

Learning to Learn

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

I am always grateful to have this opportunity to reflect with you graduates, faculty, family, and friends on what it is that we are really celebrating in this commencement today. I'm guessing that if we were to survey this large crowd in the Marriott Center, we would be exposed to several responses. Most would be legitimate and understandable, some might be more personal and even unusual, and some might just reflect the wonderment that this phase of life is finally over.

In a *Deseret News* editorial on June 2 of this year, it was reported that comedian commentator Stephen Colbert, who gave this year's commencement address at the University of Virginia, asked the graduates, "Why are you leaving? This could be the most spectacular place you have ever lived" ("In Our Opinion: Learning for a Lifetime"). I suppose that we could ask the same of new BYU graduates, recognizing that some of you have been here for a very long time.

The purposes and promises of BYU are unique and special and deserve never to be forgotten. Our wonderful physical environment contributes to this, but there is so much

more. You are part of an emerging miracle in higher education foreseen by prophets of an earlier generation and sustained and guided by our current apostles and prophets. You are evidence that what they dreamed about is realistic, with even more to come. Never forget that promises have been made and promises are yet to be kept by all who have had the blessing of being at Brigham Young University.

Most of you of necessity will be leaving, but we hope and expect none of you will ever forget what has happened to you at BYU. We hope you will always feel welcome to return and continue to help make it be the university of which we can be most proud and for which we are most grateful.

Your diplomas and credentials will attest that, to the best of our ability to judge and measure, you have learned a great deal; have mastered skills, approaches, and disciplines; and are prepared to make your significant contributions to your families, communities,

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church, and nation. What is the most valuable thing you have learned? Again, I believe that there would be a wide variety of responses to that question.

With the perspective of having lived a few more years than most of you, let me share what I think may be most valuable to you. Of course the Aims of a BYU Education are all vital and are not easily simplified. We expect that you have been spiritually strengthened and intellectually enlarged and have experienced enhancement of your already strong character. All of this has been designed to lead and assist you in an ever-ongoing adventure of lifelong learning and service.

In brief, then, perhaps what is most valuable to you is the increased capacity you have developed, and hopefully will continue to develop, to effectively keep on learning throughout your lifetime and beyond in all spheres of the BYU Mission and Aims. If you will forgive a personal example, let me try to illustrate why this is of more than just theoretical importance.

Some of you know that my academic discipline is in the field of medicine. When I graduated from medical school and passed through a few demanding years of internship, residency, and postdoctoral fellowship training, I finally felt as a newly minted and licensed physician and medical school faculty member that I was as current in my narrow field of specialty as could be expected. Now, some forty-plus years later, much of what I then learned is no longer applicable or relevant, and very much more is known than I could have then imagined. I feel a little like the sentiments expressed by Thurman Arnold, who said, “The principles of Washington’s farewell address are still sources of wisdom when cures for social ills are sought. The methods of Washington’s physician, however, are no longer studied” (*The Symbols of Government* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962], 1).

Now, to be clear, I never used leeches to drain the blood from my ill patients or prescribed any of the tonics or unproven therapies of the eighteenth century, but I also was not trained in many of the miracles of 21st-century medicine. What was true in my particular area of interest was that we had merely a handful of drugs and modalities to diagnose and treat the problems that I had an interest in during the 1970s. Today’s physicians now have many dozens of new and improved tools and approaches to enhance and preserve the lives of the afflicted. Transplanted and artificial organs were still something largely experimental in my early days of medical practice, teaching, and research, as were artificial joint replacements, genetic testing for multiple diseases, anticholesterol drugs—and the list goes on and on.

My central point in this example—which I believe generalizes to virtually every discipline and area of scientific and academic inquiry—is that for you to remain as relevant at the end of your career as you are now or when you finally finish your formal academic preparations, you will be required to know how to keep on learning and hopefully contribute to the continued learning of others.

Happily, we are sustained in all of this not only by experience and observation but also by our theology and understanding of the plan of salvation, in which continued learning and the persistent pursuit of new knowledge and understanding are part of the reason for our being. We know that we are instructed to learn “line upon line” (D&C 98:12) and that God has placed no limits on the amount of time for us to accomplish all that we can.

Congratulations again on your achievements and particularly on the potential you have demonstrated for not only continued personal growth and development but also for substantive service to all you encounter. You leave with our confidence and blessings as you go forth to serve. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.