

## LAUNCHING THE NEW YEAR

All Saints' Chapel

August 27, 2019

John M. McCardell Jr.

We renew this afternoon in somewhat altered form an old Sewanee tradition. Though not strictly speaking an Opening Convocation, today's gathering of the community reminds us of the start of a new academic year and affords an opportunity to chart our course for the year ahead.

I begin with a simple word of welcome – to our new students, to our new faculty and staff colleagues, as well as to those returning students and faculty: welcome back, welcome home. I begin also with a simple, inadequate, word of thanks to our support staff. While many of us enjoyed a slower summer pace, our friends in facilities management, in ITS, in the library, in dining services, and in the many other offices that support our work toiled on. We return to a campus strengthened and made more beautiful by their work, energized by their commitment. Thank you, our staff, for all you do for our University.

Change of course is inevitable, and Sewanee is not, cannot be, an exception. In the midst of change, however, at a place like Sewanee we are also struck by certain continuities. That something involves, as I said to the Class of 2023 last Sunday afternoon, an awareness of history (look around you in this Chapel); a sensitivity to place (what a blessing to inhabit a 13,000-acre domain); a respect for the natural order; a commitment to honorable conduct in all that we do; and, not least, a love of the God who created all things. We acknowledge before that God, our help, our hope, our shelter, and our eternal home, we acknowledge our own human limitations and imperfections – this University surely knows what it means to inhabit a fallen world – about which a bit more in due course.

As you entered the Chapel this afternoon, you may have noticed in the Narthex a representative symbol of a project now under way. During Orientation, the incoming class participated in a series of EQB workshops, in which students adorned individual pieces of fabric with words and symbols to communicate their vision for the Sewanee community's future. The result will ultimately be a class quilt. The quilt project itself will unfold for the remainder of the academic term in conjunction with Prof. Jessica Wohl's research activity -- community members will have the opportunity to participate in the embroidery of the words/symbols that students created and the assembly of the class quilt itself.

There are abundant reasons for us to be confident about the year, and years, ahead. Our budget for the current year will be balanced. At this time last year, I reported \$232 million in advance commitments to the *Stronger. Truer. Sewanee* Campaign. We met our \$250 million goal last March. Though the Campaign was an unqualified success, the Board of Regents agreed to extend it for one additional year so as to enable us to secure longer term commitments through 2022 and also to help us meet several important yet still unmet goals. I'll say more about this later, but I will note that, as of this moment, the number has risen to over \$263 million, gifts made by more than 19,000 donors. Of particular note is the extraordinary success of Tiger Tuesday and the generous, targeted gifts to the rebranded Sewanee Fund to support scholarships and internships. The Sewanee Pledge – graduation in four years, a paid internship or research opportunity, and portable financial aid for study abroad – has also been an effective instrument in recruiting new students. Every commitment made between now and next June 30 and payable by June 30, 2022, will be counted toward the Campaign.

These things tell us much that is good and encouraging. But even more important, it seems to me, is our ability, as an institution, to identify, then embrace, then pursue goals that, when achieved, speak to clarity of mission, unity of purpose, and a common commitment to improve our corporate life. We are guided still by our Strategic Plan, developed seven years ago in a process of broad consultation, discussion, and debate. That Plan is not gathering dust on a shelf. It contains four broad themes:

1. Creating an exemplary learning environment.
2. Realizing the potential of the Domain.
3. Extending the reach of the University globally and locally.
4. Fostering a diverse, cohesive, and inclusive community.

Those goals have never tidily fit into the cycle of a single academic year. Pursuing them is and has been necessarily the work of many years, marked by clearly identifiable tactical mileposts along the way. And so, today I reaffirm these four broad strategic themes and then, in the time remaining, articulate what I see as at least some of the ways, in the coming year, we can make progress toward them.

Of all of these, arguably the most critical is, appropriately, the first: creating an exemplary learning environment. Indeed, one might argue that the three other themes are essentially subsets of the first: the Domain, the broadened reach, a diverse community are all components of an exemplary learning environment.

And so what ought we to be doing? Our Admission Office, which has its finger closer than any of the rest of us to the pulse of what high school students and their families are seeking, is pretty clear about what in a 21st-century learning environment is most attractive to prospective students. This means acknowledging the ways in which disciplinary study is evolving and the rapidity with which the walls separating disciplines are realigning. Our college faculty recognized this two years ago in approving a new major in Neuroscience and last year adding a major in Finance. We have received a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to support our distinguished Finding Your Place program. And this year the college faculty will determine whether it is time – I believe it is – to go from a Business minor to a Business major, and a major that reflects the particular strengths of our University, beginning, I would argue, with making that degree a B.A. and not, as it is at most other institutions, a B.S. degree.

The college faculty has embraced holistic system of advising, which provides a pathway to help students navigate their college experience and goes beyond the merely transactional expectation of monitoring progress toward a major.

The Regents understand the importance of space to enhance a learning environment. We will, at the start of Easter term, open the Health and Wellness Commons and the new bookstore in downtown Sewanee. You may recall that our approach to the need, first expressed in the Strategic Plan, to re-energize the Quad and to provide better student social and recreational space, led first to a design for a single structure at Thompson Union. The building required to accommodate the entire program turned out to be so large for the site and so expensive that we reconsidered and moved toward the idea of a “distributed” Commons, incorporating various elements of the program in different but mostly proximate spaces – the Learning Commons, in duPont Library, the Health and Wellness Commons, and, on the site of Thompson Union, a social Commons that will enhance and diversify the types of social interaction all members of the community might have. The Board of Regents authorized us to move forward with planning for that space.

Planning is also well along not only for Thompson Union but also for the renovation of Carnegie to accommodate our business program, the Babson Center, and the Sewanee Career Center.

These projects will further help create an enhanced learning environment while speaking to the needs of both current and future students. They will, we hope, be completed within the next two to three years. For this reason, the University has issued \$26 million in bonds to finance

these projects. The debt will be funded by gifts already received and by planned gifts made to the Campaign – not bequests, but gifts that will arrive at a specified time and designated for this particular purpose. Capital Campaigns are as much about the future as they are about the present. These planned gifts, and their deployment, will help us secure the University's future. And part of the reason for extending the campaign is to secure additional new gifts for these capital projects.

Gifts to the School of Theology have also been extraordinarily generous. We exceeded the \$25 million goal set for the school. Many of these gifts support teaching and research and, especially, financial aid for seminarians. Almost half have been designated for the new School of Theology building. But tax-exempt bonds may not be used for religious purposes. So all the money for the building must be raised, and there is still work to be done. We will proceed vigorously on that front in the year ahead, having settled for good, by this October, the site for the School of Theology.

Of the many other initiatives, either planned or under way, several deserve brief mention here:

Given the success of the Capital Campaign, we will undertake a financial analysis of what it would take (which means how many dollars are still needed) to meet that elusive but oh-so-important goal of meeting the full, demonstrated need of all admitted students. I believe that this is the single most important unmet goal that we have. If and when we are able to achieve it, I believe that what follows will be transformative: more inquiries, more visits, more applications, greater selectivity, a stronger academic profile, improved retention and graduation rates, a movement up the national rankings, and a lengthening of the line of families who recognize the value of the Sewanee experience. But it all begins with a decision to meet full need and to award aid first to those excellent students who need it. My colleagues and I are working with the Board of Regents to put in place a plan to achieve this goal sooner rather than later. I promise more on this as the year unfolds.

Hand in hand with pursuit of this goal will be the work of a Strategic Enrollment Planning Committee, which will be co-chaired by Provost Nancy Berner and Vice President for Risk Management and Institutional Effectiveness Eric Hartman. I will state the obvious: the world is changing and we need to continue to position ourselves to be an economic asset in our region, an intellectual resource for our communities and students, and a hospitable place which

invites students, alumni, and our employees to help us transform ourselves and the world around us, leaving communities both successful and satisfied.

The Strategic Enrollment Planning Committee will operate on three key realities:

- Sewanee resides in an incredibly complex and challenging enrollment environment unlike anything we have experienced historically.
- The nationwide decline of students seeking a four-year degree translates into an acute and material financial impact on all colleges, including Sewanee.
- To thrive, Sewanee must create incremental prospective demand and significantly improve retention by swiftly installing curricular and non-curricular changes that ensure near- and long-term financial viability.

This process is a natural extension of the Working Groups on Integrated Advising, Student Retention, Enrollment Planning and many others during the last academic year. Like those, the SEP will continue to engage faculty and staff across campus as it does its work. You will hear more from the Council in the coming weeks and throughout the year.

One of our great achievements of the last decade has been to better understand Sewanee's role in our communities, both local on the Mountain, the region around us, and in any location where our community members find themselves. We have received national recognition for our work in civic engagement and it's due to the good work of folks in that office and their colleagues and community partners. We have strengthened our relationships with our community. While it's easy to say "let's just keep doing this is good work," and that is important, this is not their mindset. Their mindset is to get clear about their values, their mission, and their desired impact. Our Office of Civic Engagement, under the leadership of Jim Peterman and Nicky Hamilton, is not just creating meaningful opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to work. They have wrestled with the need to set priorities, identifying what is our greatest opportunity to have a lasting impact. In doing so, they have clarified their mission. They are now driving their work specifically to advance economic, social, and environmental well-being. Their deep reflection on their work and research on what's working and what's needed is now an inclusive, iterative, and integrated process. Their direction is clear, as is their vision and values and their sense of belonging to this place and their work. They are a model for all of us to follow.

This fall the Center for Leadership will begin its second leadership lab cohort, which allows employees from all divisions and at all levels to participate in experience focused on

social change. The Center's definition of leadership is "leadership as a process"— a process which can be taught and learned. We know change is difficult and it's not just the responsibility of senior leaders to deliver change. We need everyone to get better at change, and the Center for Leadership aims to be part of the solution, providing experiences that can empower any of us to improve both our own capacity and that of those around us to lead effectively.

Under the leadership of Professor Woody Register, the University Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation continues its good work this year. But it now has a new, and much more fitting, name. Many of us fondly remember Dr. Houston Roberson, a colleague in the History Department, whose untimely passing we all still mourn. It seems utterly fitting to memorialize Houston and his legacy by attaching his name to this initiative, which henceforth will be called the Roberson Project, giving this important work a powerful symbol of Sewanee's commitment to understanding our past while enriching our present and shaping our future.

This fall marks the 50th anniversary of the admission of women to the College, and we are planning a number of special commemorative events. A highlight will take place over Homecoming, November 1 and 2. We expect hundreds of women graduates from the classes of 1973 through 2019 to join us in a series of panel discussions, lectures, concerts, and opportunities to reconnect with one another and share their experiences with current students. Please keep an eye out for further details.

Finally, and not incidentally, a search is now under way to call a new chaplain to the University. A committee co-chaired by Professor Bran Potter and Regent the Rev. Patty Willett has begun its work, expects to begin reviewing candidacies in early October, and hopes to recommend a candidate to me, for election by the Board of Trustees, sometime early in the Easter semester. We will have ample opportunity to welcome a new chaplain while also thanking Tom Macfie for his good work in that role over the past 14 years.

There is so much more I might mention, but I hope this abbreviated list offers at least an indication of what lies ahead and perhaps above all of our commitment to continue to enhance our learning environment.

All these things you might properly expect of the University. What might the University reasonably expect of you – indeed of all of us, as members, and representatives, of this community?

Last year I spoke of two qualities that might best distinguish the special community to which we belong. Those qualities are no less important, and their possession no less urgent, today. I speak here of, first, integrity and, second, humility.

This morning the Class of 2023 signed the Honor Code, thus binding themselves to the practice of honorable behavior under a clear set of expectations. That is the beginning of integrity for the newest members of our community. What about the rest of us? I offer no prescription, but I do presume to suggest that any reasonable understanding of integrity would include honesty and straightforwardness in all our interactions and a sincere attempt to live the same way, according to the same behavioral expectations, in every venue we inhabit. The dormitory, the classroom, the dining hall, the playing field, the Greek house, Facebook and other social media are not separate places, where different expectations exist and bad citizenship is permitted. Think of these as Venn diagrams, having frequent and multiple points of intersection. Before you post on Facebook, before you consume that next beverage, before you put your life or that of another at risk, before you pass on malicious gossip or advise a student or a friend to avoid a person or a class or a place, think about saying or doing those same things in full public view. Accountability informs integrity. Anonymity erodes it.

Integrity, then, and also humility. “Humility reminds us,” writes Maya Angelou, “that there are people before me. I have already been paid for. And what I need to do is prepare myself so that I can pay for someone else who has yet to come but who may be here and needs me.” Humility insists upon both gratitude and paying it forward.

Integrity – and humility. The columnist David Brooks wrote recently, “throughout history the wiser minds have understood that anger and moral posturing are not a good antidote to rage and fanaticism. Competing vitriols only build on each other.” So too for competing claims to moral superiority.

These words will not please the zealous or the infallible. They will frustrate anyone seeking to conform the world to a single, perfect system. They will confound those believing, and asserting, easy answers to questions that have vexed humanity for generations.

But that is exactly why we need, desperately need, humility, an acknowledgment of our own fallible human condition and, as Brooks writes, “the courage – the courage – to rest in anxiety and not try to quickly escape it...” As Clark Kerr, former chancellor of the University of California once put it: “The University is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.”

And there, in that very place of anxiety and uncertainty, of integrity and humility, we may finally recognize that elusive yet sought-after thing we call diversity, and a diversity that acknowledges and respects genuine, not superficial, difference, and in that acknowledgment and respect, creates a genuine, not an illusory, community.

Or as our own EQB Guide puts it:

Live with personal integrity.

Respect the dignity of all.

Value freedom of thinking and expression.

Demonstrate self-control.

Develop trusting relationships.

Let us start with these five commitments and pledge to ourselves and one another to live by them. Then may we live into the words of what has been this University's model for the past 160 years: *Ecce Quam Bonum*.

Finally, and briefly --

... an announcement that I have known I would some day need to make, and that time has now come. I am beginning my 10th year as vice-chancellor. It hardly seems possible. The gift, the blessing, the call to lead this special place has been more than Bonnie had I had ever hoped for or ever dreamed. To have been entrusted with the leadership of the University of the South is a responsibility and an honor for which we will be forever grateful. I turned 70 this summer. And over the summer the words of Second Timothy have resonated with increased clarity: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." And so the time has come for me to announce that this will be my last year as vice-chancellor. I communicated this intention to Chancellor Rob Skirving a short time ago, and he has most graciously consented. And so, on or about next July 31, 2020, I will be stepping down. But this is not retirement; my plan is to return, after a period of refreshment and recharging, to part-time teaching in the History Department. I very much look forward to that. Some work of noble note, as the poet has written, may yet be done, this year and in the years that follow.

There will be time in the year ahead to celebrate what has been accomplished but, even more, to thank all of you for your support and your friendship: to our governing Boards for your steadfast support; to my faculty colleagues for your dedication to the life of the mind; to my staff friends and fellow educators, for your devoted work; and to students, for keeping us young and making us always mindful of the future – I will look forward to having some of you in class. And



most of all to Bonnie, who has been my partner for 42 years, all of them as my first lady, and more than half of them as first lady of two very special institutions. There is also, as these remarks I hope clearly indicate, much work to be done in the year ahead. I commit myself to that work with energy and enthusiasm. And, to be clear, as I wrote to the Regents and Trustees, this old duck plans to continue to paddle vigorously, quack loudly, use both wings when necessary, and walk on two feet without a limp until the last day.

I am truly honored that our Chancellor Bishop Rob Skirving, and our Chair and Secretary of the Board of Regents Joe DeLozier and Margaret McLarty, are present here this afternoon. It has been a joy to work with them. And I now invite Bishop Skirving to come forward to speak a bit about next steps as the search process for new leadership begins.

(SKIRVING SPEAKS)

(DELOZIER SPEAKS)

(McCARDSELL RETURNS FOR CLOSING COMMENTS)

I hope you share my excitement about the year ahead. I close with a story, and one that many of you know. Willie Six is a Sewanee legend. For 40 years he served as an athletic trainer. According to the University history, “he worked tirelessly to keep Sewanee men on the field, whether as stars or as scrubs.” Upon his retirement in 1947 this beloved figure was made an honorary member of the “S” society and received a varsity athletic letter. Willie Six Road memorializes his service to the University.

A reporter asked Willie, at the time of his retirement, what was the best year in Sewanee athletic history. This man, who had seen many great teams and many great moments answered without hesitation: “The best year? The best year is the one comin’ up.”

I like that a lot. Willie Six refused to look back, refused to live in the past. His comment neither denied nor demeaned that past. But that was the past. The best was yet to come. Willie Six, even in retirement, looked forward to the year “comin’ up.”

And so we begin our work in this new academic year, hoping in the end to be found faithful servants, striving to build a place where the worth and dignity of every human being are respected, where freedom does exist in proportion to wholesome restraint, where education does take place around the clock, in all venues, and where, even when the fog closes in, a kindly light still leads us on.

So let us take up our tasks for the year, as our liturgy puts it, “with gladness and singleness of heart.”

The best year is “the one comin’ up.”