

Baccalaureate Address
The University of the South
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My best wishes and congratulations to the graduating class of 2020. My name is Linda Mayes. I am a graduate of Sewanee from the first class of women and honored to be a visiting faculty member in the Department of Psychology. As some of you have heard me say, Sewanee is my spiritual tap root and it is so meaningful to join you anytime and especially today. I am very grateful to Vice-Chancellor McCardell for inviting me to be with him and all of you on this day—and indebted to him, as we all are, for his caring, generative leadership over the last decade and more than ever, in these last challenging months.

As is true for so many of us these days, I come to you virtually from a distant place not on the Mountain. But Sewanee and all of you are ever present in my daily thoughts and dreams. Indeed, I suspect many of you have found the Mountain coming regularly into your nightly dreams, and perhaps too your day dreams, for our stories tell us this is the place angels protect and keep safe. Especially in these days, we want the Mountain to be our sanctuary, ready to welcome us home and protect us from this unseen virus upending our world. But these are unprecedented times and the pandemic touches even this place.

So for the first time in our history, we cannot gather today in the comforting security of the Mountain to mark your graduation. We always expect that the beauty of spring across this mountain will bring us together in a spirit of renewal. Yet you have not been here to take comfort in the constancy of the seasons and nature's ability to leaven both the passage of time and our world's upheavals. Without you here, even spring, especially as it harkens newness, youth, and graduations, has seemed more subdued. Like many other places, Sewanee is quiet, and we miss you even as we connect with you virtually. We also deeply hope that your Sewanee angels have traveled by your side to keep each of you safe off the Domain.

So to all of you in the senior class, this virtual graduation is surely very different from what you imagined. This day is distinct for reasons far different from any you could have possibly anticipated at the beginning of this year, when a pandemic was far from our thoughts.

To be sure, rarely has a graduation moment had such mixed emotions among all of those involved. A day intended for celebration is tinged now by the sadness not just of saying goodbye to friends but a far more sobering sadness deepened by grief—of not being together in joyous communion, by the tragedy of illness and loss touching nearly all our communities and many of our families, by the economic burden weighing down so many across the country, and by the uncertainty of our future days.

Graduations are intended to celebrate a confident future opening up for all of you. Yet today, we are united by our shared experience that our world has changed even on this mountain. We cannot know for certain what lies ahead for the health and well-being of our communities and our country and for many of you, what the next phase of your personal journey will be.

What we do know, though, is the future ahead will need all of us to come together with courage and caring to remake our world into the better place we, and most importantly you, imagine it can be. As we have sheltered in place, often apart from close family and friends, we have been witness to so much good and creativity amidst so much loneliness, sorrow, loss, and grief. Much of that good is coming already from your generation. We have seen communities isolated still come together for serenades on balconies or synchronized zoom videos; drive-by celebrations for birthdays and anniversaries or fellowship around loss; teachers taking the time to visit each student in their class outside their homes at a safe social distance; families struggling themselves who still bring food to their neighbors; small business owners fearing for their future and nonetheless opening their pantries and stockrooms for others; churches reaching their congregations across the digital space; bus drivers, delivery workers, cleaning crews, first responders, doctors and nurses putting themselves in harm's way to serve and care for others. In the middle of suffering, we have seen our collective hearts heavy with sorrow and grief still swell with kindness and a common humanity. Despite the uncertainties ahead, we can be certain that each of us, and especially you, have within us the ability and imagination to bring creative invention out of uncertainty. As Wendell Berry (1983; "Our Real Work" from *Standing by Words*) reminds us,

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go

we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

So here is my question for each of you in these uncertain times and even before. What will be your song and how will you touch your world? Please notice the particulars of the question. It is not what will you “do” but rather what will be your “song,” not how you will “change” your world but rather “touch” your world, and it is not “the world” but rather “your world.” These are not casual word choices. They are intended to capture aspects of the Sewanee experience. Though you have not been here in these last capstone months of your senior year, in your many other months during these four years on the Mountain, I hope these experiences have seeped into and always remain a part of your being.

First, to your song and to singing. You have been in a place defined by a nearly infinite number of contrasts. Sewanee, this mountain, is a place of breathtaking beauty yet surrounded by the poverty of isolation, privilege up against lack, the sacred and the secular, knowledge from a scholarly canon and knowledge from local lives sometimes hard-lived, the physical classroom and the natural one, part of the greater world and yet set apart behind its gates and its mountainous terrain. In your experiences here, you have not just mastered a body of knowledge. Instead, you have been immersed in these contrasts that, if you embraced them, are bountiful ground for wonderment and a liberating education. And in that liberating education, you have learned not just to recite but to sing. After all, liberation breeds song. I hope you have found new harmonies, new ways of seeing the world, new ways of understanding and listening to your fellow travelers in this world wherever they are from.

May you have found here what Allen Tate called “knowledge carried to the heart.”¹ May you always use that knowledge to connect to others at the deepest levels of the human experience. I hope that in finding your song—and may it not be just one song and may you have a lifetime of new harmonies—you will find joy in the particulars and small moments of life with others. I hope that as your life becomes fuller and faster, you will still hear and sing your songs that you have started to write on this mountain. Certainly in our current and our post-COVID

¹ Allen Tate “Ode to the Confederate Dead” in *Poems*, p.23, Scribners, 1960.

world, there will be a great need for anyone who can bring knowledge, curiosity, and caring together into a unifying song for our society.

And now to how you will touch your world. To “touch” a place is not just to leave your mark, but more gently, to care for it, to understand your place in it, to be aware of those who share the place with you, and to imagine the place for those who will come after you. To touch your world is to live a discerning life, always reflecting, curious and understanding that you have much to learn from everyone you meet. In your touch, you may be notable leaders, you may be agents of change, you may alter the landscape. But you also acknowledge that you are but one in your place. Your touch is a contribution among many, an offering of your talents and your caring to a greater whole, and a recognition that you never know when your presence, your caring will make a difference for someone else.

In these four years, you have been with so many who have touched your lives. Your faculty who have cared for not just what you learned in the classroom (or through their recent virtual connections) but also for you as a person. Those serving you at McClurg, those you met in the community who introduced you to the mountain beyond the gates, those who looked after you when you were sick, those who checked in to be sure you were safe, those who made sure you had rich summer experiences, thought about you over the holiday breaks, and were happy to see you return. Each of these persons took the time to know you as an individual and gave you a gift that you now have the responsibility to pay forward, to give back. Especially in these times, we have seen the better angels of so many natures come forward. Touched as you have been by this place and its people, you have a special charge to bear witness to the generous possibilities we have all seen in these recent months.

Now, what about “your world”? Surely graduations are about sending you out into the world beyond these gates. Go forth, be bold, make a difference are the most common wishes for new graduates. But the message I hope you carry from your experience here is that you are a citizen of your particular place, embedded in relationships, always seeking the ways to leave your place better than when you entered it.

Even though we cannot gather together in this special place today, we are still united as a community by the meaning we give to this place. We hope you will always feel the pull to come back from time to time to touch this place and be among all who care for it. Still, we are sending

you out today into a world that often has a placeless way of knowing and relating, a world that can be linked virtually without ever touching any particular ground or any deeply held relationship. As you leave, may you remember that to ground yourself in a particular place, in your place and all the people in it, gives you the freedom to go forth, touch the world, and always have somewhere and someone in your world to come back to. Now more than ever as our world is upended, we find ourselves redefining our limits, rediscovering our homes, our backyards, reconnecting to our communities. We will need individuals who carry their places in both their hearts and minds to remind us of the world we can reimagine and remake together. Your world awaits your touch and your song, and may you always carry a bit of the Mountain and your guardian angel with you to your places, wherever they are.

Congratulations and Godspeed—and come back often in your heart to this place—your place.