

The Y on the Mountain

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One of the most noticeable features of our valley is the Y on the mountain to our east. The Y's expanse is so large and its presence so imposing that the mountain itself is named Y Mountain. The connection of the letter on the mountain to the history, purpose, and mission of the university is so deep and established that many refer to the university itself as simply "the Y"—a reference that continues to confound the alumni of Yale University.

I hope that for today's graduates, the Y on the mountain will serve as a reminder of the knowledge they have gained, the things they have done, and the persons they have become during their time at BYU. I also hope it will serve as an ongoing invitation to them to add to the impact of what some call the spirit of the Y—a spirit of service and character that emanates from not just the intellectual dexterity but also the spiritual strength that they have acquired here.

The Letter Y

That is a lot to expect from a simple letter of the alphabet, and especially one that struggled a bit to make it into and remain a part of our modern English alphabet. The letter *y* was introduced into the Roman alphabet—from which ours is derived—around AD 100,¹ long after most letters

had already arrived there.² The letter *y* performed much the same role as the Roman letter *i*, which had made its way into the Roman alphabet 800 years earlier.³ The original function of the *y* was to allow the adaptation of Greek words into Roman writing.⁴ Thus it was called *Y* or *I* or *E Greek*—or *i griega*, for those who speak Spanish—as a reminder that it was not native to the Roman alphabet.

Since it largely played a role already occupied by another letter of the alphabet, the letter *y* has always had a bit of a tenuous position. At least one modern linguist still decries the letter *y* as a "luxury . . . , or rather a great nuisance," whose presence would not be missed and whose absence would simplify spelling rules.⁵ Why not, some ask, spell *cycle*, *syllabus*, and *dynasty* with an *i* instead of a *y*?

But, despite its critics, the letter *y* has endured—sometimes only by means that seem serendipitous. At one time the Roman alphabet contained the letter *thorn* (*þ*). It was pronounced "th," as in the words *this*, *then*, or *the*.⁶ While it performed a function quite different from that of the

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letter *y*, the lowercase *thorn* appeared similar to the lowercase *y*. “Over time, as Gothic script was introduced to Old English, ‘Y’ and ‘thorn’ looked too similar—and one had to go.”⁷ Unfortunately for the letter *thorn*, French printers did not have the letter *thorn* in their printing images in their presses, “and it became common to replace the ‘thorn’ with a ‘y.’”⁸ Thus signs in England began to read “Ye Old Fish and Chips Shop” and not “The Old Fish and Chips Shop,” and the letter *thorn* faded into obscurity.

So, but for the peculiarities of French printers in the distant past, the mountain to our east might have looked like the letter *thorn*—and our university might have been known not as “the Y” but as “the Thorn.”

The Y Left Standing by Itself

The Y on the mountain has its own inauspicious origins. Its roots trace back to a rivalry between two classes of students only three years after Brigham Young Academy became a full-fledged university—a time when both Brigham Young University and Brigham Young High School shared the same space.

It was not unusual in those days for a class to mark its graduation by leaving symbols on the landscape. In the spring of 1906, the junior class at the high school decided to get a jump on the process and at the same time demonstrate its superiority to the senior class by etching a large ‘07 on the mountainside, referring to the year in which they would graduate in the future.

Not surprisingly, upon awakening to that sight, the senior class objected. One contemporary account described the reaction with dramatic flair:

*The Student Body . . . sprang to its feet in angry amazement; the whites of its eyes gleamed like lightning. Its generals . . . ran to the four winds with flaming banners, and crying: “Assemble, ye hosts, prepared to fight!”*⁹

There then ensued “an all-day mountainside altercation,”¹⁰ with punches exchanged on both sides.

BYU president George H. Brimhall and BY High principal Edwin S. Hinckley assembled a group, and a decision was made to have all the classes join together to put the letters *B*, *Y*, and *U* on the mountainside.¹¹ The project began with the letter *Y* to ensure that all the letters would be properly centered on the mountain.¹²

Measurements and calculations were made both on the mountain and at the old Academy Building (which is now the Provo City Library) to make sure the letter would appear centered and proportioned from the perspective of those in the valley. On an appointed day, the work began to construct the Y with lime, rock, and sand. As one participant described it:

*The students stood in a zig zag line about 8 feet apart stretching from the bottom of the hill to the site of the Y. The first [person] took the bag of lime, sand, or rocks and carried it 8 feet and handed it to the second [person]. The second carried it another 8 feet and handed [it] to the third [person], and thus the bag went up the hill.*¹³

The group started in the early morning with the expectation that the job would be completed by 10 a.m.¹⁴ But the task proved much bigger than the group had thought. By midafternoon some students had fainted and had to be carried off the hill, and it was 4 p.m. before the Y was finally thinly covered.¹⁵ The effort was so exhausting that, in the words of one involved, “no attempt was made to cover the other two letters,”¹⁶ and the Y was left standing by itself.

The Positive Spirit of the Y

So one might say that the Y on the mountain is the result of fisticuffs and fatigue. Hardly the kind of motivational origins that one would choose to inspire the heart, notwithstanding the allure of the alliteration. And yet there is in that history, like the somewhat tenuous history of the letter *y*, two brief interrelated lessons that I offer as my advice to the graduating class today.

First, symbols such as the letter *y* or the Y on Y Mountain ultimately gain meaning in our lives

not so much because of their physical shape or presence but because of what we choose to make of them. Likewise, the meaning of events in our lives will be determined not so much by the events themselves but by how we choose to view and respond to them. And that in turn is shaped dramatically by the perspective from which we choose to view both the symbols and the events in our lives. Given its late arrival, its limited role, and at times even its tenuous place in the alphabet, some choose to view the letter *y* as a “nuisance,” but I, for one, delight in words such as *yes*, *yearn*, *young*, and even *yikes*—not to mention *yawn*, which many of you may be doing now.

Similarly, given its origins, I suppose some could view the Y on the mountain as a symbol of conflict and exhaustion. However, I—and I believe most of us—choose to view it as a symbol of unity and energy, and that positive image has been reinforced by our actions over the years. If we choose to view events in our lives from the eternal perspective that emanates from an understanding of God’s eternal plan of salvation, our lives will be happier and more productive, and we will have greater strength to meet the challenges that will inevitably come our way. All that depends on how we choose to view things.

Even with that more positive perspective, there will be times when you will feel overwhelmed by events—times when despite your best efforts you will fall short of your goal, when you will feel that you have utterly failed—just like the exhausted students must have felt when the *B* and the *U* were left off the mountain. But, as it turns out, having only a Y on the mountain may have been the optimum result, even though few, if any, might have thought so at the time. After all, as our own Peter B. Gardner observed in his *BYU Magazine* article a few years ago, “‘Lighting the BYU’ just doesn’t have the same ring to it”¹⁷ as does the phrase “lighting the Y.” And would we really prefer a “Bee-wy-yoomount Terrace”?¹⁸

The second lesson, therefore, is that in times when you feel like you have failed, that nothing is going right, and that there is nothing that can be done about it, you can—and I pray that you

will—trust God’s remarkable promise that He can make *all* things work together for the good of those who love Him. I testify that this remarkable promise, found in Romans 8:28 and repeated throughout modern-day scripture,¹⁹ is true. You may not see it immediately, but God can make all things work together for your good. He can turn an altercation between rival classes and a failed attempt to stamp a mountain with three letters into a symbol of unity and success. More important, He can make good come from all our efforts—not just from our successes but also from our failures and the failures of others that cause us pain. God is that good and that powerful. We just need to trust Him.

So as you look at the Y on the mountain, I hope you see hope, optimism, and faith in the future. I congratulate you graduates on your achievement and pray you will be uplifted by the positive spirit of the Y in all your endeavors. And I offer that prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Michael Rosen, “The Story of Y,” *Alphabetical: How Every Letter Tells a Story* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2015), 376.
2. “The oldest Roman alphabet had twenty-one letters” and was adopted “from about the seventh and the sixth century BCE onwards” (Rosen, “The Story of A,” *Alphabetical*, 18).
3. See Rosen, “The Story of I,” *Alphabetical*, 136.
4. See Rosen, “The Story of Y,” *Alphabetical*, 376.
5. Anatoly Liberman, “The Oddest English Spellings, Part 20: The Letter ‘Y,’” *OUPblog*, 15 May 2013, blog.oup.com/2013/05/oddest-english-spellings-part-20-letter-y.
6. See Rosen, “The Story of D,” *Alphabetical*, 71.
7. Susannah Cahalan, “The Stories Behind the Letters of Our Alphabet,” *Living*, *New York Post*, 8 February 2015, nypost.com/2015/02/08/the-stories-behind-the-letters-of-our-alphabet.
8. Rosen, “The Story of D,” *Alphabetical*, 71.
9. “‘07: It Was Mean—But?” *The White and Blue* 9, no. 11 (25 May 1906): 216–17; quoted in Peter B. Gardner, “An Ode to the Y,” *BYU Magazine*, Fall 2016, 24.

10. Gardner, "Ode," 24.

11. See Gardner, "Ode," 24.

12. See Harvey Fletcher, *Autobiography of Harvey Fletcher* (Provo: H. Fletcher, c. 1967), 15; see also "Y on the Mountainside: 1906 to the Present," Brigham Young High School History, byhigh.org/History/Ymountain/Yletter.html.

13. Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 15–16; quoted in "Y on the Mountainside."

14. See Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 16; see also "Y on the Mountainside."

15. See Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 16; see also "Y on the Mountainside."

16. Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 16; quoted in "Y on the Mountainside."

17. Gardner, "Ode," 25.

18. Gardner, "Ode," 25.

19. That God has repeated the promise in modern-day scripture demonstrates how serious He is about this promise.

For example, we read in Doctrine and Covenants 90:24: "Search diligently, pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for your good."

Doctrine and Covenants 100:15 states: "All things shall work together for good to them that walk uprightly."

Doctrine and Covenants 105:40 repeats the same central message: "Make proposals for peace unto those who have smitten you, . . . and all things shall work together for your good."