

COMMENTS ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEDICATION OF HUMPHREYS HALL  
OCTOBER 6, 2003

Vice Chancellor Cunningham asked me if I might share with you a few thoughts about what inspired us to provide our lead gift support for the new residence hall here at Sewanee. And although I had not foreseen the final installment of our gift to be an additional comprehensive exam, and an oral comprehensive exam at that, I am more than happy to give it a try as it also is a good opportunity for my children here with me to understand why it we consider Sewanee to be so special.

In many ways, it is not hard to be inspired simply by the beauty of the Sewanee campus. From her first visit years ago, my wife Debra came to share my love of Sewanee's landscape, its vistas from Greens View and Morgan's Steep, and of the school's architecture. And, frankly, I made my decision to attend Sewanee for no other reason than that, when I drove into campus on one morning in November of 1974, I was taken with the spectacular sight of the gothic architecture and the trees covered with ice from the ice storm the night before - - all glistening in the sun. Sewanee - - - the place - - - itself is inspirational.

But something more than just the beauty of the mountain caused us to conclude that we should support the growth of the University. In short, we saw the residence hall project as an opportunity for the University to increase the size of the student body - - not just for the sake of growth - - but for the fundamental reason that a larger student body would provide the University the potential to produce more Sewanee graduates.

Why is that important? Let me try to explain.

A couple of years ago I was fortunate enough to have come across Dartmouth English professor Jeffrey Hart's book "*Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe*". Now, I can't really do justice to Hart's work in just a few minutes. Suffice it to say that he suggests, through a survey of the great works of Western Literature (from Homer's *Iliad* and the Bible, to Plato's *Republic*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and finally to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*), that the success and ascendancy of our western civilization has been the result of the dynamic tension between faith and reason. What I found to be particularly inspirational in the context of my experience at Sewanee was contained in the preface where Hart suggests that:

"The goal of education is the citizen . . . one, who if need be, can recreate his own civilization." [In other words,] [t]he citizen, the product of a genuine liberal arts education, should understand his civilization in the large, its shape and texture, its narrative and its major themes, its important areas of thought, its philosophical and religious controversies, its scientific development, its major works of the imagination. . . . The citizen in this sense need not know quantum mechanics, neutron theory, non-Euclidean geometry, or the details of the 12 tone scale, but he should know that they are there and what they mean. . . . That kind of knowledge is the goal of liberal education, the knowledge of the great narrative and other possible narratives and the ability to locate new things in relation to the overall design, and the ability to locate other civilizations and cultures in relation to it."

Not long after I finished reading Hart's book, I attended an alumni event here on campus. One of the programs included a talk by Professor John Reishman in which he described his first days as a young

professor here at Sewanee. To me, Professor Reishman's story captured the essence of what Sewanee is all about.

He related how he, in preparation for his first Shakespeare 101 class, had gone over to the bookstore and ordered sets of certain contemporary literature which he intended to include as part of his syllabus in order to bring out certain themes from Shakespeare in contemporary terms. Not long afterward, apparently, Professor Reishman received a note in his mailbox from English Department Head, Professor Harrison, which said something to the effect: "My dear young man, I have taken the liberty of canceling your recent book order. I will stop by your house on Thursday for a drink to discuss this with you further." Professor Reishman spent the next day or two trying to ascertain first, what he had done wrong, and second and more importantly, what Professor Harrison liked to drink.

On the appointed day and time, Professor Harrison visited Professor Reishman and explained: "You must understand, we have so little time with these young people. We can only afford to teach those works that have stood the test of time."

There it was in a nutshell - - - a sort of Sewanee mission statement: To teach those works which have stood the test of time.

What does this all mean?

Well for Debra and me, what it means is that Sewanee, by teaching those works which have stood the test of time, is engaged in creating what Hart called "citizens" - - - those who understand their civilization and are familiar with what he calls "the great narrative".

And for us, it became clear that we should assist Sewanee in producing even more citizens. By providing resources to enable an increase in enrollment, we could help Sewanee produce more graduates, more Sewanee citizens going out into the world. We viewed this not only as desirable but also as vital to our civil society's ability to remain firmly anchored to time-honored values despite the continuing assault by the tide of situational ethics that we have witnessed over the years.

Because, as Hart goes on to say:

"In a democracy such as ours, the goal must be to have as many people as possible grasp their civilization this way because they participate in the governing function, either directly or indirectly, and because they help to create the moral and educational tone of the social environment we all share.

In sum, there is a profound need for more Sewanee men and women, for more of Hart's "citizens", to go out and make their mark in the world of ideas. For Debra and me, it has been our pleasure and privilege to help make this happen.

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