

Vice-Chancellor's Welcome to New Students and Families

The University of the South

Sunday, August 25, 2019

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It is a great pleasure to welcome all of you here today.

As a parent of two now-graduated college students myself, I know something about the strange combination of feelings you parents are now experiencing, especially if this is the first child you have taken off to college. And, as a past and current college president, with 40 years spent in academia, I also know something about the exciting, challenging, fulfilling experience that awaits the Class of 2023.

An angel – a Sewanee angel, no doubt – has brought you to this place that has been prepared for you.

Today, in this simple ceremony, in this beloved Chapel, we welcome you to the extended family of the University of the South. You will soon discover that, like most large families, ours can be rambunctious, sometimes quarrelsome, never without opinions. We have our cranky uncles and odd cousins. Yet when we get together, especially in large numbers, we have a pretty good time and enjoy one another's company. And above all we are fierce in our devotion to, and committed in our love for, this place.

We know we share something that is special, even unique. That something involves an awareness of history, a sensitivity to place, a respect for the natural order, an acknowledgment of our own human limitations, and a commitment to honorable conduct. From these distinguishing characteristics, and perhaps especially from our Episcopal heritage, which we take very seriously, emerge our insistence upon principles that lie at our very core: the worth of all persons and also our equality, all of us, as sinners in a fallen world, yet, withal, in the words of our liturgy, a prayer that we may always “strive for justice among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.”

And so, we welcome you to this special place and to the beginning of Orientation, during which these ligaments of community will begin to take shape and to strengthen and to bind. My colleagues – administration, staff, faculty – and I, hope, and expect, to get to know you well over the next four years. All of us are here to help you succeed. And, like you, we can't wait to get started.

We already know a great deal about the Class of 2023 individually, and you appear to be a pretty sharp bunch. But as we prepare to get to know you as a class, we require a brief ... well, orientation.

Let's pause for a moment on how, for the rest of your lives, you will be identified. Oh sure, you'll be called many things – Gen Z, for example (you are already being herded into a seemingly not-very-diverse cohort). Some of the designations are even less polite, but they turn up when you are Googled: entitled, narcissistic, for instance (more diversity there!). In Japan you are called the “Neo-Digital Natives,” whatever that means. MTV calls you “The Founders,” of what it is not clear. You have been described as “risk averse” and also “entrepreneurial,” as preferring to work independently rather than in groups, yet also as eager to be involved in your community. Yep – that's you, easily and consistently labeled, compartmentalized, and explained. Some diversity!

Don't fall for it! At Sewanee, you are, and always will be, the Class of 2023, and revel in that identity. And, I might add, resisting, in the name of diversity, generational stereotyping. Because the opposite of diversity and inclusion is sameness and exclusion. Be careful, lest in the name of one, you succumb to the other.

But we know a lot more about you. For example, most of you were born in 2001. If your name is (please raise your hand) Emily, Hannah, Madison, Ashley, Sarah, Jacob, Michael, Matthew, Joshua, or Christopher, please keep your hands up – yours were the five most popular names for boys and girls born in 2001. Your parents may have told you about that distant past. A postage stamp – yes, we mailed letters back then – cost 34 cents. The cost of a gallon of gas averaged \$1.46. Top song in the year 2001 was “Hanging by A Moment” by Lifehouse. *Gladiator* won the Oscar for Best Picture while the top-grossing films at the box office included *Harry Potter and*

the Sorcerer's Stone, Monsters Inc., and Shrek. The Baltimore Ravens defeated the New York Giants in Super Bowl XXXV. In other sports, the Arizona Diamondbacks won the World Series, the Lakers the NBA championship, the University of Miami the national championship in college football and Duke in college basketball.

In 2001 Enron's accounting scandal cost investors something close to \$60 billion, and their accounting firm, Arthur Anderson, went out of business. Apple released iPod, and Microsoft released Xbox. Wikipedia went online. The human genome sequence was revealed. George W. Bush was inaugurated president. Tina Wesson, a 40-year-old nurse from Tennessee, became the second *Survivor* to win the grand prize of \$1 million. Obituaries included the names of George Harrison, Carroll O'Connor, Dale Earnhardt, Eudora Welty, and Isaac Stern.

Thousands more died on September 11 in a series of terrorist attacks against the United States by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda. The attacks killed 2,996 people, injured more than 6,000 others, and caused at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage. Americans have never again felt as secure. "Nine-one-one" took on new meaning in our vocabulary.

Moreover, as a parent of a recent graduate noted in a message he sent me not long ago, so far as the Class of 2023 knows from its own experience, there has always been a hole in the ozone layer. A bottle of Tylenol has always been impossible to open, and you don't know why. Airline tickets have always been purchased on the internet. There has always been a woman on the Supreme Court. The drinking age has always been 21.

You have never lost anything in shag carpet, never heard the phone "ring" (or "dialed" a number), never used carbon paper or whiteout (or a typewriter). Spam and cookies are not necessarily foods. And a thong is not something that comes in pairs and slides between the toes. Now the fact that vacant expressions from the entering class have greeted most of these facts, and that most of the knowing laughter has emanated from the parent generation, is telling. It reminds us that, like us, you are the products of a particular time and place and a particular context of cultural references that are different from those of your parents. And while this may not be the first definition to leap to mind when we hear the word "diversity," it does remind those of us who once felt smugly superior on the near side of the so-called "generation gap" that

we now need to look back, across a different divide, and understand, from the far side and as best we can, what has shaped, what has motivated, and what now concerns – you.

But first, a word or two to parents. For parents, who have learned many of life’s hard lessons and who lovingly, caringly, earnestly hope that you, their children, might be spared them, letting go can be difficult. And at no moment is that more challenging than right now.

Each year, as I prepare these remarks, I look for some particular insight to share or some fresh reading to explore. This year I cannot promise either an especially new insight or a very fresh book. But as I conducted my search over the summer, I came across a book published several years ago by Jessica Lahey entitled *The Gift of Failure* and subtitled “How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed.” So yes, letting go can be hard – for both parent and child – and within the next hour you will have that experience. Whether you have done it before or not, it will be a memorable and quite likely emotional moment.

But, to return to the book’s title, how can failure possibly be seen as a gift? Here is how the author begins: “We have taught our kids to fear failure, and in doing so, we have blocked the surest and clearest path to their success. That’s certainly not what we meant to do, and we did it for all the best and well-intentioned reasons, but it’s what we have wrought nevertheless. Out of love and desire to protect our children’s self-esteem, we have bulldozed every uncomfortable bump and obstacle out of their way, clearing the manicured path we hoped would lead to success and happiness.”

“Unfortunately,” she continues, “we have deprived our children of the most important lessons of childhood. The setbacks, mistakes, miscalculations, and failures we have shoved out of our children’s way are the very experiences that teach them how to be resourceful, persistent, innovative, and resilient...”

Psychiatrists have a term for this, I discovered. It is called “enmeshment.” Lahey defines it as “a maladaptive state of symbiosis that makes for unhappy, resentful parents and ‘failure to launch’ children who move back into their bedrooms after college graduation.”

Several years ago, I came across a remarkably insightful essay in the Sunday *New York Times*, by Madeline Levine. She speaks to what is one of parenting's greatest challenges – we have all faced it: knowing when NOT to intervene.

“The central task of growing up,” Ms. Levine writes, “is to develop a sense of self that is autonomous, confident, and generally in accord with reality. ... The happiest, most successful children have parents who do not do for them what they are capable of doing, or almost capable of doing; and their parents do not do things for them that satisfy their own needs rather than the needs of the child.”

And so, back to *The Gift of Failure*: “every time we rescue, hover, or otherwise try to save our children from a challenge, we send a very clear message: that we believe they are incompetent, incapable, and unworthy of our trust. Further, we teach them to be dependent on us and thereby deny them the very education in competence we are put here on this earth to hand down.”

By this point, it began to dawn on me that there was a message here not just for parents but also for universities, and that the same understandable inclination to overprotectedness – most clearly evident in a proliferation of rules, regulations, policies, and procedures – however well-intentioned and at some times necessary, can have consequences that are quite unintended. The goal should be a reduction in the size of the handbook, an aversion to codification of what will happen to you after any misstep, and an understanding that our purpose as an institution is not to enforce a uniform set of rules but to give students as much room as possible to learn and to grow – and, yes, occasionally to fail.

Now let me hasten to explain what that does and does not mean. It does not mean countenancing behavior that is harmful, illegal, or outside the bounds of normal human conduct. Drunkenness, sexual misconduct, drug use and dealing, lying, cheating, or stealing are not the defining characteristics of the educated human being, and they are not acceptable in this community. But it also means that parents need to understand, hard as it may be, that roommate issues, registration concerns, meeting deadlines, grades, are things your child needs to deal with. Or, as Lahey tersely puts it, “locate – and know when to use – the mute button. ... You have lived your life and learned the lessons it has granted you. Now it's your child's turn.”

All of which is also to say that, while we have certain rules and regulations here, the most effective of those come not from without, but from within. The great 18th century statesman and orator Edmund Burke, reminded us that any sound version of adult life includes, must include, self-restraint. “Men are qualified for liberty,” Burke wrote, “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. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”

As I consider these wise words, I find my only resolution as lying somewhere between, on the one hand, trying to help a young person make the most of his or her college experience and, on the other, acknowledging that in the end students must live their own lives and make their own choices and can learn only if we give them ample freedom – alongside personal responsibility and accountability – to do both and to learn, sometimes through hard experience, that when things go wrong, it is usually not entirely someone else’s fault.

Help us, help your son or daughter, find that balance, that balance between freedom and restraint. Lead, as we will also try to lead, by example, and know that your and our every move and every action gives clues. And if we, you as parents and we as the University, are successful in our partnership, we will send out into the world four short years from now a class of educated men and women who understand that risk is an inevitable part of life and who also understand that a willingness to accept personal responsibility will set the boundaries of acceptable risk and, more important, continue to hone the faculties of good judgment.

This is indeed the beginning of a partnership, yours and ours. We take with utmost seriousness our duties and obligations to create and sustain an environment in which able young people may learn and grow. And with that thought, a word or two for our new students.

You have chosen this University, and we you, because we all understand that the value of an education, like the measure of a life, is about much more than a job. You and your families might

have invested a whole lot less if that were your sole ambition. No, you have come to Sewanee because you seek not merely knowledge, but also wisdom.

“Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much,” writes William Cowper (this was engraved over the stage in the auditorium of my high school); “wisdom is humble that he knows no more.” “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” says the psalmist. “Man must learn wisdom through suffering,” writes Aeschylus.

The road to wisdom is seldom straight or smooth. It can be challenging, sometimes painful. It never reaches its final destination. But the journey itself involves the making not just of a living, but of a life. From it one develops what the columnist David Brooks calls a “moral vocabulary.” And so find, in the subjects you study and the people you meet, examples worthy of emulation. Learn from them.

Next Tuesday morning you will gather to have your class photograph taken. I hope you will think, for just a moment, as the shutter is snapped, about how your history, individually and as a class, will be written, about how your story will be told.

You see, I believe, and my colleagues believe, that you chose to come here in defiance of any particular stereotype. The Sewanee angel brought you to this University because you prefer community to anonymity, because you want to serve, because you do want to learn to exemplify civic engagement, because you seek both responsibility and accountability, and, most of all, because you will make your own decisions and not let someone else – whether a classmate, a friend, or even a faculty or staff member – make them for you. Do not believe everything you hear about “hookups” or “binges,” to cite but two examples of what you may well be told is the culture to which you must adapt. Have the courage of your own convictions, be guided by your own moral compass. Before you put yourself, or your reputation, or someone else, at risk, try to remember that each of you is the child of a loving parent, who conceived you and brought you into this world and rejoiced at the moment of your birth, and continues to love you. That young man you are with, and that young woman, is some loving parent’s child. Think, twice and hard, before doing something that might be hurtful. Do not seek, and do not be held back or allow

yourselves to be satisfied by, conformity with things of this world. Seek something higher and nobler. Be transformed, as St. Paul writes, by the renewing of your mind.

Perhaps some of you remember that powerful scene in the movie *Dead Poets' Society*, when the young instructor played by the late Robin Williams leads his class to the place where photographs of classes from long ago are on display and he addresses the discomfiting truth of their own mortality: "Peruse some of the faces from the past," he urges. "They're not different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they are destined for great things, just like you. Their eyes are full of hope, just like yours. Did they wait until it was too late to make their lives just one iota of what they are capable? Because you see, gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. If you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you – do you hear it? Carpe diem! Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

Think, then of those students yet unborn gazing upon your countenances as photographed this week. They may laugh at your choice of dress and hairstyle. But if they look into your faces, they may also, if only fleetingly, see into your hearts, because they will, in fact, be staring into a mirror. Their hopes and dreams will be no different from yours, no different from those of the Sewanee Class of 1923. They will not know how much time they have, but they may draw confidence and encouragement and inspiration and warning from the knowledge of how well you used yours.

So think about this as you pose for your class photo. And think about the opportunities the time you spend at this University will give you to lead extraordinary lives in challenging times. And understand, finally, that simply because you now have an unprecedented degree of personal freedom, that does not – does not, must not – mean the abandonment or repudiation of everything you have experienced or learned over the last 18 years. Nor do we see our job as remaking you or, even worse, making you more like us, any more than we would want this University to be more like some other place. No, if we do our job right, the education that takes place here will remove self from the center of the universe while developing traits of intellect and character that, tempered with humility, and send you forth, in the words of our liturgy, marked forever as one of Sewanee's own, confident in the choices you have made, comfortable

in your own skin, and, looking back on your time spent here, echoing the words of Browning's "Andrea del Sarto:" "I regret little, I would change still less."

And also committed to serving others. Tomorrow you will be discussing this year's common reading, Bryan Stevenson's powerful *Just Mercy*. There is much there to discuss (beginning with the double-meaning of the title). I would offer two observations. The first is the essentially and compellingly Christian message of unmerited grace offered to all who sin – which is to say all. And the second is the admonition that comes at the end of the book. Recalling the story in John's Gospel of the woman who committed adultery and is about to be stoned for her sin: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Don't be a stone thrower; be, as Stevenson urges us all to be, a stone-catcher.

In T. H. White's marvelous *Once and Future King*, Merlin offers the following advice to the young Prince Arthur, advice as good and meaningful today as ever:

"You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies. You may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins. You may miss your only love. You may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then – to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fail or distrust, and never dream of forgetting."

The clock ticks. The bell tolls. The camera is placed, the lens focused. The shutter is snapped. The image is captured. It is forever.

And finally, sometime this week, take a few minutes to walk around this Chapel, All Saints' Chapel. Stop to kneel in prayer for strength, and guidance, and protection, and wisdom.

Tennyson reminds us that "more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." And then read some of the plaques affixed to the Chapel walls. There you will see commemorated many of the saints of this university, saints who now from their labors rest, the great and the humble. Of all these, I continue to be drawn back to a plaque over near where we sit on Sundays – a memorial to Mary Josephine Tidball, about whom it is simply recorded, from the Lord's

words spoken in the Gospel of Mark, “She hath done what she could.” Could any of us rightly aspire to have more than that, or better than that, said of each of us?

And be reminded, as you begin to absorb the history that surrounds you in this place, that you are now becoming a part of a special community and extended family. To be sure, if every living graduate of this University were seated in the smallest major league baseball stadium, Boston’s Fenway Park, it would be less than half full. Though small in number, however, they are great in spirit, their friendships broad and deep, their accomplishments grand, their histories rich, their loyalty to alma mater generous and selfless. As you prepare to join their number, you have our commitment to challenge you, to nurture you, to educate you, so that, as the powerful play of human history goes on, each of you may contribute a verse.

And when that time comes in the spring of 2023 to take your leave, you will also understand, with the deep and abiding satisfaction that comes from challenge and even occasional discomfort, that though you may not always remember exactly why, there was a time, and a place, where you were indeed very happy.

You will have taken, and we will have encouraged you to take, risks that are calculated but not reckless. We will have given you considerable liberty, and we will have expected, in return, wholesome restraint. You will have been pressed neither to think alike nor to think as someone else would have you think, but rather – and this is the true meaning of diversity – to think for yourselves. Through that process, you will find yourselves transformed. And you will have discovered the great, profound truth in the words of Psalm 133, the first three words of which are emblazoned on the University Seal: *Ecce Quam Bonum*. “Behold how good.” Behold how good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity.

May God bless, preserve, and keep you on this exciting journey. Welcome to the University of the South.