

VITAL SPEECHES *of the day*

VOLUME LXXXIII

No. 11 / November 2017

Impartial. Constructive. Authentic.

310 _____
As President of the United States,
I Will Always Put America First
DONALD TRUMP, President, United States of America

315 _____
What Foreign Policy Is
BERNIE SANDERS, Senator, Vermont

321 _____
We Will Move On Because Brexit
Isn't Everything
JEAN-CLAUDE JUNCKER, President, European Commission

328 _____
We Firmly Believe This Is the
Responsible Path
JEFF SESSIONS, Attorney General,
United States of America

329 _____
A Once-in-a-Generation
Opportunity for Tax Reform
DONALD TRUMP, President, United States of America

334 _____
A National Recommitment to
Free Speech on Campus Is Long
Overdue
JEFF SESSIONS, Attorney General,
United States of America

337 _____
A Serious Pursuit of Truth
BETSY DEVOS, Secretary of Education,
United States of America

342 _____
My Mother's Story
DANA ROBBINS, Vice President & Group Publisher,
Metroland Media Group

344 _____
Wisdom and Eloquence
SEAN PATRICK O'ROURKE, Director, Center for
Speaking & Listening, and Professor of Rhetoric
and American Studies, The University of the South

And to that I would add that we have accomplished much as a nation, much of which we can be justifiably proud; make no mistake, I am a proud Canadian. But much of the heavy lifting in our nation building is still to be done.

Inclusion must be at the heart of that work. And meaningful reconciliation with our First Nations, Metis and Inuit must be our shared commitment.

When I returned from Batoche this summer, my first stop was at my

mother's nursing home. I told her about the trip, what my brother and I had learned about Marguerite and Joseph Patrice, and I told her we should be proud to come from such stock.

As is her nature now, Mom sat quietly, never uttering a word, and watched me while I spoke.

If this was a movie, I would tell you that some small part of my recitation penetrated my mother's consciousness, and that she gave her son some

signal of comprehension, perhaps a smile, maybe an almost imperceptible nod of the head.

But this isn't a movie.

And I know in my heart that no part of that story was understood. The telling of it came too late for Rita Jeanne Dumas.

My mother is still living, but she will never know the pride our family has in our rediscovered Metis roots.

This is my mother's story.

WISDOM AND ELOQUENCE

There Is. No. Immaculate. Perception. Each of us will always have a somewhat different perspective on the world, its many issues and concerns, and the several routes forward. And that, while agreement on any of these points may be rare, constructive disagreement is a goal worthy of a liberally educated citizen in a republic.

Address by SEAN PATRICK O'ROURKE, Director, Center for Speaking & Listening, and Professor of Rhetoric and American Studies, The University of the South



Delivered at the Dedication of the Learning Commons, duPont Library, The University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, Sept. 11, 2017

Thank you, Vicki, and thanks to all of you for coming to the dedication of this wonderful facility.

We gather this evening to thank those whose generosity, effort, ingenuity, and love of learning imagined this space, turned imagination into blueprints and sketches, held countless meetings and discussions, and together created a learning environment that may well be the envy of liberal arts colleges everywhere.

I add my thanks to Vicki's and want also to thank the team of builders—electricians, carpenters, masons, refinishers, and carpet-layers—who toiled all summer long to meet an impossibly tight schedule and hard deadline and did so with good cheer and incredible skill. Thanks also to Vicki Sells, who oversaw every part of the project, herded many wayward cats, and shepherded us to this moment in this place. Thanks to my colleagues Professor Stephanie Batkie, Director of the Writing Center, and Professor Melody Lehn, Assistant Director of the Center for Speaking & Listening. Finally, thanks also to

the members of the original Quality Enhancement Program Committee, a group that, two years ago, saw better than most what a space like this might allow Sewanee students and faculty to do.

In addition to giving thanks, however, we also gather to mark this moment in Sewanee's long and distinguished history of contributions to liberal education.

Sewanee has always been both a guardian of the traditions of liberal education and an innovator when changed circumstances and the altered conditions of our existence have demanded them.

Sixteen years ago today the circumstances and conditions of our existence changed completely. We are still feeling the effects of 9/11 and its aftermath: Recent independent polls by Pew, Gallup, and *USA Today* all indicate that we are more divided now than ever before.

That division is evident in our use of corrosive, abusive, and hateful speech, our failure to listen to each other, our unwillingness to research

and investigate the controversies that divide us, our willing and willful ignorance of science and scientific communications, and our tendency to let raw power replace informed debate, reasoned deliberation, and considered judgment. Our republic, commentators now tell us, is threatened more than at any time since the Civil War.

I am reminded of a time over two millennia ago, when the Roman statesman and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero saw his own republic threatened in similar ways—fraught with internal strife and intrigue, susceptible to the allure of dictatorship, and vulnerable to the machinations of rogues and tyrants. Deeply concerned and forced into exile from Rome, Cicero retired to his villa, thought deeply, and wrote to remedy the ills of his society.

In 55 BCE he produced his magnum opus, *De Oratore*, in which he articulated a kind of operative philosophy of civic leadership. At its heart was rhetoric, the art of speaking and listening well.

"*Sapientia et eloquentia*," wisdom and eloquence, were the intertwined virtues of his ideal civic leaders, virtues essential to the health and welfare of the commonweal. And liberal education was the means and the environment in which wisdom and eloquence were to be cultivated.

The duPont Library's Learning Commons, the space we dedicate today, is the beginning of *our* answer to *our* civic crisis. If the purpose of liberal education is, as Cicero suggested, to cultivate wisdom and eloquence in tomorrow's civic leaders, then the Learning Commons, the Writing Center, and the Center for Speaking & Listening are Sewanee's innovative return to . . . well . . . to a tradition we have long understood in theory, if not fully in practice.

As you know, the Learning Commons includes not only the beautiful space you see around us.

It also includes the enormous resources, both electronic and printed, of a superb college library.

It includes the research assistance of a learned, skilled, and dedicated library staff.

It includes state-of-the-art technology.

And it includes, most importantly, a team of scholars, tutors, fellows, and teachers committed to working

together to help every student achieve, in her own way and in his own field of study, "*sapientia et eloquentia*," wisdom and eloquence, never one . . . without the other.

Our hope, and the goal toward which we are all dedicated, is that Sewanee students will emerge ready and able to do their part:

To elevate the level of public discourse in our all-too-rancorous republic and to listen to one another even as we disagree;

To answer the bigoted and uninformed tweet with reasoned, informed, and considered judgment—to read and write, speak and listen as befits a liberally educated adult;

To meet the defamatory utterance with passion, guided and directed by reason, but nonetheless forceful and clear and strong;

To speak truth to power even when the risk is great and the fear nearly paralyzing;

To pursue knowledge, to weigh evidence no matter how contradictory or complex; to distinguish what is real from what is concocted, to engage questions even when they are difficult;

To eschew the easy talking points of partisan propagandists and instead embrace the nuances and complexities *always* present in any worthwhile debate or discussion;

To understand, in the end, that *There. Is. No. Immaculate. Perception.* That each of us will always have a somewhat different perspective on the world, its many issues and concerns, and the several routes forward. And that, while agreement on any of these points may be rare, *constructive disagreement* is a goal worthy of a liberally educated citizen in a republic.

Now, you may think I am asking too much of people so young. I look out and I see Codell Craddock and Victoria Pallos and Michael Vaughn and Simon Boes—some of our new student tutors—and I see your point. But I think they are up to the challenge. Just over 50 years ago, Robert F. Kennedy addressed a group of students in South Africa—at the time a republic with more than a few problems yet to be solved—and he said this:

This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease.

"*Sapientia et eloquentia*." Wisdom and eloquence. These are our goals. Our students are our hope. And working together, in this beautiful facility, we can achieve and fulfill both.

Thank you very much.