

The Perplexing Voyage

The great power of my Vanderbilt education and its great joy. By WAYNE CHRISTESON, BA'70

During the Vanderbilt-South Carolina game last week, a man sitting in front of me stood up and turned to the rest of us and demanded of no one in particular, "Haven't y'all ever been to a TITANS GAME?" Everyone looked at him politely, but no one said anything. He continued, "They CHEER at Titans games!" Someone cleared his throat and a few people nodded, but we continued looking at the field where play was about to resume. The man turned and sat back down with the slightly chastened look of someone who is not sure what he has just done.

This man is by any accounting an estimable fellow. He is a friendly, pleasant companion and an obviously intelligent man. He has a lovely wife who sits with him like a butterfly in muted black and gold,



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and he disports himself loyally and attentively toward the team. He bridles visibly when he hears whispered criticism of Vanderbilt's efforts. Still, he returned to his seat, rattled, as though he had lost his grip for a moment and shaken his fist at God.

His question is a good one, though. In a Socratic kind of way, it reveals something important, not just about Vanderbilt football but about the entire Vanderbilt experience. What makes the events at Dudley Field different from Tennessee Titans games? What distinguishes the entire Vanderbilt experience from almost any other?

Like many alumni, I see the University through the lens of football. I know about Vanderbilt's exceptional educational accomplishments and its service to the community, and I love my old professors. But the sad fact is that I am no longer in class, and I am no longer in intimate touch with the educational mission of the school. What I know of the University is what I can buy a ticket to see, and what is fed to me by the newspapers. That is mostly sports.

I imagine the alumni of most schools have this kind of relationships with their *almae matres*, but their connections are more surely rooted in the success of their teams, or at least the prospect of success. At Vanderbilt, the lens of sports is reversed: We see a football program that has become magically unsuccessful.

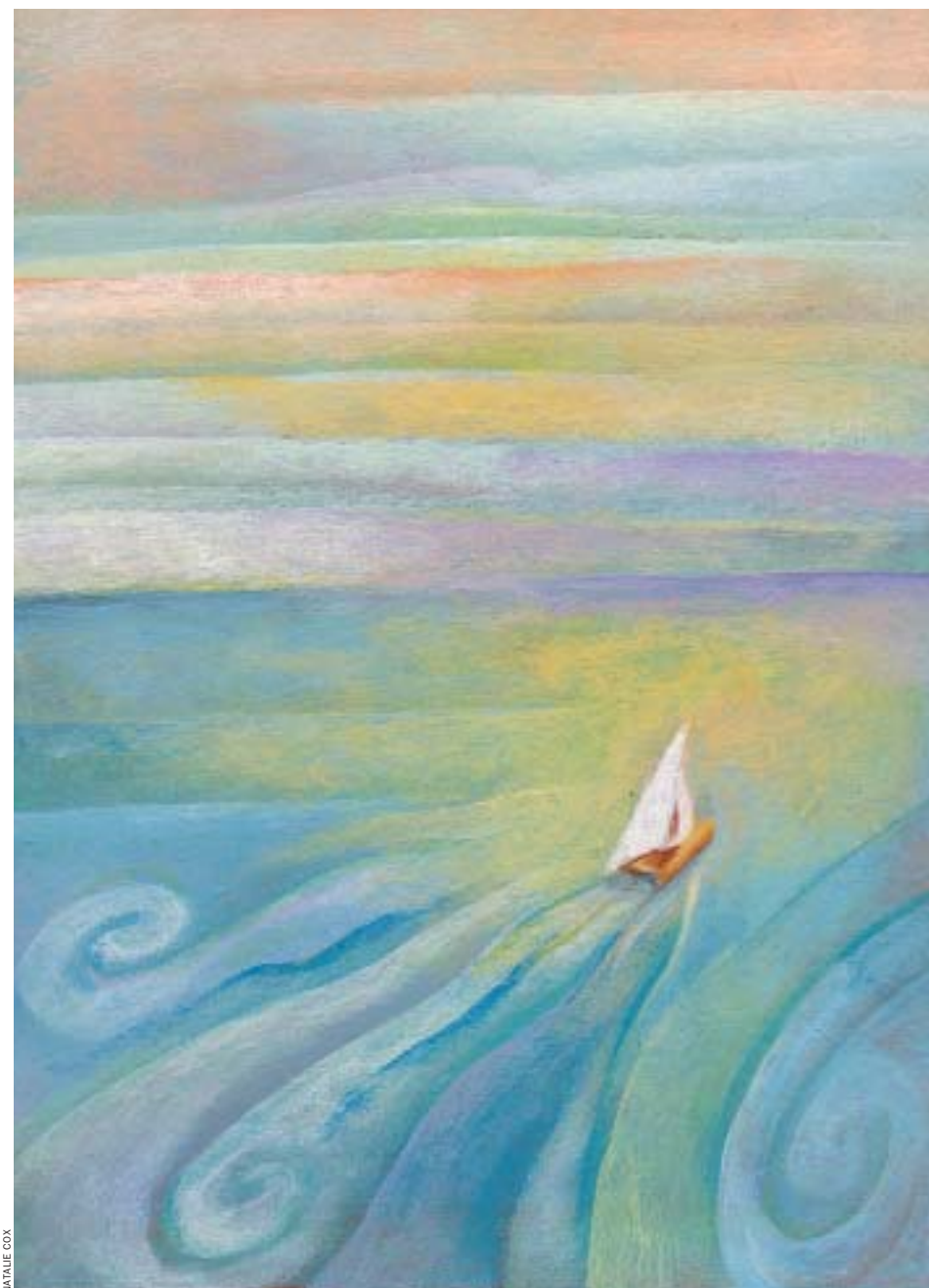
In an odd way, the experience of watch-

ing Vanderbilt football reinforces the experience of a Vanderbilt education itself. The lessons it teaches are unique and, to be perfectly honest about it, I am happy we have a football program that calls upon the lessons I absorbed as a student and whose ultimate effect on me is good.

Don't get me wrong! I love the Vanderbilt football team without reservation, and I stay until the final horn for every game. The players drive themselves hard—physically, mentally and emotionally—and they deserve success. Success may seem a distant dream at Dudley Field, but for me it is no less longed for. I know the abandon of full-throated enthusiasm at Titans games, but I know instinctively that Vanderbilt games are a different and altogether deeper experience.

As an undergraduate, I was taught by extraordinary professors who seemed surprisingly modest. They wore their erudition lightly, like a scarf tossed over the shoulder. This was not just a matter of style; it was a matter of perspective, a manner of thought. They spoke of their subjects with passion and conviction, but they did not popularize them. They allowed their ideas to emerge from a power beneath the surface flash of the world that, paradoxically, made sense of the flash.

What emerged was the ambiguity at the heart of existence, in everything from poetry to particle physics, and gave me the necessary instruments for guiding the elusive



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and ambivalent course of my life. This was the great power of my Vanderbilt education and its great joy, and it taught me to follow Vanderbilt football.

I moved on from Vanderbilt, to career and family and triumphs and losses, but I find myself back at Dudley Field each year, puzzling my way through another autumn.

I am new to my seat this year, and a kind old man sitting next to me turned to me last week and introduced himself. He said, "We may as well get to know each other, young man. We're going to be here for the rest of the year." For a moment I felt as though we

were standing on the deck of the *Titanic* and he was saying, "Let's go take a look at the hole in the side." It was a fermata of reflection for me: We both knew what we were facing for the rest of the voyage, but we were going. This was our *Odyssey*.

Our seats in Section D are little rafts in the ocean of space-time. As the weeks of the season pass, we push our bubble of space before us so the horizons may seem unchanging, but we know we are moving, riding with Albert Einstein, in the great journey of our lives.

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Glams that untraveled world whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move." That is what we do at Dudley Field. We are on the endless and continually perplexing voyage of learning. Vanderbilt set us on it, and Vanderbilt football keeps us there, much to our good fortune. We are fortunate souls who, like Ulysses, have a journey of great value: an inexplicable losing streak for players who know they deserve better, something worthy of their heroism and of our devotion, something we will contend with forever.

We cling to our seats and cry, "Go Vandy!"