

# *Your Eternal Learning Process*

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You may wonder, as we gather to recognize and celebrate the *end* of your university career, why we hold a ceremony that we call a commencement. A commencement is, after all, a beginning, not an end. Some may conclude that this apparent misnomer occurs because university administrators, who organize and name such events, are often so confused that they are never sure whether they are coming or going or beginning or ending. That may be true. However, there are other explanations for this seeming contradiction.

We celebrate the final act of your university education with a commencement ceremony in part to impress upon you the need for perspective. Whether something is a beginning or an ending depends, in large measure, on the perspective from which things are viewed. A newly married couple—reflecting on the hectic events of the wedding day and all the details and planning that led up to it after a long engagement—was heard to say, “Now that we are married, we are finally at the end of all our troubles.”

A wiser, more experienced couple standing nearby responded, “That is true, but the question is, at which end?” Perspective does matter.

While you may have taken your final final exam, while you may never again pull an overnighter to complete a research paper, and while you may no longer need to worry about what grade you receive on an assignment, that does not mean that your education is complete. Calling this ceremony a commencement hopefully serves to remind you that while you are graduating from this university, you have not concluded the learning phase of your life; instead, you are at the other end of that process, the beginning—the commencement.

Brigham Young, the founder of this university, put it this way:

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*Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this commencement address on 11 August 2016.*

*We might ask, when shall we cease to learn?  
I will give you my opinion about it: never, never.*<sup>1</sup>

Thus one of the aims of a BYU education is to prepare our students for “lifelong learning.”<sup>2</sup> And, in that regard, it is important to note that we believe in very long lives. As Brother Brigham explained:

*We do not expect to cease learning while we live on earth; and when we pass through the veil, we expect still to continue to learn and increase our fund of information.*<sup>3</sup>

I have met numerous lifelong learners in my life—people who, no matter how much they know or how far along they are in their careers or lives, seem compelled to learn more. One such was Domingo Catricura. Domingo was a student in an Indian law class I team taught at the University of Chile Law School more than twenty years ago. Domingo was in his fifties at the time and was one of about twenty-five non-law students who attended the class along with thirty law students. The non-law students were invited to attend the course because they were leaders in various Mapuche communities—the Mapuches being the largest indigenous group in Chile. They were not there to obtain a degree but just to learn—and to help us learn.

The course primarily covered the history of Spanish and Chilean interaction with the indigenous peoples of Chile and the first comprehensive Chilean Indian law that had been enacted just the year before. I provided a comparative perspective, contrasting the Chilean experience with that of the United States.

Though not a law student, and therefore without any hope of obtaining a law degree, Domingo attended the three-hour, once-a-week class every week, occasionally making a nine- to ten-hour bus ride from his small native village of Chiuimpilli in southern Chile in order to attend. He was anxious to learn

everything he could about the new Indian law and every other aspect of the course, even that which I attempted to convey about U.S. law in my somewhat rusty Spanish. Though of limited economic means, Domingo purchased a small tape recorder to make sure that he thoroughly remembered and understood everything covered in the class. He also took copious notes, which he frequently reviewed with his two teenage children, who occasionally attended the class with him. He absorbed the information in class and wanted to discuss it after hours.

Domingo was not there to obtain a college education nor to earn a university degree. He was not there to advance his career nor to improve his job opportunities. He was there to learn anything and everything that might help him maintain the cultural integrity of his native village and improve the lives of its residents. And he was willing to search far and wide for information that might help him achieve that goal—even to consider what might be learned from the experience of what was a faraway country with a different legal system and history.

When I think of lifelong learners, I picture in my mind Domingo Catricura, his silver-haired head bowed over his desk, vigorously taking notes during a three-hour lecture in an unheated room in winter and then staying after class in order to further discuss the day’s subject.

Some believe that the sole purpose of a college education is to prepare students for their first job. They question the value of a degree that does not have a clear path leading directly to some kind of occupation. Others, noting that the specific tasks of any particular job are likely to change so quickly that most people will end their careers doing something quite different from what they started out doing, assert that college should provide students skills and knowledge that will prepare them for their last job.

But the main purpose of a BYU education is not to prepare students for their first job nor to prepare them for their last job. The purpose of a BYU education is to help prepare students for what we might call their ultimate job—to help them realize their full potential as sons and daughters of heavenly parents with “a divine nature and destiny.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose of a BYU education is, as our mission statement proclaims, “to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”<sup>5</sup> That is a learning process that must not end here today. It must commence over and over again.

Still, there are things I hope you learned while you were here—perhaps for the first time or perhaps as a reconfirmation of things you already knew before arriving on campus. Let me share with you two in particular.

First, I hope you learned to discern and determine the relative value of the different kinds of information you have acquired or might acquire in the future. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell once observed:

*All knowledge is not of equal significance. There is no democracy of facts! . . . Something might be factual but unimportant. . . . For instance, today I wear a dark blue suit. That is true, but it is unimportant. . . . As we brush against truth, we sense that it has a hierarchy of importance. . . . Some truths are salvationally significant, and others are not.*<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, as Elder Maxwell also accurately noted:

*Certain knowledge comes only by revelation and, thereby, is only “spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).*<sup>7</sup>

If you learned, or reconfirmed, those truths here, your BYU education is very much worth celebrating today.

Second, I hope you have come to understand that learning is more powerful and truths are better understood when they are shared

with others in an effort to help them improve. There is something deep within us that wants to share newfound truth with others. It is in our spiritual DNA. When we act on that deep-seated instinct by attempting to explain the truth to someone else, we often find new insights into what we thought we already fully understood. True learning is not a selfish endeavor. True learning is most powerfully experienced and most deeply ingrained when it is used to improve the lives of others.

President Henry B. Eyring encouraged those of us at BYU to become a “community of learners and lifters,”<sup>8</sup> urging us to follow Brigham Young’s admonition:

*Put forth your ability to learn as fast as you can, and gather all the strength of mind and principle of faith you possibly can, and then distribute your knowledge to the people.*<sup>9</sup>

I hope that during your BYU years each of you has experienced the mind and soul-expanding experience of using newly discovered truths to bless the lives of others around you.

And so I congratulate each of you graduates for having completed this formal stage of your learning process, but I do so with the hope that this is just the beginning—the commencement—of the next phase of your eternal learning process, a process that, if successful, will lead to the fulness of joy that comes from discovering the most important eternal truths and from sharing those truths with others to improve their lives. May this be your destiny is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Brigham Young, *JD* 3:203.
2. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 5.
3. Brigham Young, *JD* 6:286.

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

5. *Mission and Aims*, 1.

6. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Inexhaustible Gospel," BYU devotional address, 18 August 1992; see also Maxwell, "The Inexhaustible Gospel," *Ensign*, April 1993.

7. Maxwell, "Inexhaustible Gospel"; see also 1 Corinthians 2:14–16.

8. Henry B. Eyring, "A Leader of Learners," BYU devotional address at the inauguration of President Kevin J. Worthen, 9 September 2014.

9. Brigham Young, *JD* 8:146; quoted in Eyring, "Leader of Learners."