

Commemorating Your Divine Potential

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This is my first graduation ceremony as president of the university. As you might imagine, I have given a little thought to what graduation ceremonies are all about.

In some respects, a graduation ceremony is a rather odd event. While the graduation ceremony had its origins in Europe, it is now largely an American phenomenon. As Robert Pippin, a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, once noted on a similar occasion:

All modern developed nations have universities and some sort of procedure or exam for marking the end of study, but virtually no other nation in the world has graduation ceremonies (the exception is some in England). . . . We Americans, uniquely in all the world, are crazy about such ceremonies. We even have them . . . for graduation from kindergarten, first grade, fourth grade, eighth grade, high school, driving school, secretarial school, dog obedience school, and so on.¹

To make the matter even more odd, even though this is mostly an American ceremony, we dress in ways that hardly any Americans—except perhaps priests, judges, or individuals we would consider to be deranged—would

ever think about dressing.² The ceremonial garb we wear today did at one point have some practical significance. In medieval Europe many ordinary people wore long-sleeved gowns or robes to provide warmth in poorly heated buildings. They also wore hoods, which they could pull over their heads when it became too cold.

Over time, distinctive gowns and hoods were developed for the various professions, trades, and religious orders. Because most of the professors at early universities in Italy, France, and England were clerics, formal academic wear came to resemble that of the early clergy.

However, once someone figured out how to heat buildings properly, most people abandoned the gown-and-hood look for something more practical. Status conscious as they were, academics “still tried to mark themselves off as in a special group,” as Professor Pippin noted, and faculty and students at most universities “continued to attend class and teach in what

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this commencement address was given on 14 August 2014.

had by then . . . become the basic university attire, the black gown.”³

By the end of the nineteenth century practicality overcame status symbols, and the practice of wearing academic robes to class every day slowly died out, even in America. However, Americans continued to hang on to the tradition of donning the garb for graduation ceremonies. And, in typical American fashion, marketing forces soon began to influence the practice. Professor Pippin explained:

*Mr. Gardner Cottrell Leonard, a young man of industry and sound commercial sense, . . . had not been happy with the shape and fit of his graduation gown, worn at Williams College in 1883, and he spent the next year traveling across Europe, researching medieval attire and the design of gowns and hats. For the next ten years or so, he had developed and promoted the business of designing and supplying such gowns, and when a meeting of college officials was held at Columbia in 1895 to decide on uniform standards . . . , Mr. Leonard was the technical expert . . . and very successful promoter of all this regalia.*⁴

The standards set at that meeting were revised over time, and there is today—and I am not making this up—an academic costume code that prescribes the style of the sleeves, the nature of the material, the color of the hood and width of its binding, and the type and color of the tassel, all according to the institution and the degree awarded.⁵

So here we sit—or, I guess, there you sit and here I stand—“dressed,” in the words of Professor Pippin, “like thirteenth-century monks thanks partly to the marketing skills of the son of a dry goods manufacturer in Albany, New York” in the late 1800s.⁶ And we do so in order to go through a ceremony largely abandoned by the rest of the modern world. How does one explain this?

Anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, and, I suppose, even psychologists could

provide a variety of interesting answers to that question. Let me offer just one.

I suggest we are willing to endure what might seem like an odd custom because ceremonies help us mark transition points in our lives, making it clear to us (and to others) that we have finished one important phase of our lives and are now entering another. Thus we celebrate not only what you have accomplished here in the past few years but, more important, the fact that you are moving on to a new stage of life in which—because of what you have experienced and learned here—you will be prepared to accomplish even more. That is the reason why—even though you are finishing your formal education here—this ceremony is called a commencement rather than a termination.

Almost all societies have some kind of ceremony (either formal or informal) to mark life-stage transitions. Ceremonies like this one help us reflect on what we have learned and on how that learning has prepared us for the challenges that lie ahead.

As you ponder on those matters today, let me suggest that, as someone once observed, “the question to be asked at the end of an educational step or sequence is not what has the student learned but what has the student become.”⁷

As I am sure you have already discovered—and if you have not, you soon will—there is a vast difference between knowing something and doing something. You may understand the theoretical principles of physics, for example, and still not be able to construct a rocket ship. The gap between theory and practice is sometimes wide.

But the observation goes one step further, drawing a contrast not just between knowing and doing but also between doing and being. That distinction is particularly important at a university like this one whose mission is not just to convey knowledge to students but also “to assist [them] in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”⁸

In the long run, your success at BYU—and your success in the next phases of your life—will be measured not by what you have learned from some textbook. You will soon forget much of that, if it wasn't forgotten the minute you walked out of the final. Nor will your success be determined solely by what you have done here. Your grade point average, for example, will matter less and less as time goes on. (For some that is good news.) Your success, here and beyond, will ultimately be measured by what you become, by your character. The real question to be asked at a ceremony of this kind is "How close are we to reaching our full potential?" The BYU mission statement indicates that this is a place where "the full realization of human potential is pursued."⁹ And that potential is greater than many in the world imagine, because all human beings are "beloved spirit son[s] or daughter[s] of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny."¹⁰

As important and as powerful as it is to learn some truth or to do some good act, it is much more important to *be* true and to *be* good. If you become a true and good spouse, parent, child, sibling, co-worker, or friend—and ultimately realize your divine potential as sons and daughters of heavenly parents—your higher education that has begun but not ended here will be a true success. Reminding ourselves of these truths and that potential is reason aplenty to engage in this distinctive ceremony. May each of you realize that full

potential is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Robert B. Pippin, "American Gothic or: Why Am I Dressed Like This?" University of Chicago convocation address, 10 December 1998, 1, <https://convocation.uchicago.edu/sites/convocation.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/453rd%20-%20Robert%20B%20Pippin.pdf>.

2. In the words of Professor Pippin, "Americans, or most anyone else apart from some Oxford dons and religious functionaries and judges, do not dress anything like this" (Pippin, "American Gothic," 1).

3. Pippin, "American Gothic," 2.

4. Pippin, "American Gothic," 3.

5. For the current contents of the code, see American Council on Education, Academic Costume Code, acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Academic-Costume-Code.aspx.

6. Pippin, "American Gothic," 3.

7. Senator Mark O. Hatfield, interpreting James Monroe's views, in U.S. Senate special hearing, *Education Reform: Hearing Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, 103rd Congress, 1st session, 17 April 1993.

8. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 1996), 1.

9. *Mission*, 1.

10. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.