.

Here we are indeed. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for your perseverance. And thank you, above all, for returning.

Thank you faculty and staff. You have every right to feel and to express exhaustion. But your love of this place and of this class is palpable. Take some time while you are here, graduates, to thank that professor, that coach, that dining hall worker, that groundskeeper, that librarian, that individual, whoever he or she may be, who, in mirroring your patience and your perseverance and, yes, your love for this precious place, tended it, nurtured it, sacrificed for it in anticipation of the day of your return. This day.

Particular thanks to those who have so caringly planned for the ceremonies yesterday and today: to David Shipp, Tim Garner, and our marshals; to Kate Reed and our magnificent Sewanee Angel Team; to Michael Ostrowski and his amazing ITS team; to Susan Askew for handling invitations and registrations and planning last night's wonderful party; and to those who quietly, simply serve, who are even now transforming the Quad into a setting where we will share a parting meal and absorb all that this day, and this weekend, mean.

And thanks finally to Chancellor Rob Skirving, Acting Vice-Chancellor Nancy Berner, and Chaplain Peter Gray for graciously and generously allowing us to take a step back in time and perform the ancient rituals of Baccalaureate and Commencement as though it were still 2020. I almost feel two years younger!

So ... what is there left to say? Well, it seems to me something more.

I spent some time this week looking back at my address to you that August day in 2016. I came across this passage:

“At Sewanee, you are, and always will be, the Class of 2020, and revel in that identity. 2020: defined as ‘visual acuity’ or ‘clarity of vision.’ 2020 – as the poet Matthew Arnold would put it, ‘seeing life steadily and seeing it whole.’”

So a worthy topic for our remaining few minutes this morning might be just that: vision. Just what does that term, vision, mean? Vision is what lies on the most distant horizons, sensed more often than actually seen, directing our movements, raising our sights beyond the toils and cares and grievances of the present moment, setting our course, urging us forward. Vision is the “kindly light” that leads amid encircling gloom. Vision is not preoccupied with a past that cannot be altered or erased. Vision can seldom be found in familiar, beaten grooves or in platitudinous sloganeering.

But vision also learns from the past. And among the things vision learns, and which in turn shapes it, is that we are all imperfect human beings. No exception. All of us flawed – dare I say it, all of us sinners – or why else ask in the Lord's Prayer to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We too may someday be judged on our own inability to see or to comprehend what our successors will say is, and ought always to have been, obvious. Vision must never become arrogance. Vision must necessarily be tempered with humility.

Vision cannot ignore facts, of course. But facts alone – or formulas, or projections, or models – are not vision. In 1903 the Superintendent of Streets in New York City, a practical man if ever there was one, advanced a fact-based, calamitous vision of the future as he discerned it. At present rates of growth, he warned, within ten years every street in the city of New York would be covered by three feet of horse manure. In that same year, Henry Ford created the Ford Motor Company. Ford envisioned a day in which affordable and durable transportation would be available to all Americans, who would have the freedom to move from place to place on a national system of roads, and who would be assured of having a job at a decent wage.

Now I suspect that in 1903 at least as many Americans would have found themselves persuaded by the forecast of an impending fecal blizzard as would have thought the vision of a horseless carriage the least bit plausible. But that's just it: a forecast is not a vision; predictions are not aspirational; extrapolation cannot transcend.

From the very first meeting of the Board of Trustees of the University of the South in 1857, our motto has been *Ecce Quam Bonum*, from Psalm 133. You know it well: "Behold how good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity." That motto is our vision. Have we from time to time stumbled in its pursuit? Of course; we are mere mortals. Has it seemed at times beyond our reach? Yes; what's a vision for? Do we nonetheless hold it up as worth striving for? We do; we have; we must. Finally, do we not only say it with our lips but believe it in our hearts and daily practice it in our lives? Can we include without excluding? Can we distinguish between diversity and sameness? Can we disagree civilly and respectfully? Can we live honorably, true and just in all our dealings?

If there is anywhere that the vision of *Ecce Quam Bonum* can be pursued, that these most fundamental questions of our time can be engaged, and in that engagement the vigorous pursuit of truth be exemplified, and that even when we stumble or err our hands remain quick to welcome and our arms to embrace, that place is here: a campus, on a mountain, where those fleeing an increasingly soulless world find a place that has not lost or compromised its own soul; a place shaped by the knowledge and experience, first-hand, of what it means to live in a fallen world; a place that reminds us that history did not begin on the day we were born or on the day we arrived; where as few utterances as possible being with "I" or end with "me;" a place where incompleteness becomes less incomplete, where the unmade becomes made; and a place from which young men and women set forth to live out a vision, marked forever as one of Sewanee's own.

The Class of 2020 will always have a special place in the hearts of all of us who know you, and each of you will for all time hold in your hearts a unique shared experience. You have made this community a better place and together we have discerned in our trials the better angels of our nature. I am proud and deeply honored to be leaving the stage with you.

Two years ago, I shared with you some "famous last words" taken from a great country song by Lee Ann Womack, with which I now close. . Perhaps you remember:

"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.”

Ecce Quam Bonum. Godspeed, Class of 2020.

And now, class members, please rise for the charge, after which I invite all to rise and join in singing the alma mater.