

Reflections on Lessons I've Learned

Delivered by W. Marichal Gentry, C'86

at

**“Beyond the Gates”
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I am extremely humbled and proud to be here on this evening inhabiting this special space, and dwelling among you, for: *Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity* (Psalm 133).

I appreciate the opportunity to provide reflections on lessons I've learned from my career and my life, and to affirm how you, as a Sewanee student, are well-suited to rise to your own challenges.

First, I'd like to thank Kim Heitzenrater for inviting me here to participate in the 7th Annual *Beyond the Gates* program. She, like Lisa (Howick), and many others on the mountain, is a Sewanee treasure. Her dedication and commitment to Sewanee are remarkable.

Kim epitomizes what I have come to appreciate and expect when I interact with most Sewanee graduates. She's thoughtful and hardworking; she's one step ahead of the game, and she plans *early*. She wrote to me nine months ago, asking if I would serve as this year's speaker. I appreciated having such early notification, because it's given me plenty of time to reflect on what I wanted to say to you this evening.

As this year's keynote speaker, I am honored to follow in the footsteps of two most recent speakers at this event, both of whom I have the pleasure of knowing and admiring. One recent speaker was Dr. Linda Mayes, the first woman valedictorian at Sewanee, and known worldwide for her work at Yale's Child Study Center. I first met Dr. Mayes at a Sewanee alumni reception during my first year at Yale. I've gotten to know Dr. Mayes, and she is a delightful and inspiring woman.

Another recent speaker is Dr. Serena Satcher, an accomplished physician, who excels in musculoskeletal physical medicine and rehabilitation. Serena happens to be the daughter of Dr. Robert Satcher, president of St. Paul's College, the sister of Robert Satcher, Jr., also a physician, and currently a NASA astronaut, and she is the niece of former US Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher.

By the way, to a certain extent, Serena is responsible for my decision to attend Sewanee. First impressions matter to me, and Serena gave my family and me a tour of Sewanee during our very first visit to the Mountain. She painted for me an honest and fair picture of Sewanee, and all that I should expect as a student should I get in, and should I choose to attend. As a result of her honesty and wisdom, Sewanee quickly moved to the top of my college choices and became an academically and socially viable choice for my education. So I thank Serena and countless others, like Mr. (Eric) Benjamin, for example, who is here with his lovely wife, Michelle.

I'm sure you, like I, have many people in your lives to thank for guiding and paving the way for you. For me, there are too many people to name here—though I will take this time to say that the wisdom that my mentors bestowed on me and the great care that they continue to show has not gone unheard, unfelt, or unappreciated—and I can never say thank you enough.

I've been asked to speak for about 20 minutes or so and to share a few life lessons I've learned. I have chosen three basic points that I've found to have sustained me through the years. They are: Number one—get to know people, number two, value and make the most of the liberal arts, and number three, define your purpose in life.

So here's what I'd like for each of you to do. While I've been asked, essentially, to talk about my story, I'd like for you to take this opportunity to think about your own, and about the manner in which you are pursuing your own dreams and ambitions.

So I begin with the first lesson.

I grew up in a small, rural town in Tennessee; when I arrived at Sewanee, I had a very limited world view. I never could say that I wasn't willing to know more about people—I just didn't have many opportunities in my homogeneous small town. My limited world view would have remained just that had I not *actively* (and I emphasize the word actively) chosen to get to know and interact with people.

When I arrived at Sewanee as a student, the deliberate choices I made to get to know people shaped the personal and professional experiences that I enjoy today, and developed real, useful skills that have readied me to assume positions with great authority, responsibility, and visibility. I have been fortunate to lead and advise people, serve as an agent for change, and on multiple occasions, be able to create, implement, and follow through on a vision.

The common denominator for each position I've held in twenty-five years of professional work has involved working with or serving people in one way or another. Whether I was working at a bank, in college admissions, in a pediatric hospital, or as a dean, I always have been involved with people from all over the world. Having the ability to interact and be effective with people does not come without a bit of practice or without finding interesting and quirky ways to get to know more about people.

My most memorable moments at Sewanee were the ones in which I was engaged in conversations with my classmates both in and out of the classroom. I believe that the most basic skills that people can attain (for free) are those skills that involve being acutely proficient listeners and developing an ability to exchange ideas with people, **all people**, from all backgrounds. It was extremely important to my learning that I interacted with folks who didn't look like me (which was easy to accomplish at Sewanee in the 1980's; most people didn't look like me), **and** to engage with people who also didn't share the same personal beliefs as I (be they religious, political, or other). I wanted to know about people, why they believed what they believed, and how they came to the decisions that they made. I also wanted them to know about me, to learn to respect my beliefs, and I encouraged them to ask informed questions of me.

With the rapid advances in technology, we have come to occupy a world filled with sound bites, passerby chit-chat, and superficial friendships and relationships; we know little about other groups' beliefs or customs, other than what we might have heard on the latest radio or TV talk show. As a result, we often develop a distorted view of other groups, and we, too, are often misunderstood to be something we're not.

I strongly contend that leaving our awareness and understanding of people solely to what we hear on the radio, what we see on television, and what we read on blogs, certain newspapers, or tabloids, undermines the very essence of what it means to be culturally competent.

The term, cultural competence, surfaced in the mid-eighties, when healthcare organizations recognized that nurses, doctors, and hospital administrators needed to have an awareness of the people that they treated, and that when a hospital official displayed a poor sense of a patient's culture, this often translated into a poor diagnosis and a poor overall healthcare experience for the patient and family.

The term cultural competence now is applied universally, and a person's high level of cultural competence is valued in business, education, and in every imaginable occupation. So, why, I ask, wouldn't one have a strong desire to be culturally competent?

I believe that in any profession you select, highly effective people have at the core of their existence, a fundamental understanding of other people, regardless of a person's race, ethnicity, origin, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or other life experience; and at the very least, are willing to learn more about people who aren't like them.

So if you haven't made it a practice of having in-depth and candid discussions with your peers in your residence halls, in the library, or in the dining hall—conversations that might last into the wee hours of the

morning and that consists of any range of social, political, or religious issues, I challenge you to do so. Get in the habit of inviting someone you don't know well to lunch, dinner, or coffee.

The point I'm trying to make is that you should always open yourselves to a world full of beautiful, interesting people—a world that extends far beyond the comforts to which you might be accustomed. So if you believe you've mastered this area of your life, then go out and find more interesting people to meet. There are plenty of them out there.

Now to the second point I'd like to make concerning the value of a liberal arts education. As you all know, Sewanee provides a superb liberal arts education, and I can say with unfettered pride that my Sewanee experience played a defining role in the career paths I've taken, and in the amazing opportunities to which I've been afforded.

I don't know about your experience, but as long as I can remember, I have always been interested in any number of unique and interesting activities. I have a wide range of professional and personal interests, and I love dabbling in this or that activity at work or outside of the office. I never wanted to be tied down to any particular activity. For example, one day, I'd be performing in a theatrical production, and on other days, I'd be playing basketball. Throughout my youth, leading up to my decision about which college I would attend, I was cautioned by well meaning people not to spread myself too thinly, and that I needed to choose a college, learn a trade, have a career, and stick to it. Don't be a "jack of all trades and master of none", I was told.

I listened to conventional wisdom, at least at first, though I found being one dimensional quite limiting. I respect my elders, family members, and friends, but I respectfully stopped listening to their advice on this particular issue. Sometimes there **will** be times when you just know that your intuitions are right. If this ever happens to you, I suggest that you go with your gut.

When I began my college career, I learned more about the liberal arts curriculum, which is designed to provide general knowledge and intellectual skills, rather than technical skills. There is nothing wrong with schools that provide technical training. For me, the liberal arts provided the flexibility that I found, well, *liberating*.

As you may know, my first professional job out of college was as a banker. I worked for what is now known as Wells Fargo, which is headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina. During my college years, the federal banking regulations were changed, and banks were able to merge with other banks to become more powerful and competitive. Due to these changes, interstate banking became possible.

At the same time banks were expanding, consumers became more demanding for quality service, and banks and other service industries began to see the utility in hiring people who could communicate, think critically, and write well. Banking recruiters came to liberal arts colleges in droves looking for talented people to fill management positions, and they were not concerned whether or not students, like me, had any banking or business experience. Banks wanted people who could write, who could hold an intelligent conversation, and who could lead other people. Banking recruiters believed that the mechanics of banking could be taught easily.

I stress that when you begin your job search, you should make the most of, and I'll even go as far as to say, with all due respect, exploit, the fact that you received and successfully mastered your liberal arts education. Be able to demonstrate that the critical and analytical skills, in addition to the writing and verbal skills that you acquired in the Sewanee classroom have equipped you with an abundance of useful tools which render you a highly marketable employee in the workplace—any workplace.

So the point that I'd like for you to take away, is this: Resist questioning, devaluing, minimizing, or rationalizing the reason you chose to attend a liberal arts college. Believe in the skills that you are acquiring, and use them to your advantage. More importantly, continue honing your critical and analytical thinking skills by journaling, reading, and speaking. These skills are just as important now, (perhaps even more important), than they were when I was your age.

So far, I've stressed the lessons I've learned about getting to know people and, I've shared with you how I believe you should consider using the liberal arts to your advantage.

And now to my final point about defining your purpose in life. I love quotations. I have collected them for years, and I have used them in speeches, have taken phrases from quotes to develop workshops, and have used excerpts from quotations and tailored them to create themes for training sessions that I've facilitated.

A few years ago, I came upon a quote about quotes, and I read where Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "*I hate quotations. Tell me what **you** know*" (Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, May 1849). After pondering his statement, I decided in many ways, he was right. What is **my** own truth? What do **I** really know, and how do I share what I know with others.

It was during this time when I decided that I would enter a season of deep self-examination, reflection, and renewal, and that I would ask and try to answer two basic questions. The first question I asked myself was, "What truly fulfills me?" The second question I asked was, "What would I say to someone who asked me to share my strategies that best define how I live my best life and face my toughest challenges in the pursuit of my dreams and passions?"

Answering the first question about what fulfills me was not as difficult to answer. For me, having a good life and being happy don't require having the most money, the biggest house, or the trendiest clothes. Those things are nice, but they don't truly define or fulfill me as I'd believed they would.

The thing that truly fulfills me is knowing that my small contributions to the universe are meaningful to someone in some significant way. For this, I believe, is the definition of leadership—that is—giving of yourself to others, so that they may benefit, prosper, or move forward OR backward.

Backward? You might be asking, "Why would you ever encourage someone to move backward? Aren't we always taught to go forward, get ahead, advance, and get to the front of the line?"

Yes, and I believe that we should think this way. But not always. Think about it. There are times when we know we must step back, retreat, or move in the opposite direction. Doing so often can offer us perspective in the midst of a difficult situation. I can recall numerous times when taking a step back has resulted in a positive outcome. Sometimes, it makes sense to move in reverse.

Answering the second question and coming up with a list of personal strategies that define my best life took a bit of thought and consideration; the consequence of making such a list really fostered a renewed self-assurance and confidence that had become dormant. Defining my purpose and developing my own thoughts and ideas about how I wanted my life's arc to bend left me more focused and in control of my own destiny. And most importantly, it freed me.

So in keeping with the idea of telling you what **I** know, I decided that that I wouldn't try to find a quote to insert into this speech as I am prone to do when I give a talk. Rather I will relay my own thoughts to you about what I know, and before I take my seat, share 12 of my always evolving life principles with you.

I encourage you to create your own list, and observe how it manifests in your own life over time, and how, ultimately, it might provide inspiration to others. So as you listen to what I'm about to say, please know that I've stirred into my principles a dollop of humility, patience, temperance, persistence, resilience, understanding, empathy, imagination, energy, and above all, **love**—each of which I believe to be necessary ingredients.

So here is my list:

Number one.

Embrace difference in others and become globally sophisticated around issues of multiculturalism, pluralism, and diversity, and then watch how the hug you give yourself broadens your perspective and expands your personal and professional opportunities.

Number two.

Enjoy the learning process, and concede that it's a life-long endeavor. One can never learn too much.

Number three.

Create or produce something artistically at least one time per year and present it to a friend or a group of people. It could be something as simple as:

Writing a poem or a song or reading an excerpt from a story you've written.

Or something more challenging as:

Giving a recital

Filming an adventure you've taken, editing the footage into a movie and screening it with your family or friends

Creating a piece of art.

Develop the habit of exercising the right side of your brain.

Number four.

Find a spiritual home, a center, a base, a community, a support network.

Number five.

Honor traditions, yet be willing to try something different. Create new traditions and be amenable to change.

Number six.

Outside of your small world, there are human needs; take a look at the larger world and be of service to people in need.

Number seven.

Find a mentor for yourself and become a mentor to someone else. Paying it forward never felt so personally rewarding.

Number eight.

Simplify. There is nothing as easy as simplicity.

Number nine.

Clear your conscience—apologize. There is someone out there to whom you owe an apology.

Number ten.

Don't take yourself too seriously. Laugh at yourself sometimes; self-deprecation affirms your imperfections.

Number eleven.

Find a connection to the natural world. Take a hike in the woods, get outside and breathe the air, climb a tree, lie in the grass—dream about—and chart your next adventure.

And number 12,

Identify your passions and pursue them with zeal. Your passions do not have to be related to your livelihood, but if they are, then—**well done.**

Thanks for listening to me this evening. God bless and keep you all. Ecce Quam Bonum!