

Vice-Chancellor's Remarks and Charge to the Class of 2018
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“Cancellarie, licetne anglice loqui?”

“Licet.”

In a moment I will pronounce, as our ritual requires, a charge to each of you as graduates of the University. We will sing the Alma Mater and then we will process out to the Sewanee Hymn, to which a new stanza has been added by a member of the Class of 2018, in what I hope will be an annual emendation of that work. But first, a word or two – in English.

“But in the importance and noise of tomorrow,” writes the poet Auden on the death of Yeats, “a few thousand will think of this day as one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.” You will, I wager, never again experience a day quite like this. Savor it. Remember it. Treasure it.

If you were up early this morning (or simply had a long, long night), you experienced the exhilaration that comes from a peaceful campus, in the cool of the morning, under a glorious sunrise. This has been an exceptional Commencement Week, for which we are indeed thankful. But we also have other thanks to render, and I hope, as you prepare to take your leave, you will stop for a moment to offer those thanks –

... to your teachers, who gave you knowledge and who modeled wisdom: in the classroom and across the campus, teachers who were called professors, yes, but who were also called coaches, library and IT staff, police, custodians, deans, dining hall workers, groundskeepers (many of whom have worked very hard this week, and even very early this morning, unsung, behind the scenes, to make these ceremonies bright and beautiful).

... to your families, who nurtured you, and who lovingly, trustingly, committed you to this University, who saw in you their own hope for immortality, who gave you life and opportunity, and who now, surely, on this day wish for you the wisdom that springs from knowledge.

... to your friends, with whom you shared over these four years all manner of experiences, and from whom you received a substantial part of your education.

As we entered this chapel at the stroke of ten this morning, we sang the familiar words of a beloved hymn: “For all the Saints.” Here, in All Saints’ Chapel, we are surrounded by the names and accomplishments, the memorials, of those men and women who have been a part of the life of this University for the past 150 years – lives that remind us that history didn’t begin on the day we were born, lives often of great accomplishment, yes, but also lives summarized in such simple statements as “she did what she could.” To put it another way, here, today, we are surrounded by memory.

And, because this is Commencement morning, memory is not simply on the walls and in the liturgy; it is also in our hearts and in our minds: memories of things seen and done and learned here, of friends made here, of challenges large and small encountered here. Today you join that long line of this University’s saints, great and small, famous and those who have no memorial. You take your place in that line, and with that place you take on a new relationship with *alma mater* and a whole new set of obligations.

But I hope, and my faculty colleagues share this hope, that you take something more than simply memory with you as you take your leave. What might some of those other things be?

Humility, perhaps? I still remember William Cowper’s words inscribed over the stage in my own high school auditorium: “Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much; wisdom is humble that he knows no more.” We could all use a bit more humility, a bit more willingness, as Benjamin Franklin once put it, to doubt a little, each of us, in our own infallibility, and a bit more acknowledgment that, in the fallen world we inhabit, truth can never be fully revealed, never wholly discerned, but, in fragmentary moments at least, it may at least be sensed, hinted at, approached, approximated.

Self-restraint, maybe? As you may know, one of my favorite quotations on this point comes from a speech made late in his life by the distinguished statesman and orator Daniel Webster. “Liberty can exist,” he stated, “only in proportion to wholesome restraint.” Or, as Virginia Woolf has put it, “to enjoy freedom we have to control ourselves.” It is so very easy to say the first thing that comes into our minds or to surrender ourselves to the illusion of our own immortality by failing to consider the consequences of the choices we make before we make them. Or to blame someone else when things go wrong. Or to succumb to the seduction offered by whatever institution or candidate for public office offers the most free stuff. Society – and this includes higher education – is in great danger of losing that balance between freedom and restraint.

Liberty without restraint is anarchy; restraint without liberty is tyranny. Self-restraint makes freedom possible and is the best antidote to the growing coarseness and judgmentalism and misogyny that is increasingly apparent in what passes these days for public discourse. Keep your distance, and your soul, from the madding crowd and current fashion. Choose your own course, and choose it wisely.

Because with humility and with self-restraint will come selflessness, a consideration of views other than your own, a recognition that true happiness can never be pursued or realized as an end in itself but is rather the byproduct of experience, even struggles and setbacks, and by the surrender of self to something nobler and greater.

As the great historian Henry Adams wrote, toward the end of his monumental autobiography: “Every man [and every woman] with self-respect enough to become effective has had to account to himself, for himself, somehow.” This accounting – to yourself, for yourself, somehow – requires something more than mere knowledge. Your brightness, and your resume, may carry you far, but these will not enable you to give the final accounting. They may make you good at asking questions. But you will still, yourself, need to give answers, make decisions, assume responsibility. That will require you to summon all that you have learned at this University. Call the tally of those virtues character, perhaps, or duty, or moral compass. Call it, if you will, faith. Above all call it selfless, and call it timeless. Glimpse it always in the distance, ever on the horizon. Follow its gleam. Make it yours. Make it you.

My hope for you on this Commencement morning, then, is a hope I confidently believe is shared not only by my faculty colleagues but also by your families, and especially by those mothers whose day this also is. It is that you will take with you, and continue to nurture within you, not only knowledge, grades, a resume, but also a pride tempered with humility, so that you may find wisdom, hold her fast, know true happiness, continue to discern the better angels of your own nature, and remember that you caught your first glimpses of those angels here; that all your works, in the words of St. Paul, will show “thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” And finally, that the education you have received here and the experience here that set you on your life’s course will, in the words of our beloved baptismal liturgy, mark you as one of Sewanee’s own forever.

Graduates please rise for the charge, at the end of which, may all rise for the singing of the *alma mater*.