

Alumni of Your Alma Mater

KEVIN J WORTHEN

I have long been fascinated by words and language. My children would call me a word nerd. I'm the kind of person who wonders why we drive on parkways and park on driveways. Think about it. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Similarly, have you ever wondered if a fly lost its wings, would we call it a walk? Again, you have to think about it—and now you know why my children groan a lot when I try to use my sense of humor.

My love of language is one reason why I enjoy graduation ceremonies so much. At graduation we hear words that we don't ordinarily use in everyday life. We use terms like *cum laude*, with either *summa* or *magna* attached as modifiers; these are not terms typically bandied about during the family dinner hour.

Two of the terms we often hear at graduation are *alma mater* and *alumni*. In a few minutes Amy Fennegan will officially welcome you graduates as alumni of BYU, and upon graduation, BYU will become your alma mater. Again, these are not words that we use in many other settings.

Interestingly, at least to me, and instructively, neither of these terms originated in

connection with graduation or even higher education. *Alma mater* is a two-word Latin term that literally translated means “bounteous [or] nourishing mother.”¹ In its early form, “it was a title given by the Romans to several goddesses but in particular to Ceres and Cybele, both representing fostering mother figures.”² The association with higher education came many centuries later when the University of Bologna—which many identify as the first university in the Western world—adopted as its motto *Alma mater studiorum*, meaning “nurturing mother of studies.”³ Since that time *alma mater* has been used in a variety of ways at universities. And the idea that universities play a special “nurturing” role in the development of their students—somewhat like though not identical to that of a parent—has taken hold in American society to the extent that the prevailing definition of *alma mater* now is the university or college from which one has graduated.⁴

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, gave this commencement address on August 17, 2017.

The term *alumni* similarly developed outside of academia and likewise referred to a special, almost parent-like relationship. In Rome, *alumni* was first used as a term that generally referred to “children abandoned by their parents and brought up in the home of someone else”⁵—what we might now call foster children. Over time the term *alumni* came to also refer to students or pupils in an educational setting.

In this setting today it is worth noting that the two terms we hear often at graduation—*alma mater* and *alumni*—both originally referred to a special relationship, one very much like but also different from that between a parent and a child. Moreover, the two terms were linguistically connected from the outset, as they both derive to some extent from the same Latin term *alere*, which means “nourish.”⁶

Now some of you are no doubt beginning to wonder if there is a point to this lesson on the etymology of these two Latin terms. Let me suggest three short ideas.

First, given their origin and history, hearing the terms *alma mater* and *alumni* should remind all of you graduates that you have not achieved the success we are celebrating this day on your own. In addition to your own family members—parents, spouses, children, siblings, and grandparents—who have supported you through this endeavor, there are many others, including many at this university, who have nurtured and shaped you in ways that have enhanced and become part of your university education. These *alma maters*—these nurturing mothers and fathers—include faculty members who have tried to help you learn and progress both intellectually and spiritually, who have loved you almost as much as their own children, and who have loved you enough to draw from you the very best you had to offer—and sometimes more than you thought you had to give. These *alma maters* also include others who have provided services such as meals, technology, clean rooms,

and beautiful grounds—all in an effort to create a stimulating setting in which learning “by study and also by faith”⁷ can flourish. These *alma maters* include your classmates, who in some ways have contributed to your deep learning beyond what the faculty has done. And these *alma maters* include both generous donors and humble tithe payers, who have given of their funds to support you, even though they have never met you and may never come to Provo.

Each of these individuals has in a sense nurtured you as an *alumnus*, or foster child, whom they took in and loved. Each of them is in a sense your *alma mater*. When you hear the term *alma mater*, I urge you to think not of buildings or bricks and mortar but of people and relationships. When you proudly proclaim that BYU is your *alma mater*, please have in mind all the *alma maters* who have contributed to you in so many ways.

Second, the fact that you have been nurtured by so many gives rise to an obligation to nurture others. As *alumni* who have benefited from the care of others when you may have felt alone, you have a responsibility to become *alma maters* to others who may one day feel abandoned. As the hymn reminds us, “because [we] have been given much, [we] too must give.”⁸ “Enter to learn; go forth to serve” is not just a motto; it is a university and gospel imperative.

Third, I hope that when you hear the terms *alma mater* and *alumni* and remember their familial origins and connotations, you reflect on the glorious truth that as important as the relationship is between you as *alumni* and the many people who have made BYU your *alma mater*, it pales in comparison to one central and eternal family relationship. I hope your time at BYU has increased your appreciation of the breadth of meaning and the depth of importance of the eternal truth that “each [of you] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”⁹ I urge you to

reflect on that truth at this time of celebration and gratitude. It will provide hope in times of distress and motivation to help others in times of success. If you do that, we, your alma maters, will be pleased to call you our alumni. That it may be so is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Julia Cresswell, *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "alma mater," 12. See also *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, oed.com, s.v. "alma mater." "Alma mater comes from two Latin words meaning 'nourishing or bountiful mother'" (*Vocabulary.com Dictionary*, s.v. "alma mater").

2. Cresswell, *Word Origins*, s.v. "alma mater," 12.

3. Wikipedia, s.v. "alma mater"; see also Wikipedia, s.v. "University of Bologna."

4. See, e.g., Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. "alma mater."

5. John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 118.

6. Cresswell, *Word Origins*, s.v. "alma mater," 12.

7. D&C 88:118.

8. "Because I Have Been Given Much," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 219.

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