

Senior Toast, April 29, 2020

Thank you, Sebastian. You represent your classmates so well with the intellect and generosity you have invested in Sewanee. When I work with students like you I think of their parents, who have literally raised up a never - failing succession of fine people who will make their mark in the world.

Warm greetings to all of you from Sewanee. It is an honor to be with you this evening, for many reasons. There are strong bonds of respect and friendship, in some cases lasting a lifetime, that many of you have developed with my faculty colleagues and with staff members. We are deeply invested in your success and your achievement. I feel a kinship with many of you. I have learned from many of you in classes, on hikes, at camp fires, at All Saints, and in passing. And we are ending our time at Sewanee together. Both for you and for me, the time we are ending is the beginning of something much larger. Isn't it wonderful we have this touchstone of a place as we sally forth into the world?

The telescoping, the compression of time in the final days of the spring semester never ceases to unnerve me, and this year is no exception. Here we are, in the midst of a turmoil of final classes and exams. It will all blow away like chaff in the next seven days. The sheer joy and magnitude of your major accomplishment can't be dimmed by a few details, however important. This is your time, and it is a time to celebrate. We formally begin our celebration tonight, and carry it on into the next week, and rightly so-- what a distance you have come: intellectually, spiritually, emotionally. And that great distance between your 18 year- old self and your 22, 30, 40 - even 72 year - old self will continue to become richer. Celebrate it. Acknowledge we're still growing!

I graduated from a wonderfully similar college 50 years ago. That spring the National Guard and police shot students at Kent State and other campuses. We bombed Cambodia. More than one hundred campuses, including mine, were on strike. No classes for a month. No

finals. Some is a blur, but the essentials endure. I was convinced that in a few weeks I'd be married, entering the Peace Corps, that I would find ways to use my passions for history and for helping other people. Some of that happened. It was a very unsettled time, and I don't have to tell you about unsettled times. We are all writing that book together. I can, in the few minutes allotted, relate some stories that remind us of the magic of our Sewanee education.

In preparation for addressing you, an honor that I see as a gift, I looked back through my daily journals to August 24, 2016. Eleven First Year Program classes - filled with many of you out there tonight - had been here for a full week with a First Year Program Professor. Many were feeling good about the power of knowing a place and of experiencing your own place in this Cumberland Plateau context. Some of you were beginning your college careers at other schools. Another group of you savored your summer days as long as possible, arriving just before orientation. That evening of the 24th about 200 of you gathered at a bonfire for the general fun that is PRE, and I saw many of your faces reflected in the firelight.

My journal entry later that night reads *"a very pleasant bonfire. Clear skies and Milky Way, with Mars, Venus, and Antares lined up near the horizon."* Stars and planets aligned. And on the horizon. Does that sound propitious? I remember it as beautiful.

This past Fall, I had a Walking the Land class for seniors. What a pleasure. We read a short Emily Dickinson poem together called "I Stepped from Plank to Plank". Here it is:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea
I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch--
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call experience.

It is a privilege to read a piece together with seniors and hear their life experiences and sense the reading skills and a depth far superior to what I think I possessed at that age. Some were beginning to grieve the end of their time here. This grief is a recurring theme in their journals as the semester progresses. With their experience had come the love for a place, a place they would soon be leaving.

There is certainly a great deal of experience you all have gathered here in your four years. Unlike Dickinson, some of you have not been particularly "slow and cautious"! But all of us have experienced a precarious gait, a halting walk, as we navigate our lives. One aspect of the poem I value is Dickinson's great economy of language, and the other is the sense of forward motion. Certainly, our steps may be precarious as we venture forth; we're not keen on tasting the salt water. Yet it is wonderful to acknowledge even our precarious steps have led us to the place we are today. And it is telling to me that what you consider your precarious steps may be viewed by friends and admirers as confident ones.

To stay in motion, no matter how precarious our steps, is essential to remaining fully alive. And sometimes we must turn from our path to move ahead. For me this image of turning resonates strongly with the declaration at the end of the Shaker song called "Simple Gifts": "to turn, to turn, shall be our delight, 'til by turning, turning, we come 'round right." Perhaps it helps to think of the turning as an unwrapping, a continuing exposure to the richness, complexity, and joy of life.

We must keep moving, and much of that can be done, as my friend Wendell Berry observes, without dusty travel. Here is a Berry snippet that has been at the top of my Physical Geology syllabus since 1980:

And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet, and learn to be at home. WB

I turn now to your home for four years, to the Plateau many of us call The Mountain. Here on the Cumberland Plateau the streams run outward in all directions to the lowlands. In fact, you've been living on a divide that separates the waters of the Crow Creek from those of the Elk River. I know, I know, I can hear some of you thinking, "this guy is a seriously broken record, or a warped CD. He was talking about this four years ago at the PRE Bonfire." Correct. But you and I are all different people than we were in August of 2016.

A divide is by definition a high place. You often can't cross it without effort, and you have completely different views as you turn to see one watershed and then another, perhaps one part of your life that's behind and another ahead, dimly seen through the graceful wisps of fog.

A divide is often windy, and with the view can come aching cold and a newfound ability to lean into that wind. A divide separates huge watersheds and view sheds, and it is also their only point of contact - it connects them.

Rather than describing our home here, our divide, as a scientist would, I prefer the phrase Thomas Hughes used for his pioneer settlement of Rugby, Tennessee, a hamlet farther north on our Cumberland Plateau. He called it "*This lovely corner of God's earth.*" (long ago, with many seniors and others in Guerry Auditorium, we sang about the lovely corner that was Rugby: "*This lovely corner of God's Earth has been entrusted unto us- to treat it lovingly, reverently, guard it's natural beauty. We must take care, care that our children shall not have cause to say: see what a chance they had back then: they threw it all away*".) Fortunate people, you and I, who have been able to call Sewanee our home for a while. May it always feel like home to you.

A divide can bewilder you with its variety of views and leave you wondering how you can possibly choose among all the possibilities - definitely an issue for some of you tonight and in the months ahead.

A divide can simmer in your mind - something you can't get over. A divide can separate life and afterlife.

There's very little space on a sharp topographic divide, as my wife Cindy and I found in New Zealand on a long, knife-edge ridge as wide as a single footpath. It was thrilling to hike there above the tree line. Like us, you're likely to find yourself on some kind of divide either alone or with someone you care for. The shared view, or your different takes on that view, are valuable as you leave the high point and make your way down into the world below that's full of good work to do.

There are so many times in our lives when we stand on a divide: sometimes a physical one, sometimes an emotional one, sometimes a tactical divide. That's one measure of an adventuresome life, but for **you**, for **you**, the one you've reached this spring by so much effort, by so many different paths, is one of the biggest of your lives. It is yours to cross, but take the time to drink in the view and resolve to come back when the view or your lens may have changed. With any luck, and with a lot of work by those entrusted to care for our 'lovely corner of God's earth', the physical view will remain beautiful. You'll be on divides all your life, and that is good. I hope this divide in your life, your graduation from a place we hold dear, will remain an inspiration to you and your successors. It will be so to me.

And now a choice of love and of remembering. I have decided to end with the bonfire songs of 2016. They address so many of the elements of this talk, and more importantly many of the themes in your own soon - to - graduate lives. Listen for them. First, Kate Wolf's "Across the Great Divide. Second, Dave Mallett's "I Knew This Place."

after the songs:

Seniors. I wish you all the very best! What a time in your lives! Celebrate each other's success and celebrate your own. And give thanks for all who have sustained you.

Thank you for listening. I pass you now to Abbie Vaughn

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE –

KATE WOLF

C C F C
I've been walking in my sleep
 Am F
And counting troubles 'stead of countin' sheep
 C Am
Where the years went I can't say
 F G C
I just turned around and they're gone away

I've been sifting through the layers
Of dusty books and faded papers
They tell a story that I used to know
It was one that happened so long ago CHORUS: All
 C F C
It's gone away---- in yesterday
 Am F
Now I find myself on the mountainside
 C Am
Where the rivers change direction
G G C
Across the Great Divide

Well I heard the owl calling
Softly as the night was falling
With a question----- and I replied
But now he's gone, across the borderline CHORUS : All

The finest hour that I have seen
Is the one that comes between
The edge of night and the break of day
It's when the darkness rolls away

I Knew This Place, by Dave Mallett

G C G
I knew this place, I knew it well, every sound, and every smell
C G C D
And every time I walked I fell for the first two years or so,
G C G
There, across the grassy yard- I, a young one, running hard
C G C D G
Brown, and bruised, and battle-scarred, and lost in sweet illusion

And from my window I can see D
The fingers of an ancient tree CG
Reaching out it calls to me CG
To climb its burly branches CD VERSES 1,4, AND 6 ARE SIMILAR
But all my climbing days are gone C VERSES 2,3, AND 5 ARE SIMILAR
And these tired legs I'm standing on CG
Could scarcely dare to leave this spot CG
Upon which they are standing CDG

And I remember every word (also use as last verse 4/29/20 a la Bea Troxel)
Of every voice I ever heard
Every frog, and every bird
Yes, this is where it starts-
My brother's laugh, the sighing wind
This is where my life begins
This is where I learned to use my hands
And hear my heart.

This house is old, it carries on
Like verses to an old-time song
Always changed, but never gone
The house can stand the seasons
Our lives pass on from door to door-
Dust across the wooded floor
Like feather rain or thunder roar
We need not know the reason

And as these thoughts come back to me
tonight)
Like ships across a friendly sea
Like breezes blowing endlessly
Like rivers running deep-
The day is done, the lights are low
The wheels of life are turning slow
And as these visions turn and go
I lay me down to sleep

I knew this place, I knew it well (omit this verse
Every sound, and every smell
And every time I walked I fell
For the first two years or so,
The day is done, the lights are low
The wheels of life are turning slow
And as these visions turn and go
I lay me down to sleep.

