

Valedictory Address
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Chancellor Howard, Vice-Chancellor McCardell, Provost Berner, Deans, faculty, staff, family, and friends. Thank you.

And Happy Mother's Day to those who are here with us and those who cannot be. When I was younger, I asked my mom why, if there was a Father's Day and a Mother's Day, there was no "Child's Day." She just laughed and told me that it was because every day was "Child's Day." At five or six, I didn't really understand this, and I still wanted my own, special day. But as I've grown older, I've realized that because of my mom's endless love, support and selflessness, every day was child's day. Today is no exception, but it is also Mother's Day. So Happy Mother's Day to you all – thank you for everything you've done to get us here, and thank you for sharing your day with us today.

Most importantly, to the University of the South Class of 2018. Congratulations!

Four years ago, each of us made the decision to come to this place for a variety of reasons, most obviously to continue our learning and pursue our degrees. Clearly, we have done just that. But we have done far more than that, too. We have discovered so much about ourselves throughout this process, and most of that learning was done not only in classrooms, but also in shared spaces like McClurg, the library, or the P-trail that a lot of us probably just did in the past week to complete our Sewanee bucket lists.

Earlier this week, my brother asked me what EQB stood for. I tried to pronounce it in Latin but failed miserably, so I won't try to do that here.

But "Behold how good it is when people dwell together in unity."

Behold how good.

I remember sometime during the fall of my first year I was walking towards McClurg for breakfast. In my memory, this was a particularly beautiful day, but in all honesty, I probably just didn't sleep through any alarms. So truly, this morning was just like any other, but on that morning, I was struck by the beauty of this place. By the way the birds sounded, by how All Saints' looked from the back as I was walking past Woods. That morning, I felt the sun on my skin, and I vividly remember turning to one of my friends and saying, "This place is so beautiful. I hope I never get used to it."

But do you know what? I did. I got used to it here. And I forgot, in the midst of deadlines, midterm exams, papers, meetings, and trying to call home just enough to let my mom and dad know I was doing all right, I forgot. I forgot to stop. I forgot to look around. And I forgot to soak this place in.

During our time here, things get lost and misplaced. I'm not talking about the countless iPhones, car keys, and wallets that went missing every Friday and Saturday only to be posted about on Sewanee Lost and Found. No, I'm talking about how I lost my sense of place and gratitude for this beautiful, unique, and sometimes weird campus we call home.

It wasn't until this past semester as I was approaching the end of my college career that I remembered this conversation. I lived on the same side of campus this year as I did my first year, so I took that very same path to McClurg many mornings, just as I had done three years prior. And on one of those mornings, that conversation came flooding back into my memory. We were kind of in that sweet spot, where occasionally someone would throw out a day count, like "84 days left," but no one was really aware of how little time we had remaining here.

In the past three months, as I'm sure many of you have, I've rediscovered this sense of gratitude and this sense of place. I began to hold tight to small things. That star magnolia that bloomed by duPont right before spring break. The way the sunsets looked from Stirlings. How quiet All Saints' felt on Sunday morning a few minutes before the service started.

I did my best to be intentional with what little time I did have, and sought out those people who had already taught me so many things. What I discovered was that neither my gratitude nor sense of place was ever truly lost, just oftentimes overshadowed by things I mistakenly thought were more important at the time.

Sewanee has taught me how to really, truly live in the moment and place that you are, and how to be grateful for that experience, whatever it may be. Because even when my midterm exam took three hours for a fifty-minute class, even when Sewanee Secure (wireless) failed at seemingly the most inopportune time, and, yes, even when McClurg took away our paper cups, I still had the incredible privilege to be a student here, at one of the most beautiful campuses in the nation, surrounded by some of the most generous and intelligent people imaginable.

This place has forever changed all of us, and as we set off from here we will take little bits of this Mountain as we go. The Domain has taught me a lot about gratitude and a lot about place, but what Sewanee has taught each of probably is not the same, nor should it be. Although we will always share this place, we have each had our own four years here, and we have each been taught different things.

As we leave All Saints' today with our degrees that we won't be able to read as they're written in Latin, and we can intentionally step on the University seal for the first time, I challenge you to answer a question that was posed to me this week: "What has Sewanee taught you that another place would not have?"

More than preparing us for future jobs and careers, we are told that our four years here at Sewanee have made us ready to set off into the so-called "real world." But I don't understand why we feel the need to differentiate Sewanee from the "real world," and I don't believe the two are truly separable. Instead, I think the world out there could learn a little bit from us.

Because wouldn't it be great if we could make *that* world more like our own? Like our world here? Our place? Our Sewanee?

Wouldn't the world be better if we all pledged not to lie, cheat, or steal?

Wouldn't the world be better if more of its many places took the time for the passing hello?

Wouldn't the world be better if everyone embraced EQB and lived together in both unity and fellowship, looking out for one another the way that we do here?

Wouldn't the world be better if we all held a little tighter to traditions, but felt comfortable challenging them as well, like we've done many times over the last four years?

Wouldn't the world be better if when we disagreed, we did so as Sewanee has taught us to do – with reason, with respect for one another, and with an understanding that dwelling together also means disagreeing constructively and learning from each other?

Wouldn't the world be better if every once in a while, we paused to watch the sunset, decided that spending time with one another was more important than deadlines, and remembered our shared community?

In our youth, as my mom said, every day was “Child’s Day,” whether we realized it or not. And the point at which we probably started to appreciate this was the point at which we had outgrown that time in our lives.

In the same way, every day of our past four years has been a sort of “Sewanee Day,” and we probably didn’t realize that either. But now that we are outgrowing this place, it has become increasingly evident.

As we leave here over the next day or so, let’s tap our roofs, collect our angels at the gates, and take the lessons we’ve learned here. Let’s take a little bit of this beautiful, unique, and sometimes weird place with us, because although every day cannot be a “Sewanee Day” anymore, I bet that the world out there would be better, and a little less scary, if it looked more like our world here.

Thank you and congratulations!