

Choosing Who You Will Become

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Fellow graduates, families, faculty, President and Sister Worthen, and Elder and Sister Gong, I am grateful and honored to be here today. Though our graduation ceremonies look different from what we had imagined, I hope that we can each find unique and memorable ways to commemorate our time at BYU and celebrate the adventures that lie before us—both those that we are anxiously awaiting and those that we have yet to imagine.

The past few weeks have been filled with the anticipation of graduation and with the excitement and uncertainties of deciding what our lives will hold once we leave this campus. I am sure many of you have become familiar with the question “What will you be doing after graduation?”

Some of you may have even cringed as I said those words. For me, each time this question was asked, it held both the joys of the potentials ahead and a sense of pressure as I considered the decisions before me. With each response to this question, it seemed that my answer became

a repetitive script briefly explaining the options I was considering.

On one particular morning, I sat in a meeting with my supervisor and mentor, Tanner Crandall, as our conversation shifted to focus on my future plans. As I anticipated giving my rehearsed answer, I was surprised by the question he instead asked: “Who do you want to *be* in five years?”

This simple change in focus allowed me to push past my expected answer and see that “what I will do” is only one piece in the larger whole.

As I started my freshman year, I had a plan of how things would go and the things I would experience. I anticipated gaining concrete knowledge and a clear path to the work that I hoped to do. Ultimately, I anticipated answers. However, I had not anticipated the degree of joy and sorrow I would experience or how these experiences would spark new questions about what I hoped to do and how I viewed the world.

During my first semester of college, I was navigating a new phase of life full of new expectations

Alyssa M. Baer spoke as the representative of her graduating class at BYU commencement on April 22, 2021.

and a list of campus building acronyms in which I often confused the JSB with the JFSB and the MSB with the MSRB. I hurried to my Health 330 class—the introduction to the health promotion emphasis in the public health major. My professor, Dr. Robert A. Chaney, began the class by exploring the intersections between public health, spirituality, and personal growth. We discussed President Worthen’s 2015 commencement address entitled “Who You Are and the Things You Do,” in which he stated:

As you begin this next phase of your lives, do not underestimate your potential for good in the world. . . . If you will remember who you are—sons and daughters of heavenly parents with a divine purpose for your lives—you will find that who you are will define everything you do and that the things you do will make a profound difference in the world.¹

Dr. Chaney emphasized that throughout our lives we would have the opportunity to decide what is more significant to us—who we are or what we do—and asked us to consider the question “How will you measure your life?”

Two years later, I found myself on uneven dirt roads in Lusaka, Zambia, working with Mothers Without Borders (motherswithoutborders.org). As the army truck jostled over the bumpy terrain, I listened to Josephine—one of our local staff members—as she told us about the women and children that we had met in the community. When asked about an individual’s life, Josephine would respond with stories of each woman’s courage, strength, and hard work as well as her role as a sister, mother, and friend—only mentioning each woman’s work as a nurse, teacher, doctor, or chef when specifically asked about professions.

The stark contrast in the way that our two cultures responded to this question intrigued me. Where we would often answer with a job title, she answered first with divine roles and attributes centered on people.

In many ways, these two experiences left me with more questions than answers. As I reflect on the past four years, it is experiencing both

the clarity and the uncertainty that came from considering the intersections between academia and religion, learning from the beauty of Zambian culture, experiencing personal and family health challenges, and engaging in vulnerable conversations about inclusion and belonging that have become the measure of my time here. Like many of you, some of my greatest successes and joys have happened during these years; however, for many of us, our greatest setbacks and deepest sorrows have also happened on this campus. It is the balance of and intersections between these experiences that will define our time at BYU.

These experiences have deepened my understanding of BYU’s goal for us to become lifelong learners²—having the courage to listen and learn from the experiences of those around us, finding innovative and sustainable solutions to social problems, advocating for change, and committing to bettering our workplaces, graduate programs, communities, families, and, perhaps most important, ourselves.

I once feared uncertainty as a sign of weakness, but I have come to appreciate it as an opportunity to allow God to work more fully in my life—realizing that if I had all the answers, I wouldn’t need to trust and rely on the Lord.

A friend once counseled me, “Heaven is constantly conspiring for your good,” and I believe that is true for each of us today. As we leave BYU, we have the opportunity to not only choose what we will do but who we will become.

To our faculty, donors, and mentors, thank you for the role that each of you has played in our growth and for your confidence in our futures. To each of you, my fellow graduates, I offer my sincere congratulations—both for all you have accomplished and will yet do and, more important, who you will become.

Thank you.

Notes

1. Kevin J Worthen, “Who You Are and the Things You Do,” BYU commencement address, 13 August 2015.

2. See *The Aims of a BYU Education* (1 March 1995).