



NEW USES FOR OLD IDEAS

Adventures
in the
Liberal
Arts



BY THOMAS LAKEMAN, C'86

A theatre major and onetime performer for Cirque Du Soleil, Jon Morris, C'99, now owns a design studio whose work covers a wide spectrum from clothing to public art installations.



IT ALL STARTED OUT as a quest for something to eat. “One Saturday in April 2008, I impulsively bought an entire flat of strawberries at the Santa Monica Farmers’ Market,” says Kevin West, C’95, “and realized there was no way to eat them all before they went bad. Then I remembered the strawberry freezer jam my Gran used to put up on her farm in Blount County, Tennessee. Since then, I’ve become obsessed with making preserves taste the way I think they should.”

Nowadays, Kevin (who serves as West Coast editor of *W* magazine when he’s not canning fruit) cooks up recipes that Gran West probably never dreamed of — such as quinces in honey, first described by Pliny in his *Naturalis Historia* circa 79 A.D. It’s not just fruit that gets preserved, West says, but the culture that produced it.

“Preserves are simply sugar and fruit,” he observes. “A good cook can coax amazing flavors out of the right ingredients. Still, it’s our own deep associations — like my memories of my grandmother’s farm — that add layers of complexity to food. Cooking is narrative. Recipes are vehicles for stories.”

Recipes are vehicles for stories. An appropriate sentiment for someone educated in the liberal arts.

William Alexander Percy once vividly portrayed Sewanee as “a place to be hopelessly sentimental about and to unfit one for everything except the good life.” Seventy years down the road, Percy’s encomium continues to inform every conversation we have about the liberal arts at the University of the South. And yet what precisely do these words mean — and how closely should we embrace them?

The “place to be hopelessly sentimental about” is easy enough to describe: a ramble of deep forests and sandstone buildings wreathed in sheltering clouds, a pocket kingdom of wakeful nostalgia and perpetual twilight, where study and conversation alike pass in an animated haze; where the water is excellent but by no means the most popular drink; where you know the names of everyone you meet, dogs included; where there is solitude without loneliness and a thousand ways to volunteer; where the student union is a “common,” the campus a “domain,”



and the vice chancellor is also the mayor; where comping seniors and white-tailed deer run free; and where the sure knowledge that Yea, Sewanee’s Right is manifest even in the altar window of All Saints’ Chapel that illuminates Jesus Christ crowned in majesty over ... well, All Saints’ Chapel. Its gates enclose time, not space. It casts spells unknown in Prospero’s book. It is the Mountain, the Domain. Home.

Still it is only a place, and it can’t follow you into the world outside. Rather, it is the liberal arts curriculum itself that becomes the Sewanee graduate’s traveling partner. The list of academic disciplines has changed since Martianus Capella codified the *trivium* and *quadrivium* in the fifth century A.D., but its purpose remains the same. Christopher McDonough, associate professor of classical languages, summarizes this as “new uses for old ideas.” If there is controversy in that definition — and it wouldn’t be much good if there weren’t — it centers on the second word. Do we “use” our education in the practical sense, or does it exist to prepare us “not for labor but for life”? In the swim-or-die of our daily affairs, is it advisable to be unfit for everything except the good life? Is it even possible? Mary chose the good portion by studying at Jesus’s feet, but sooner or later we all have to join Martha in the kitchen. And, as Kevin West discovered, the quest to fill our bellies can lead to wonderful adventures.

What you are reading now is the result of a decidedly unscientific experiment to better understand what part a

Kevin West, C’95, edits a fashion magazine (*W*) and a blog about preserving food (savingtheseason.com).

liberal arts education ought to play in our lives, testing the received wisdom that a general education can give us an advantage in *any* profession — no matter how esoteric — by teaching us to think more clearly, speak more confidently, and adapt more quickly than those who specialize.

I began my investigation with a come-all-ye (on Facebook and Sewanee-centric web groups) for college alumni to participate in an informal survey, a list greatly augmented by suggestions from the alumni office and faculty. Thus I soon became acquainted with a noted painter and raconteur, a talent agent in the music industry, several corporate philanthropists, a one-time female boxing contender, a former acrobat with Cirque du Soleil,

saver for the University — an argument that the regents found most persuasive.

“This experience of translating benefit to financial benefit was an eye-opener for me,” says Stevenson, who now serves as a private consultant to non-profit and government agencies working on sustainability and the public interest. It was on one such venture at Wal-Mart’s Bentonville, Ark., headquarters that she found many of her views shared by a representative of the Environmental Defense Fund. That kindred spirit turned out to be a fellow Sewanee alumna — Michelle Mauthe Harvey, C’76.

“Environmental groups used to take the attitude that the only way to make Big Business clean up its act was to take it to court,” says Harvey. “We’ve made much greater progress by speaking to corporations in their own self-interest. A colleague once told me that people love partnerships the same way they love Christmas trees: They’ll gather round to admire it, but they won’t stay unless they see a present with their name on it.”

Harvey is fond of quoting ecologist Aldo Leopold: “The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant, ‘What good is it?’... If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts?” One might easily speak of education in the same terms. If knowledge seems useless, perhaps that is only because its usefulness has not yet been found. Who but a fool would choose to be rid of any part of it?

Martha Stevenson chooses to embrace it all. “I often think of myself as a conglomerate,” she says, “a collection of little pebbles, some larger than others, all representing people I’ve known and experiences I’ve had. What is really me — Martha — is the matrix holding it all together. Sewanee is a very large pebble in the rock and I don’t know a way to separate my Sewanee education from my development into the woman I am today.”

DIVING DEEP

A mineral analogy might not come as quickly to non-geologists, but the sentiment is held by many. Knowledge is discrete; it’s the imagination that synthesizes. “The benefit of studying so many different disciplines is that you’re forced to dive deep,” says Peter Dillon, C’96. “When you take history, you learn to think like an historian. When you take philosophy, you learn to think like a philosopher. The ‘eureka moment’ happens when you begin to find ways of connecting those deep seams of knowledge on your own.”

As head of sponsorship and events for UBS in the Americas, Dillon believes that his experience “diving deep” has helped him navigate the subtle pathways of corporate funding. “Underwriting art and music is

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a designer of custom-made skirts, and an assistant stage director for the New York Metropolitan Opera. Also met on the journey were homeschoolers, military officers, a submarine pilot who once traveled under the North Pole, a past employee of a certain unnamed clandestine intelligence service, a software designer who teaches computers to think, a manager of new food items for a national restaurant chain, a retired FBI agent who was personally sworn in by J. Edgar Hoover, and the owner of a sockeye salmon fishery. All of them earned their undergraduate degrees at the University of the South. There is not space enough here to contain them all. What follows are just a few of their travelers’ tales.

LIFE AS A CONGLOMERATE

“Don’t memorize flash cards,” a classmate told forestry major Martha Stevenson, C’00. “Memorize forests.” The advice opened her eyes. From then on she began to study not just isolated facts, but the natural system as a whole. “Sewanee is uniquely equipped with a 13,000-acre textbook,” Stevenson says, a sentiment that echoes Emerson’s injunction to “study nature” as a path to self-trust. In fact, many alumni report that confident self-expression is the most important skill they learned at Sewanee. During her tenure as a student trustee, Stevenson presented the Board of Regents with her student group’s findings that a properly managed recycling program could be a money

naturally good for a company's image," he says. "More fundamentally, though, it's about stewardship. It represents the corporation's awareness of its obligations to the community."

Like Stevenson and West, Dillon credits Sewanee's emphasis on rhetoric. "You can't hide in class at the University of the South," he says. "You can't fake it. You have to articulate exactly what you mean and stand by it, and that gives you a special kind of confidence."

Any number of avenues seem open to those who can write well. Carlotta Cooper, C'84, writes professionally about animals, and once put her Sewanee education to work in an article concerning the attitudes of Greek philosophers toward birds and beasts. Caroline Morton Huffman, C'86, found an unexpected use for her English degree at the pharmaceutical company Novartis, where she monitors experimental drug studies. "A lot of what I do is simple communication," she says. "I found to my great surprise that I was fascinated by medicine and that I enjoyed the investigative aspects of my job."

Huffman is one of a growing number of professionals who work at home, allowing them to devote more time to the education of their own children. For some, homeschooling is a fulltime occupation. "The 'eureka moments' come when your children begin to set their own goals and drive towards them," says Bess Moffat, C'85, who remembers the day that one of her four children began to troubleshoot his own spelling errors. "You begin to learn to pace the lessons according to the questions they're asking."

"When my daughter reached the third grade, she decided she wanted to take Latin," says Kelley Mather, C'87. "I thought, 'Why not?'" Her fine arts major came in handy while tutoring a Japanese student through *Moby-Dick*. When language barriers finally proved insurmountable, she relates, "I resorted to drawing pictures to explain things. I am probably the only English teacher to *draw* my way through Melville!"

The great white whale also shows up in the published writings of Laura Saunders, C'76, who combines critical scholarship with her career as a tax journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*. "Looking at *Moby-Dick* alongside readings in economy theory," she says, "I found the connections fascinating. Melville wrote the great American business novel because whaling was our first oil business. The industry's direct descendants include General Motors, Berkshire Hathaway, Standard Oil, and R.H. Macy. The foundations of these firms are, in a way, right there in Melville's mighty work."

Here again we encounter the intersection of art and commerce, nature and narrative: whether the subject is

whales and Wall Street, Pliny's quinces or Peter Quince, Sewanee graduates seem drawn to what Saunders refers to as "alternate interpretation" — an unlikely connection that illuminates disparate elements in a new way. Call it connecting the dots or the matrix that binds the pebbles together. Call it imagination. If education is meant to foster anything, surely it is this.



A TELLING ADVANTAGE

Not everyone out there is a fan of the liberal arts. Penelope Trunk, a blogger and founder of the aptly named social network Brazen Careerist, goes so far as to proclaim the idea of paying for a liberal arts education "over." Since life provides experience and the Internet provides facts and opportunities for discussion, she argues, it's not necessary to attend some elitist private college to learn critical thinking. One could, of course, use the same logic to suggest that since the Internet provides facts about human anatomy and the streets are filled with the sick and wounded, it's not necessary to attend medical school. Still, there is sufficient truth in the charge to provoke a wistful pang of *ubi sunt?*, as if modernity had power to scatter all of William Alexander Percy's dreamy scholars into the mist like so many ghosts at cockcrow. Whither the good life in the age of Wikipedia? Whither Dubose and Lytle and Abbott Martin?

There are, however, flawed assumptions in Trunk's argument. One is that knowledge is solely about getting answers, when it's also about knowing how to frame questions — a skill that's difficult to master without a trusted

At Sewanee, forestry major Martha Stevenson, C'00, learned to look beyond isolated facts to study natural systems as a whole.

guide. Sewanee professors are mentoring tomorrow's physicians and scientists in the disciplines of research and publication. One cannot imagine achieving this without good teachers, not to mention a first-class laboratory.

Further, Trunk seems to imply that since liberal arts colleges are devoted to tradition, they must also be in retreat from progress. Of course, the idea of progress is itself a tradition, and a very old one at that. Innovation and scientific objectivity are as much a part of the liberal arts as Shakespeare's plays or the commentaries of Julius Caesar.

It would be difficult to imagine a field of study more on the front lines of modern technology than artificial intelligence. This is precisely what Rayid Ghani, C'99, is

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doing with his double major in mathematics and computer science. "My job is less about computers than it is about coming up with new ideas and solving problems," he says. "Yes, I couldn't have done what I'm doing now without specialization and grad school, but I couldn't have done it without a liberal arts education either."

In his native Pakistan, the last two years of Ghani's high school education had been devoted to just three subjects — math, physics, and chemistry. At first, the courses he had to take in English, history, and religion seemed useless by comparison. "I'd decided to get through the first year and then transfer to an engineering school," he says. "Then I realized that I had not only come to like the place and the people, but also the liberal arts philosophy. I decided to stay at Sewanee and I'm glad I made that decision."

Ghani's AI research with Accenture is principally in the arena of data mining, developing algorithms whose applications are practically limitless — everything from predicting the likelihood of heart attacks to preventing the next terrorist attack. "The common thread in my work is making computers smarter so they can use all this widely scattered data to solve a variety of problems."

Making connections. Seeking patterns. If human beings can teach computers the cognitive skills that took us millions of years to achieve, then does it suggest that we are making ourselves obsolete — or does it perhaps demonstrate our continuing success in finding new uses

for old ideas? Problem solving is not a uniquely human trait (the bird feeder hasn't been made yet that a squirrel couldn't outwit), but we seem to be better at it than many animals, even our closest evolutionary cousins. As recently as 24,000 years ago, early humans were still competing with Neanderthals for food. Where are the Neanderthals today? Did we out-hunt them or flat-out murder them? Did we just have better fight songs?

Or was it perhaps our ability to connect the dots that gave us a telling advantage?

I once heard a paleoanthropologist observe that Neanderthals do not appear to have mastered the techniques of preserving food for later use — no Gran Wests in the whole bunch. This could suggest that Neanderthals weren't dumb, they just lacked a capacity for seeing ahead. After all, Neanderthals buried their dead, just as early *Homo Sapiens* did. Our ancestors made tools, and so did the Neanderthals. Yet one thing the Neanderthals didn't do — and Cro-Magnons did do — was to bury their ancestors with tools in the grave. Which leads to a tantalizing hypothesis: Is it just possible that, whatever their capabilities, the Neanderthals never made the small but astounding leap to conceiving of another realm beyond the physical, where the dead might still need their tools? That they never quite developed a gift for metaphor, conceiving of life and death as a pilgrimage, as Chaucer did? And that our ancestors' talent for metaphor and narrative — evidenced not just in fossilized traces of dried fish, but also in the highly detailed cave paintings of Lascaux — might have given early humans an edge.

If so, then perhaps self-expression and good narrative skills are not simply luxuries, not if they mean the difference between eating and extinction. And perhaps they really do point us toward something higher and deeper than mere survival.

OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE

The term "liberal arts," once narrowly referred to the education proper to a free man — Latin *liberus* — as opposed to the vocational education reserved for slaves (the stereotype that the liberal arts are elitist must be very old indeed). More broadly, it refers to the education necessary for a citizen to shoulder the burdens of liberty. High among these is an idea as old as St. Luke: that from those to whom much is given, much is expected.

Jon Morris, C'99, is just one of many who has sought to obey this injunction. A theatre major and onetime performer for Cirque Du Soleil, he now owns The Windmill Factory, a design studio whose work covers a wide spectrum from clothing to public art installations. His latest project, Clothing the Line (www.thewindmillfactory.com) will be

an interactive performance installation designed to raise awareness, generate dialogue, and spark policy change to end homelessness by telling the stories of New York's 35,500 homeless. "I named my company The Windmill Factory because it's always in motion," Morris says, "but mainly as a nod to Don Quixote, who never stopped chasing a dream."

The stereotype of the small private college as academic country club starts to wear thin once you meet the Rev. Becca Stevens, C'85, author of numerous inspirational books and co-founder of Nashville's Magdalene House, a residential community for women with a criminal history of prostitution and drug abuse. Avery Tucker, C'95, a double major in philosophy and fine arts, manages more than \$15 billion in nonprofit endowments as senior vice president and philanthropic consultant for Wachovia. Rondal Richardson, C'91, summarized the call to service in this way: "What you learn at Sewanee is to give more, do more, and lead more. The education you get here is amazing — but it's completely useless if you don't take it outside the bubble, out into the world."

FASHIONING THE SELF

I began my quest hoping to identify a unifying trait among the Sewanee alumni I interviewed. I did find one, though it wasn't at all what I expected. I'd invited my correspondents to talk about their memories of the Mountain, to describe the paths that brought them to their current professions. They were happy to give these answers, but they never seemed to be the focus of the conversation. Instead, what these alumni seem to want to talk about most is what they are doing *now*. Learning is not simply the exercise of memory, nor is Sewanee merely a museum of nostalgia. Education is, as the term implies, a leading outward — a means of exploration, of staying highly focused in the here and now.

Frenchie Bunch, C'99, designs custom-made skirts — everything from cocktail to run-to-the-grocery attire. I asked her to define beauty, and this was her answer: "Whoever it is that's walking into my shop today." Sometimes, she says, beauty is the 90-year-old woman who wants sequins and sparkle and shine. Sometimes it's the awkward teenager who's designed her own prom dress, and winds up looking more beautiful than she ever thought possible. "Sometimes it's just seeing my studio on an average weekday," she adds, "with people working and shopping and fitting and being fitted. Then I have to take a step back and appreciate how very real this dream has become."

"Man is fashioned, not born," wrote Erasmus, noting that education permits us not only to fashion but con-

tinually refashion ourselves. Or, as Professor of English Pamela Macfie suggested, "The crowning gift of a liberal arts education is the capacity to re-invent yourself." To fashion and reinvent: a practice that is as fitting to a maker of skirts as it is to a maker of jams who is also a fashion journalist, or to a tax journalist who also studies Melville, or to a teacher of Melville who homeschools her child, or to a homeschool teacher who married a forestry major, or even to another forestry major who is now an agent to



country-western and folk musicians.

"You have to trust the messenger." This is how Jay Williams, C'94, describes the kind of client he seeks out as an agent for William Morris Endeavor Entertainment. "If you don't believe what they're singing, you won't want to hear it." Williams believes that all relationships — whether between a musician and her fans, or between a talent agent and his clients — depend on trust and integrity, and something more. Something that may well be the single most important lesson that any human being can learn: empathy.

"In a negotiation, your capacity for seeing both sides of an issue is everything," Williams concludes. "One of the greatest things I left the Mountain with was the ability to appreciate differences in people and experience. I credit that ability with almost any success I've enjoyed in my career." ■

*Thomas Lakeman, C'86, has used his liberal arts degree to write novels, build web sites, and answer fan mail to *Chucky the Killer Doll*. He is the first Sewanee alumnus to serve as the Tennessee Williams playwright-in-residence. He says it is left for others to decide whether he ought to be the last.*

Frenchie Bunch, C'99, makes custom-designed skirts in Columbia, S.C.