

The Importance of Being Present

JARED T. BLANCHARD

Elder Holland, President Worthen, distinguished guests, faculty, and fellow graduates, I am honored to address you today. It is truly humbling to speak to an audience of such talented and accomplished individuals, many of whom are my dear friends. I am especially happy to have my family here with me. I can honestly say that I would not have made it to this point if not for their presence in my life, which brings me to my chosen topic: the importance of being present, both for our own happiness and for the good of others.

It has been said that “80 percent of success is showing up,”¹ but even more important than our physical presence is our mental presence.

In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis gave a profound description of the present that has stuck with me for years. He wrote:

*The Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which [God] has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered.*²

Yet sometimes we live in the past like Napoleon Dynamite’s Uncle Rico, who obsessed that he could be “soakin’ it up in a hot tub with [his] soul mate” if only the coach would have put him in fourth quarter.³ Yes, you probably could have won that intramural T-shirt if not for that one ref who had it out for you. Or you may have been the next Albert Einstein if not for that one failed math test freshman year. I may or may not be speaking from personal experiences. Nevertheless, we can’t have freedom or actuality or true happiness if we live in the past.

That also goes for the future. For the past few months, my wife, Laura, and I have stressed over our future plans. There were, and still are, so many unknowns. Where would I be accepted for graduate school? When would Laura graduate? Where would we like to live and work?

Jared T. Blanchard spoke as the representative of his graduating class at BYU commencement on April 26, 2018.

I am sure our experience is not foreign to this audience. It is easy to say that I will be happy once I graduate or once I get accepted to grad school or once I get this job or once I have a house, but having that worldview can keep us from enjoying our current situation. Remember, the present is the time when we have freedom and actuality. Use that freedom to create a fulfilling life now instead of basing your happiness on something that has not happened yet.

As we avoid being prisoners of the past and future, it is also important to avoid being prisoners to present distractions. Smartphones, while being wonderful tools, are common conveyors of distractions. We may well ask ourselves:

- How many friends have I passed by but not noticed because I was watching fail videos?
- How many test questions have I missed because I was checking Snapchat in class?
- How many innocent tree limbs could have been spared a collision with my face if I had looked up from Facebook?

There is a plethora of other distractions that keep us from being truly present. They range from upcoming homework assignments to work responsibilities and even social worries. For example, I remember daydreaming about Thanksgiving break while working on the BYU Mars Rover during my capstone class hours. Yet I fretted away that same Thanksgiving vacation worrying about the rover when I could have been enjoying time with my family. Work when it is time to work and play when it is time to play.

One of the highlights of my undergraduate experience was singing in the BYU Men's Chorus. Our beloved conductor, Sister Rosalind Hall, always reminded us to be present in our rehearsals. "Sing when it is time to sing" was one of her mantras. She emphasized that the only way to be excellent is to be focused on what you are currently doing, leaving all distractions outside. She told us that by doing so, we would not only be a better choir technically but would be able to touch

the hearts of those in our audiences. "This is a lesson for life," she said, insinuating that we can make our lives like a beautiful song.

When we avoid living in the past or future and free ourselves of distractions, we can not only find fulfilment for ourselves but also serve those around us. One of the pieces we sang this year emphasized this idea. The lyrics were the words of the poem "A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. They read as follows:

*Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!*

...

*Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.⁴*

We all entered this great university to learn. I pray that now, as we go forth to serve in our homes, workplaces, and church callings, we may live in the present and avoid distraction. By doing so, we will find freedom and actuality for ourselves and be better prepared to touch the lives of others. Graduates, if our lives are a song, now is the time to sing! Thank you, and congratulations, class of 2018!

Notes

1. Woody Allen; see William Safire, *Quoth the Raven* (New York: Random House, 1993), 170–71; referencing Woody Allen, in Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 119.

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1941), letter 15.

3. *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004).

4. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life" (1839), stanzas 6, 9.