**50 Years of Women at Sewanee Gala Keynote Address**
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I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with everyone tonight at this very special event. I'll admit that I'm still not sure it has really been fifty years, vivid as my memories are, with many roused to an even more vibrant wakefulness over these days. But to paraphrase Hippolyta in the beginning of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, "[Fifty years of] days will quickly steep themselves in nights; [Fifty years of] nights will quickly dream away the time." Dreamlike as it may be, it truly only seems just a short time ago that I was making the move from Winchester to campus, a move short in distance but the beginning of a longer journey in coming to a place that would ultimately send me to new worlds far away, and yet continue always to bring me back to this mountain. It is the power of place, this place, and what that means for each of us wherever we are that I most want to reflect on tonight.

I've been thinking about the question we often ask—and especially on occasions such as these: "What was your Sewanee experience?" Here are snippets of mine, parts I have told before, but I tell these again tonight for a very specific purpose. Sewanee was a part of my world for many years before I came as a university student. I was born in the old Sewanee Hospital; my mother's obstetrician was Dr. Betty Kirby-Smith. My pediatrician was Dr. Ruth Cameron. We came regularly to the Mountain in my childhood to see her. In my child's eye, I still remember the trees surrounding the old hospital as they shimmered in the fall, fell bare in the winter, and burst forth in the spring. My family also ran a poultry business, and we regularly delivered eggs to the dining hall (Gailor, not McClurg), lifting the egg crates onto the loading dock as the university life passed around us.

Thus, Sewanee was both familiar and yet another world. Growing up in the valley, I also knew Sewanee as the "Mountain", beautiful in the winter when ice storms coated the trees into a glistening, diamond sparkling forest, as a place with stately architecture. I knew when we spoke of "up on the mountain," these were people from elsewhere, sometimes very far away, sometimes at the "other end of the county," but still not from the valley. When I was in Franklin County High School and deeply immersed in the band, there came the opportunity with a State of Tennessee scholarship to attend the Sewanee Summer Music Festival. Here were students and teachers from all over the world, completely devoted to music, and all of us in this place so close

to my home, so familiar, but also so different. I still remember that first Sunday afternoon orientation, sitting with my parents in Convocation Hall. It wasn't just the program ahead beckoning new, even daunting opportunities; it was the room. Who were the people in those portraits? They were not the farmers, the neighbors, the teachers I grew up with. But there were stories in their eyes and in that room, in that place. To this day, I have that same rush of feelings for stories waiting to be told and heard when I enter that room or indeed any other spot on this mountain.

It wasn't too long into that first summer that I met Dr. Edward McCrady. He was the vice-chancellor but I knew him as the older man who played the violin in the junior orchestra, always sitting in the back of the first violin section, always with his cocker spaniel by his side, sometimes lifting its head up to add a vocal accompaniment to our orchestra's quavering efforts. Later that first summer, Dr. McCrady told me he was organizing a chamber orchestra to play every Sunday afternoon in his house—Fulford Hall at that time—and he hoped I would join them. I didn't know any of the others in the group though I learned their names and only later who they were—Charles Harrison, professor of English, Allan Tate, the Southern poet, and others.

They accepted me into their group as one of them, no note of my age, no tests of my musical skills, no questions that I was from the valley. They were unassuming, simply enjoying each other's company, each other's music, and their years of friendship that were still open enough to include someone many years their junior. We played for the moment. In truth, we weren't that good, but being together outweighed musical skill (though we did provide the musical interlude for the county Chamber of Commerce dinner). In their own way, my fellow musicians taught me the art of conversation, they showed me an openness, acceptance, and curiosity for others, and they gave hints to what it was to live a life of the mind and to live it fully in and of a place. One fall afternoon, Dr. McCrady casually told me the university was going to become open to women, perhaps I would apply. And so it came to be. When I graduated from high school, Dr. McCrady came—not as vice-chancellor but as friend and fellow musician.

I tell this story not to reminisce, not to idealize the past, not to call out my particular experience as different. but rather to say that my Sewanee experience is a tapestry of relationships, some woven well before I formally enrolled, and an evocative mixture of the local, of the place beyond the classroom, with the education that this place gave me. If asked, as I often

am, how was it to be in the first class of women, I cannot truly answer that question as I believe it is intended. Others will have an answer that befits the question's focus on the uniqueness of the moment when a male institution opened its doors to women; and others will be able to address specifically the cultural strains and achievements that becoming a more diverse campus has brought. But long before the anniversary we are celebrating, I was of this place, and not just as one of the first women, special as that time was. Surely there were challenges as well as remarkably exciting times by being in that first class. But it was the teaching by so many—Jerry Smith, Bayley Turlington, Anita Goodstein, Laurence Alvarez, Jim Lowe, John Bordley and so many others—that made this place rich with contrasts and mind-stretching opportunities. They cared for far more than just what I learned in the classroom. They cared for who I was as an individual and who I could be, not just as one of those first women, and they helped me see the world beyond this mountain.

And it is these caring relationships forged and nurtured here, some new, some remembered but gone, some sustained and deepened over many years, that always bring me back. This Mountain, this county, this place, is not just home; it is my spiritual tap root. I will drop all else to come back and consider it the greatest gift now to be a member of the visiting faculty and to teach students, to host a summer internship program, to be involved with the pre-health team, and to give back to this place through efforts in the community with friends across the counties on the Plateau and the valley.

So how does this devotion to place come to be? For there are many others, not born in Franklin County but with different stories, who feel the same, who are devoted to this place, this university and this Plateau with a fierceness given often only to kin. I think the answer is in the deeper implications of our frequent question: "What is your Sewanee experience?" Taken on the surface, the question pulls for "experiences of, at, or in Sewanee." But more deeply, the question is about the impact of living in a place that is so rich in natural beauty, in caring pedagogy and penetrating scholarship, so focused on a discerning life, on the interface of the secular and the sacred, that is wealthy in opportunity and yet surrounded by the poverty of isolation, the disparities of privilege and lack, a place both of the greater world and in many ways, safe behind its gates, real and imagined. The place we call Sewanee, this Mountain, is in its very contrasts of surrounding and lived experiences, fertile ground for a truly liberal and liberating education. The Sewanee experience, if we are open to it, is to step outside ourselves and our personal ambitions

to learn how to be citizens of our place, wherever that place is. It is the opportunity, as Wendell Berry has written, to "*Belong to your place by knowledge of the others who are Your neighbors in it: the old man, sick and poor….and by your caring for it as you care for no other place…" (Leavings, 2011)*

This place, the Sewanee experience, if embraced, is to live a life embedded in relationships, guided by a moral compass, and always seeking the ways to give back and leave your place better than when you entered it. This affection for a place and all the people in it gives us our capacity to imagine and nurture the other places we will inevitably, and must, go out to. Indeed, the Sewanee experience gives us the ability to understand all our fellow travelers with whom we share our places and to have the knowledge that Allen Tate says can be "carried to the heart"[1]. We come back to this place to touch base and be reminded of our devotions, to be among like-minded, to be rejuvenated and then return to our places around the world that this place, this experience, prepared us for. We take our guardian Sewanee angels with us not solely as protection in an outside and uncertain world, but also to remind us that we have been given a gift here to pass on to others in that world.

So in closing, I ask, what will be the Sewanee experience of those who will come to this place years hence—and may they always come, go forth, and as needed, touch back. Here is our challenge. How do we hold onto the value of grounding ourselves in a place, in the intimacy of relationships with all in this place, even as the world around us presses for an often "placeless" way of knowing and relating? How do we prepare our students for that world while at the same time showing them the power and the freedom to embrace their place and live truly within it? May we hold these questions close in our hearts and minds, and come back years hence to hear our students-to-be tell us their stories, their Sewanee experience.

[1] Allen Tate "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in *Poems*, p.23, Scribners, 1960.