

Baccalaureate Address
University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee

Christoph Keller, III
All Saints' Chapel
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It is such an honor to be here. Thank you.

To the Class of '24:

Mine is a large family. I have many sisters, my sisters have husbands, and I a wife. Among us we have many children, who have husbands, wives, and children of their own. At a reunion you could fit us in a school bus, maybe. On that bus, the two best readers are the two who graduated from Sewanee. Is that a coincidence? I don't think so.

One of those two is my sister Kathryn, whose Sewanee class was the second that included women, graduating fifty-years ago this month. She majored in English and Fine Arts. Now she is an artist by day (a painter) and by night reads English novels. "Have you read Trollope, Chris?" she asks. "Not yet." Our other top reader is our son Christoph, who sat where you sit with the Class of '08. I am wearing his gown. He majored in Philosophy and is now a lawyer. Unlike his Aunt Kathryn, Christoph's literary taste is varied, though he has read every word of Robert Caro's *Life of Lyndon Johnson* and will start on volume five the day it hits the bookstores.

By tradition, a commencement speaker offers some advice to the graduating class. My advice to you is this. Be true to your school. Let it be said of you, sixteen or fifty years from your going forth tomorrow, that you are the best reader on a crowded bus.

You may want to try a habit that has worked well for me. I choose an author or topic for a year. This began forty years ago with Faulkner, with whom I felt I had some catching up to do. In 1997, as my church debated same sex marriage, I studied hard on that, which changed my mind. I read for a year on race, and then one just on Dr. King. Two favorite years were Walker Percy and Marilynne Robinson, back-to-back. Five years ago, I studied Israel. In 2024, I am reading up on Emma Darwin.

Now I am going to tell you how this habit brought me to Sewanee. It starts with the year I gave to learning logic. It was either that or Trollope. Copi and Cohen's *Introduction to Logic*, the twelfth edition was my guide. I sharpened my pencil, and started on page one. I love that book. I wish everybody in the world would read the section "Definitions and their Uses." We have such awful battles over words. That section calms them down in my mind.

But it wasn't Copi and Cohen that got me thinking about Sewanee; it was Dorothy Sayers's little book *The Lost Tools of Learning*. This was actually a speech Sayers gave in 1947 at Oxford University, the school some say was modeled on Sewanee. As Oxford speeches go this one was a scorcher. Sayers scolded Academia for failing to do what for centuries had been the first aim of higher education—to teach us how to think. That bears repeating. She said "how to think," not "what."

Thinking comes as naturally to us as breathing. Have you ever tried to stop? Painting pictures comes naturally to some. My sister could do that from the start. But she sharpened her pencil here, to become an artist. At Oxford, Sayers charged that students now "learn everything except the art of learning."¹

In 1947, war memories were omnipresent. Sayers reminded her British audience that when war broke out in 1939, young soldiers were sent to France poorly prepared and not well armed to try to hold the line against the German blitz. The result was Dunkirk. She made that her metaphor for modern education. This is a quote:

We let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them all to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. . . . They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects.²

That warning was a stimulus for SUMMA. I felt moved to try to reach a rising generation somehow; not to tell them what to think but teach them how, as the best antidote to bad ideas and avenue to good ones. By “them” I mean you, in high school.

There was a second impetus.

After my doctorate, I often lectured at my church on faith and evolution. Those talks were well attended, but never by anyone in high school, which was a disappointment. Teenagers are naturally curious, and smarter than they care to show. In Little Rock, a lot of them were active in their faith. All of them learned science at school. Did they see a conflict? If so, what to do? If not, where was the fit? These questions cross young minds. I knew there would be interest.

And I was interested on their behalf. Before they left home for college, I wanted them to see that faith and science are not opposed, and have some practice putting them together. That would put them out front of most people on the planet. So how to get them in the room to do this?

I saw the risk, but it occurred to me debate could be the answer. After you’ve done it once, it’s fun. There may be no better way to learn to think, than having to chew a bone from opposite directions. I could introduce them to Thomas Aquinas, who took that approach to every question. For any claim, from “God exists” on down, Aquinas would open with the strongest reasons he could think of to deny his own position. “It would seem that God does not exist because . . .” etc. We are used to seeing advocates throw mud and curses at opponents. Aquinas saw them as companions in the search for truth.

Aquinas debated with himself because he knew debating fosters better thinking, and saw how better thinking opens pathways deeper into faith . . . and hope . . . and love. Also, with Aquinas I could show them the fit between faith and evolution. Professor Cynthia Crysedale, who teaches

up the street, has co-authored a brilliant book explaining Aquinas and that fit in detail. (Did you know that? So many good things happen here, it is impossible to know them all.)

About the risk, you see it too. What happens in debate is commonly the opposite of hope and love, and debates over faith are what they do in hell for entertainment. But what if we could somehow turn that right-side up? *Debating fosters better thinking, and better thinking opens pathways deeper into faith, and hope, and love.* Wouldn't that be something? I asked a colleague, Cindy Fribourgh, to help me start from scratch and make this happen. She said yes, thank God, and immediately we faced the question: Where on earth to put this?

It should be a college, not a camp; not doctrinaire, but faithful; a little cooler in the summer would be nice; ideally a lovely place, but crucially a loving place, to lift debate to a plateau above the mud, the curses, and the fear. *Ecce quam bonum.* How perfect for SUMMA that we knew of such a place, on an honest-to-God plateau in Tennessee.

And what a dream come true for me. Here in summertime the cicadas are so loud it is almost scary. At dusk, I would take a chair in front of Quintard just to watch the lightning bugs and listen. It is no wonder to me you love this mountain.

And it won't surprise you that students go home from SUMMA hoping to return for college; or that a good number of them do so. You may not know that one who did was Sam Piazza. Sam was first a camper then a counselor for SUMMA. He arrived for college in August, 2018, two years ahead of most of you. His death on October 5, 2022, is a grief we share.

On my part, this isn't only due to SUMMA. Sam's hometown is Little Rock and I had been his dean there at Trinity Cathedral. If I look familiar to some of you, that is probably because I gave the sermon at his funeral. Many carloads drove four hundred miles from here to be

there.

Last November, Sam's mother and father wrote an open letter to Sewanee students, which I hope you saw. About Sam and Sewanee, his parents said "he loved the friends he made here, the intelligence of the students, the quirkiness of the school." By quirkiness, I've wondered what Sam might have had in mind. The logistics can be a bit eccentric. When a room key didn't fit the lock I would say to myself "Remember, Chris, this is an institution run by English majors."

I loved the quirkiness of Sam. He was polite, but sly; philosophical like my son, but artistic like my sister. After he died, Sam's mom said to me "I mourn his future." She spoke for everyone who loves him.

At Sam's funeral I talked about potential. Potential is what might take place. The actual is what has taken place or is doing so right now. As newborns we are pure potential; day by day, actuality takes hold.

For example, in you we see the vast potential that is still the greater part of your identity; but already in you the actual is strong, including in the fact that you are, as of tomorrow, Sewanee graduates. With that achievement comes enhanced potential. If only it were invulnerable. At Memorial Cross, Sewaneeans are honored who sacrificed their own potential in service to a common good. Back home, someone's heart was broken by a telegram.

I called Sewanee faithful. Sewanee's faith is polite but sly, rarely in the forefront, but always in the atmosphere, its music wafting from this chapel Sunday mornings. Those sounds are more than lovely; they are on to potentials that are vulnerable but undeterred.

One year ago on this weekend, I presided at a wedding. The bride that night is dear to my family. Missing from the wedding was her father who had died seven years before. Throughout the church, his absence was palpable. What I said last year to her of him, I say now to you of

Sam. St. Augustine said of God that he is higher than our highest thought, yet nearer to us than our most inward part. So far, so near, is Sam today to those who love him. He is more alive than we are, with potential grown beyond our power to imagine it.

It was 2008 when we sat packed in this room with other families, watching the door for the faculty and graduating class to enter in procession for Commencement. I remember feeling happy for our son, the graduate, but also sympathetic. From my own graduation I'd not forgotten how it felt driving out alone, after one slow last turn around the quad.

Do you know that when you leave tomorrow it creates a void? The ones you leave behind miss you as much as you do them and one another. Thank goodness friendship travels.

We are back in 2008. Now the doors open, the organ swells, the congregation rises, and to my surprise the ceremonies begin not with Pomp and Circumstance, but with this chapel's anthem.

*For all the Saints, who from their labors rest . . .
Alleluia, Alleluia.*

As I am singing, I am lifted. I don't know a place that better understands this day for all it is, or embodies it more beautifully.

At the end of that service, I was again surprised. Students had spoken; degrees had been conferred. Things had been said in Latin that I didn't understand. There was a pregnant pause. The Vice-Chancellor stepped forward and to the graduates he gently, pure-and-simply, just said this: "Farewell. God bless you."

What a perfect way to say goodbye.

¹ Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, A Speech Delivered in 1947 at Oxford University, first electronic edition, (figbooks.com, 2011), 5.

² Sayers, 8.