**50th Sewanee Alumni Reunion, November 3, 2023**

I am very grateful for this award and for the opportunity to be with so many friends brought together by this place that we all care about—and to share this moment with my Sewanee friends. What an abundant fifty years it has been—though I’m convinced that someone is playing tricks with the calendar or has counted wrong. It just can’t be two score and ten years since we left this place to find what we had to offer the world and it to us. Still across these fifty years, I have so much to be grateful for especially in my time at Sewanee. Growing up in Winchester, Sewanee was never far away geographically. But it was worlds away academically. Coming here more than fifty years ago for music and then for college was life bending. My gratitude for all this place with its people has given me is deep and sustaining. I will be giving back forever more.

Yet, why is it that so many of us have come back for this fiftieth reunion, indeed so many coming back across their class years? Why is it that Sewanee has such loyal alumni, giving back so regularly and generously with their time, their money, their connections, their ideas? To be sure, the generosity of Sewanee’s alumni reflects remarkable altruism maybe coming from the same depth of gratitude I feel, and perhaps also impelled by a touch of nostalgia for the place and memories of those halcyon younger days of seemingly endless possibility. We give back to be sure this beloved community endures—and that it also continues to nurture us –and our children--whenever we return. After all, the original meaning of nostalgia is a disquieting, ever-present yearning to return to and hold onto a past time and cherished place. Practically, at the same time, each of us also gives back to be sure faculty and students have the resources and opportunities not only that we had but even more importantly, that we didn’t have and that students urgently need in this fast-changing world.

Of course, these are all good and galvanizing reasons to give back—and may our alumni forever continue to be so generously motivated. But, for me, there is a deeper reason I give back that has become clearer since reflecting on this reunion. Perhaps many of you will share this reason. I give back to ensure this university community continues to be one of ferment, questioning, and serious self-reflection, that we send our students out into the world as much unsettled as settled, to be engaged, critically thinking citizens asking questions others cannot or will not, capable of and willing to have civil discourse despite our fragmenting social world, challenging social and cultural norms, speaking up for the social good, feeling responsible for leaving a better world for those who will come after.

I give back to ensure that as much as we are a university of the south, we hope our students will critically consider what being a part of this region means. What are the burdens of our regional and local history of racial violence and discrimination of all kinds that we must acknowledge and reckon with? May our students seriously consider how we accept open, honest critique demanding bold change to coexist with our devotion to this place.

I give back to make sure that we all continue to experience those moments of our students’ discomfited discoveries such as when our summer interns who come to Yale for eight weeks gradually, or sometimes suddenly, understand the hidden inequities built into our healthcare systems, when they proudly realize that they already stand out for the questioning, analytic skills they are learning here, when they bravely take the leap to work on a project they didn’t think they could do.

I give back for the moments such as in a class on rural Appalachia that I have co-taught with my friend and colleague Karen Yu in Psychology and with my teacher, now colleague, Jerry Smith, when our students come to appreciate the complexity of these mountain cultures and of how much they can learn from their neighbors working at the dining hall, the university grounds, or in the surrounding communities. I give back for the opportunity to see a student take on an issue they have recognized in a senior seminar and against all received, conventional wisdom, develop an impactful and new way to address that need that they put into action and make work.

This semester, with another Sewanee friend and colleague, Pradip Malde, we are teaching a course on understanding, respecting, and listening for life’s journeys—our own and others—and learning to live with uncertainty, ambiguity, and especially surprise. Lifelong lessons to be sure—and ones I certainly wish, perhaps all of us wish we had understood more deeply a few decades ago. Twenty students across each of the class years have joined Pradip and me on this course journey. We learn about different life journeys from both guests and written accounts. Together we play with the many ways to recount those stories that go well beyond words. We ask our students to stretch their imaginations, go beyond where they are comfortable, try new ideas, listen deeply, dive into what they don’t know and are perhaps afraid to try. And they do. They take us with them to places we are surprised, dazzled, and even unsettled by. They share their uncertainties, their doubts, and then have the experience of realizing they can go further and deeper than they thought. What we are experiencing with our students is the core of what a liberating education should be and what Sewanee has had the vision, the ability, and the faculty commitment to do. This liberating education is what each of us benefitted from whether we knew it at the time or not, and what we, as alumni, must be committed to nurture, for it is severely threatened in these perilous times.

In the beginning of Look Homeward Angel, Thomas Wolfe wrote that Eugene Gant’s journey from Pennsylvania into the hills around Altamont was “touched by that dark miracle of chance which makes new magic in a dusty world”. Every year, each student brings that dark miracle of chance that can make our mountain community a little less dusty, even magically renewed. I don’t take it for granted that this will always happen. It really isn’t magic. It’s hard, challenging work. We always need to encourage our students to help us see and sweep the blinding dust away, to push us to be more clear-headed, openly confront our hard truths, and become better versions of ourselves. Much as it is a statement of devotion to this university when our students and each of us says “Yea, Sewanee’s right” or nod in agreement about EQB and brethren living in unity, I give back with the hope that when our students leave this place, they will ask are we always “right” and “right” for whom at the same time they enthusiastically say “YSR”. I hope our students will both celebrate the gift of this special community while also persistently asking are we making room for everyone and being open to the richer harmonies—and often much needed disharmonies—of a diverse community.

These are the reasons I give back and will as long as I can, why I am so grateful to have been a student here these fifty or so years ago, and why I am indebted to remain connected to this community. This is also why I now dedicate this award and honor to all the students who have and will allow me to walk alongside a part of their journey to, from, and sometimes back to this place. No doubt, I am, indeed all of us are, better for their trust and courage.

Thank you.

Linda C. Mayes, MD