

Words to Live By

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It is customary for speakers at a graduation ceremony to give advice to the new graduates, to share with them words of wisdom to inspire them in their next stage of life. Perhaps because such sage advice is in somewhat limited supply, much of what is said at these events has been said before and will likely be said again. With that in mind, let me give you graduates a two-part charge that I doubt you have heard in any graduation ceremony you have attended.

First Charge: Be Awful

The first part is a simple two-word admonition: “Be awful.” Yes, you heard right. My advice to you is be awful. You can see why I was so confident that you would not have heard this message at any prior graduations that you have attended.¹

Before you dismiss my advice as a completely inappropriate effort to be unique rather than helpful, let me explain what I mean by that charge.

Linguists know well that the meaning of words can change dramatically over time. One form of change is what is called *pejoration*.

“*Pejoration* is the process by which a word [with a positive or neutral meaning] acquires negative connotations”² over time.

One classic example of pejoration is shown by the history of the word *silly*. In the thirteenth century the word *silly* meant “worthy, good,” and “pious, holy.”³ Over the ensuing centuries, however, the meaning changed first to “innocent” or “harmless,” then to “deserving of pity or sympathy,” to “weak/feeble,” then to “ignorant.” By the sixteenth century it had descended to “foolish,” its current meaning.⁴

The same thing has happened to the word *awful*. It too has pejorated. Centuries ago the word *awful* had a very positive connotation. Its original meaning was “awe-inspiring,” “worthy of . . . respect,” and “profoundly respectful or reverential.”⁵ But as one author explained, “Since what inspires awe isn’t always so pleasant, [over the centuries, *awful*] came to mean something negative.”⁶ The word

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had pejorated, linguists would say. And so today *awful* has come to mean “terrible, dreadful, appalling”; something not just bad but “exceedingly bad.”⁷ Hardly the kind of thing you would expect a graduation speaker to advise you to be.

My admonition is that you be awful in its original, unpejorated sense—that you always be aware of things that are awe-inspiring. I am urging you to be full of awe, if you will.

“Psychologists have described awe as the experience of encountering something so vast—in size, skill, beauty, intensity, etc.—that we struggle to comprehend it.”⁸ It is the kind of thing that Moses experienced when God showed him the purpose, creation, and history of this earth. Struggling to comprehend the grandeur of all he had seen, Moses “greatly marveled and wondered.”⁹ As a result, he came to realize things he “never had supposed.”¹⁰ He was in awe—or full of awe.

Being awful in that way has its rewards. It makes life fuller, more enjoyable, and more productive. Matthew Hutson explained in a recent article in the *Atlantic* magazine that awe

*shrinks our ego. Awe makes [us] feel a greater sense of oneness with others. And this oneness can make us nicer: Researchers found, [for example], that inducing awe—[such as] by having people stand in a grove of tall trees—increased generosity. . . . Awe also shapes our sense of time. One series of studies found that awe made time feel more plentiful, which increased life satisfaction.*¹¹

Most important, experiencing awe can help us keep things in perspective. That is what happened to Moses. His vision caused him to think deeply about the grandeur of God and His plan of salvation. Moses understood things he had never even supposed before. That in turn caused Moses to have greater faith in God and in God’s plan for him.

I am confident that all of you during your time here learned something that you never

had supposed. It may have been an insight into a subject you were studying. It may have been the discovery of something you did not know about yourself. It may have been inspiration concerning the goodness of God and His love for you and for others around you. I hope that each of you took advantage of those opportunities to be filled with awe—to be awful. Moreover, I hope you continue to have such experiences for the rest of your life.

Unfortunately, increased knowledge can sometimes diminish our ability to experience awe. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf put it this way:

*It seems to be human nature: as we become more familiar with something, even something miraculous and awe-inspiring, we lose our sense of awe and treat it as commonplace.*¹²

Thus the first part of my charge is to not let your education diminish your willingness to experience awe, for there is so much in the world around us that can cause us to be full of awe.

BYU professor David W. Hart stated it well in a devotional talk he gave here a couple of years ago. He said:

*Make an extra effort to find awe in the everyday aspects of your life and take a moment to say, “Wow!” In so doing, your senses will be heightened and, in turn, will reveal more about you as well as additional opportunities to apply your uniqueness.*¹³

Second Charge: Don’t Pejorate; Ameliorate

The second part of my two-part charge consists of a three-word admonition: “Don’t pejorate; ameliorate.” Just as words can pejorate and acquire a more negative meaning over time, words can also acquire a more positive meaning. Linguists call this *amelioration*. A classic example is the word *nice*, which in the twelfth century meant “careless, clumsy; weak; poor, needy,” but which through a series of

changes over the centuries has ameliorated to mean “kind, thoughtful.”¹⁴

As each of you are now graduates from BYU, you will carry with you your good name and the good name of this university. What people think of those two names will largely depend on their interactions with you. The second part of my charge to you is that you never do anything to pejorate your name or the name of your alma mater, that you instead strive to ameliorate both. My hope is that those who encounter you and learn that you are a graduate of Brigham Young University will think better of BYU because they know you, that the term *BYU* will ameliorate—not pejorate—as a result of what you do and who you are.

Moreover, most of us have also taken upon us the sacred name of Jesus Christ. Please do nothing to diminish the importance of that name, for “Jesus Christ is the name which is given of the Father, and there is none other name given whereby [men and women] can be saved.”¹⁵ As we are filled with awe for Him and for His works, as we act in accordance with the promptings we feel at such times, His name will not only ameliorate but will eternally be glorified by what we do. I hope you make that one of your postgraduation goals as well.

So be awful. Don’t pejorate; ameliorate. Words to live by. May we all do so is my humble prayer, which I express in the awe-inspiring, holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. I note that BYU professor David W. Hart once urged campus members “to be awe-full,” but that was not a graduation speech. See David W. Hart, “Be Excellent: Becoming Who

You Are in Today’s World,” BYU devotional address, 10 February 2015.

2. William B. McGregor, *Linguistics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 367.

3. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, oed.com, s.v. “silly” (definition 1a).

4. Willem B. Hollmann, “Semantic Change,” chapter 16 in Jonathan Culpeper, Francis Katamba, Paul Kerswill, Ruth Wodak, and Tony McEnery, eds., *English Language: Description, Variation and Context* (Basingstoke, Great Britain; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 306–7.

5. *OED Online*, oed.com, s.v. “awful” (definitions 1, 2, and 6).

6. Howard Richler, “When Good Words Go Bad,” Full Comment, *National Post*, 4 June 2013, news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/howard-richler-when-good-words-go-bad.

7. *OED Online*, oed.com, s.v. “awful” (definition 1 and 4a).

8. Matthew Hutson, “Awesomeness Is Everything,” *Study of Studies*, *Atlantic* 319, no. 1 (January/February 2017): 15.

9. Moses 1:8.

10. Moses 1:10.

11. Hutson, “Awesomeness Is Everything,” 15.

12. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “O How Great the Plan of Our God!” *Ensign*, November 2016.

13. Hart, “Be Excellent.”

14. Ojibwa, “Origins of English: Amelioration and Pejoration,” *Cranky Grammarians*, *Daily Kos*, 15 March 2014, dailykos.com/story/2014/3/15/1284995/-Origins-of-English-Amelioration-and-Pejoration.

15. D&C 18:23; see also Moses 6:52.