Tradition and Surprise: the gown's enduring meaning
Founders’ Day Convocation 2015
Alec Hill, C’16

To Ms. Woodruff: thank you, for your engaging and challenging words. To the families, friends and teachers of those being inducted into the Order of Gownsmen today: welcome. To those being gowned: congratulations.

My name is Alec Hill, and I’m honored to speak to you for a short time today. As President of the Order, in recent months I’ve tried to discern what it means to wear this gown, and to celebrate its place in our life as a school. At its most basic level, the wearing of gowns is a tradition adopted from British universities, and before that, centuries of monastic scholarship. Its adoption therefore informs us that Sewanee’s founders saw learning as serious business. As symbols of this seriousness, they embraced the costumes and rituals of the elite academic institutions of their day. In short, over the 142 years since the Order was founded by the Rev. Dr. William Porcher DuBose, we have embodied Sewanee's devotion to academic achievement.

While the Order's place within Sewanee's history should awe anyone who loves our school, at the same time, I don't know what else to say about the traditional meaning of the gown. For when I think about wearing this strange, thin piece of dark cloth, I wonder: what does it mean today? Why should those who are about to be inducted into the Order see their membership as valuable? What makes the gown not just special, but important?

Unsurprisingly, what thoughts I've mustered in response to these questions owe their inspiration to Sewanee's faculty. To be specific: last spring, I took Modern British Poetry with Dr. Tucker, and in her class we read Phillip Larkin’s “Church Going.” Larkin's speaker in that poem is a man visiting an empty church. Perhaps like some of us here now, he feels out of place in what to him is an unfamiliar environment. Though he acknowledges a certain “unignorable silence” and solemnity in the air, he can summon only “awkward reverence” for the church's esoteric spaces and objects, its “brass and stuff / up at the holy end.” What respect he feels for the place is destabilized by his skepticism about the modern utility of religion. Deciding that this one was “not worth stopping for,” he dismisses the church as a kind of relic, and turns to leave.

The speaker’s tone at “Church Going”的 opening, his mix of confusion, discomfort, and second-hand embarrassment, seems analogous to attitudes about the gown prevalent among students at Sewanee. Most of us are glad to earn our gown and the minor privileges it confers, but once we have it, only a few students will wear it. After this ceremony, a
third of the undergraduate body will be members of the Order, but during a normal day you won’t see more than one or two of us wearing gowns to class.

Instead, reluctant to be seen as pretentious or boastful by our peers, or just scared to look different, we limit our gown-wearing to comps and graduation. This is a mistake. For by doing so we embrace the public entertainment that ritual and regalia provides on a few days a year, but we eschew contemplation of the private responsibilities that induction into the Order might confer. What I mean is that, though this gown is a reward for past achievement, it can also function as a trigger for further growth, a small reminder that we are capable of great work even on days without ceremony or celebration. If we are prepared to accept it, then, this tradition grants us access to a sanctuary of habit and inheritance, with real value in our lives as students. Like Larkin’s churchgoer, though, we are largely content to “peruse” the grounds for a bit, then head for the door without fully appreciating the meaning of our tradition, the gift provided by our predecessors.

As Larkin’s speaker turns to leave the church, he feels himself “at a loss.” Imagining a time when churches “fall completely out of use,” he realizes that “power of some sort will go on,” forcing us to ask, “what remains when disbelief has gone?” If skepticism erodes tradition until, unsupported, it collapses under its own weight, what happens next? What foundation for living in community does cynicism provide? The answer to these questions, I think, also answers the questions I posed a few minutes ago. For of course the speaker's doubts about churches, like doubts about the gown, provide no foundation at all: we need traditions, even when they are discomfiting to our juvenile sensibilities. We need them because the gown, like every Sewanee tradition, provides us with a context, a body of experience from which to act. As Larkin describes a church, so I would describe a gown:

a serious house on serious earth it is / in whose blent air all our compulsions meet, / are recognized, and robed as destinies. / And that much never can be obsolete, / since someone will forever be surprising / a hunger in himself to be more serious / and gravitating with it to this ground, / which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in.

It remains up to us to breathe new life into this serious house, to enact the undefinable but unignorable magic that draws us to this mountain. In a few minutes, the privilege and the responsibility of upholding our tradition will be passed to 240 undergraduates and 19 seminarians. I encourage you all to embrace it, to enjoy it, and to honor it. In doing so, you may surprise yourself.

I will now read the names of the students being gowned today. Please stand, and remain standing, when your name is called. Those who will be conferring gowns, please await the Vice-Chancellor’s instructions before doing so.