

Spiritual Creation

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I am grateful to be here with you today. It is truly an honor—and also a bit surreal—to be standing here after attending these devotionals as a student so many years ago. I am grateful for the support of my family, friends, and colleagues as well as of some of the young women from my ward who are here today. Preparing for this experience has been a humbling journey, and I pray that the Spirit will be the better communicator during our short time together.

Producing and creating content for television has been a part of my life for nearly twenty-five years. I have had the great privilege of working and collaborating with creative, committed, and talented individuals across the globe on thousands of hours of content for networks both domestic and international. While I have had many wonderful experiences over the years, the unique opportunity I have at BYU Broadcasting to create content that embraces and magnifies eternal truths central to the gospel of Jesus Christ has been one of the most rewarding of my career.

Defining Spiritual Creation

I would like to talk to you today about what it means to be intentional, spiritual creators in our own lives.

All meaningful creation begins with a spark, a kernel of an idea that is filled with potential. It requires faith, imagination, and focus to grow it into existence. When God created the world, He intentionally shaped and brought order from chaotic matter to create the heavens, the earth, and everything on it. We learn from the book of Moses about a vitally important step in the creative process:

And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew. For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth.¹

This ability to create spiritually—to conceptually form an idea before we bring it into

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existence—is a process that sets us apart from God’s other creations. Isn’t it interesting that out of everything He created on this earth only we are made in His image? I believe that with this truth comes a divinely inherited ability to spiritually shape our own creations, including the experience and path we will forge here in mortality.

Most often when we think of creators or creativity, the works of sculptors, painters, writers, composers, dancers, or actors come to mind.

Some of you may not consider yourself to be “the creative type,” but I would like to challenge that notion. Creativity and creation are an integral part of our divine DNA.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf described our creative nature in this way:

The desire to create is one of the deepest yearnings of the human soul. No matter our talents, education, backgrounds, or abilities, we each have an inherent wish to create something that did not exist before. . . .

. . . Remember that you are spirit [children] of the most creative Being in the universe.²

Creativity, then, becomes a broad and beautiful palette in which we all participate. It encompasses unique expressions, both tangible and intangible, ranging from complex equations, magnificent structures, and technology to our personal, nurturing relationships and dedicated service to one another.

A primary facet of spiritual creation is the ability to see potential even when others see none. My grandfather George Barrack was a first-generation immigrant from Lebanon. As a child of the Great Depression, he and his sister often went hungry, and they would do any odd job to help make ends meet. During the potato harvest season, George would scour the railway tracks to find potatoes that had fallen from trains so that his family could use them to make soup.

With only a seventh-grade education and despite numerous challenges, George imagined something more. He developed a lifelong passion for planes and motorcycles. He would gather rusty parts and pieces of old Harley-Davidson motorcycles in junkyards, at swap meets, or even on the side of the road. Where others saw pieces to be

discarded, George saw something to be restored. He would sand, polish, and paint with an artist’s hand. Throughout his life, he restored dozens of beautiful bikes, each a unique work of art. George became well known to many in the Harley-Davidson community. His work was chronicled in magazines, and he was even inducted into the Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Museum Hall of Fame. Where others saw old, broken parts, George saw potential.

One of my favorite scriptures speaks to the potential that our Heavenly Father sees in each of us. In Romans we read:

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.³

This is a stunning inheritance. As children of God—whatever state we are in right now, whether we are rusty or just need a good polish—this inheritance means that our potential is endless. How might your desires, focus, choices, and path change if you could fully see yourself as God sees you?

Shaping Your Unique Story

I would like to turn now to one of the most important spiritual creations that you will craft during this earthly existence: your story. You have a unique story that you are shaping every day through your experiences and choices. There has never been nor will there ever be another story like yours. Is your story an intentional, spiritual creation? Is it a story that relies perhaps too heavily on another’s influence or is happening too much by default? Is it a story that is in harmony with our Master Creator, our Father in Heaven?

President David O. McKay often liked to paraphrase the poem “Life Sculpture,” saying, “Sculptors of life are we, with our uncarved souls before us. Every one of us is carving a soul.”⁴

These careful carvings—not only of our own souls but also those carvings that we create in the lives of others—will shape our existence not only here but throughout eternity. For all of us, our souls are works in progress. My incredible

parents, spouse, children, siblings, extended family members, friends, teachers, and mentors have all been wonderful and loving sculptors throughout my life. We must be so careful about who or what we allow to create these carvings on our souls.

The most important carvings will be those that are led by the Spirit. When we listen and choose to act, these pivotal carvings transform our lives.

Television production was not a path I had ever considered during my earlier education or even in my college years. Following graduation, my husband, Steve, and I moved to Los Angeles.

I still remember many of the difficulties of that first year. We were newlyweds with uncertain and unstable career paths living in a huge city far away from our families and friends. After a year of working uninspiring jobs to pay the bills, I felt stagnant. I prayed, pondered, and questioned often—and not without discouragement—whether we would ever “figure it out.”

Around this time I had a strong prompting to quit my job. We were barely scraping by in that big, expensive city. To quit without having something else lined up was terrifying to me. But the spiritual nudge was unmistakable. So I quit, not knowing what was next or how we would have enough money to pay our rent.

In the days and weeks that followed, I prayed often and searched for direction—and jobs—until one day a relative offered to introduce me to their childhood friend who was an executive at a television production company. So many beautiful blessings have come into my life because of that first meeting with Debby. She continues to be an incredible mentor and dear friend. She is a woman of faith who has blessed me and my family. Debby and I have reminisced often about the perfect and inspired timing of that first meeting. The window in which I could have been hired was so small! Debby took me under her wing and taught me so much. I know that it was through the Spirit that we were put into each other’s lives. That leap of faith to quit my job was the catalyst for years of experiences, friendships, joys, and lifelong learning. I am so grateful that I chose to listen.

Finding the Heart

One of my primary responsibilities at BYU Broadcasting, together with our incredible team, is to find those stories of faith and redemption that entertain, inspire, uplift, and improve families and communities. A great story can be a powerful motivator. It can inspire joy, empathy, connection, and understanding. Stories have the potential to shape and influence us for good and bad.

We can look to the Savior, who utilized the power of storytelling to impress upon us important doctrines. The stories of the ten virgins, the prodigal son, or the good Samaritan help us internalize eternal principles of preparedness, forgiveness, mercy, repentance, kindness—and the list goes on!

In media creation, finding, cultivating, and creating the best stories take time. The development process always begins as an act of spiritual creation, of imagining what an idea *could* become. Brainstorming, outlines, scripts, a trailer, proof of concept, or even a fully produced pilot might be created before we ultimately decide to greenlight a project. This process takes months—and in some cases years. To me, this process of content creation is a beautiful metaphor for our own intentional journey.

One of the first things that we do with any new content idea is boil the premise down to a few sentences. We may refer to this as an “elevator pitch” or a “logline.” But beyond that, we explore the core principles that we want to communicate. What is at the heart of it?

I would like to illustrate this principle across three *very* different projects that we have developed and produced at BYUtv.

For the scripted drama *Ruby and the Well*, a logline might read:

When Ruby and her father inherit a crumbling family estate, Ruby discovers an old wishing well. When the well chooses her as its new “Keeper,” it’s up to Ruby and her friends to solve the mystery behind each wish that has languished in the well for years. Together they find a way to grant the wishes one by one, bringing hope and healing to a broken town.

But at the core, *Ruby and the Well* is about service, sacrifice, an awareness of the needs of others, and the willingness to act on that knowledge—much like how the Spirit works in our own lives. When we are open to those promptings, we have a greater capacity to understand and serve each other.

Or we might look at *Saving Me*, a half-hour, animated comedy with a very different tone and approach. The logline would read:

Bennett Bramble, a tech genius billionaire living in the future, has everything he ever wanted—except happiness. When Bennett builds a time machine and travels back to his eleven-year-old self to fix his past, chaos ensues. Together, and often badly at first, the two Bennetts must reinvent themselves and learn what it means to become a better person in this ultimate do-over.

While housed in a quirky, animated comedy, the core of *Saving Me* is rooted in eternal progression, repentance, forgiveness, family relationships, and, ultimately, redemption.

And finally, in the documentary series *Artful*, prominent painters, illustrators, sculptors, and others provide rare, intimate, and wondrous glimpses into the lives of artists. They share how they are moved upon to create some of their most important works and how the process of creation connects them with the Divine.

While beautiful masterpieces are created, at its core *Artful* is about humility, listening and recognizing spiritual impressions, and the process of cocreation with the Divine.

I love that eternal and distinctive truths can be woven into such varying, creative expressions.

As you examine your own life, how would you characterize your creative expression, your individual logline? And how would you define the principles that make up your core?

Fleshing Out the Story Line

Once we have identified the heart of an idea, the next step in the development process is to flesh out the form. In both scripted and unscripted development, these discussions will include format, story structure, arc, theme, plot, conflict, and character.

In a layered, rich story, industry sources will often refer to the varying plotlines as *A*, *B*, and *C* stories. The *A* story is what it sounds like. This will be the primary story line for the main character or protagonist. The *B* story is generally a parallel story line headed by more secondary characters. And the *C* story is where you might see smaller threads—or “runners”—that pay off long term but in which the characters won’t have any significant transformation.

As we go through the scripting process, wonderful, funny, and dramatic story ideas will arise that improve and strengthen the *A* story. Alternatively, some ideas, while compelling, can weaken the main story if they aren’t aligned with its core purpose. These ideas can be very difficult to let go of! Carefully, we must discern and weed out those distracting ideas if we are to stay focused on the story that really matters.

In Moses we read, “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”⁵

All of the Lord’s commandments, doctrines, and teachings are tied to the plan of salvation—our Heavenly Father’s *A* story—and the purpose of our creation. If we are His work and glory, what are we doing to align our *A* story with His? Is it possible that we’re spending too much time and energy as a secondary character in our own journey, focused on our *B* or *C* subplots and missing His larger narrative?

Another aspect of great storytelling is a strong protagonist. A compelling lead character is always a complex, flawed being with nuanced emotions, strengths, and weaknesses who is driven by an overarching aspirational objective.

If you have seen *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* movies, or even *The Lion King*, then you have already been introduced to a popular archetypal story pattern called the hero’s journey. I can’t help but think that this structure resonates deeply with us because it closely mirrors our own spiritual journeys.

In this pattern, our hero leaves the familiar world behind to venture into the unknown. In this new and foreign world, our hero will face many trials, temptations, and adversaries. Our hero will also find allies and mentors to assist them in

finding their higher purpose. This higher purpose will always be greater than the hero's own self—greater than their happiness or livelihood. Through grueling preparation and training and a great awakening to their true potential, the hero overcomes the greatest challenges and returns triumphant to the familiar world.

While you have seen stories with examples of wonderful, complex characters, you have likely also experienced flat, one-dimensional characters who lack depth or substance and often lean on stereotypes. A one-dimensional character is the same at the beginning of a story as they are in the end. As children of God, we are built to learn, transform, and evolve. We are built for eternal progression. I see a disturbing trend, especially in our current social-media-driven environment, in which our brothers and sisters are presented as stereotypes—one-note caricatures who lack nuance or depth and are incapable of growth rather than the children of God that we all are.

In a 2009 TED talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stated:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. . . .

. . . The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.⁶

Let us be careful that we don't reduce ourselves or others to a single story. We must see each other as a collection of our stories, both shared and unique. If our primary story is that of a child of God, then we are bound in that, regardless of any individual beliefs or perspectives that we might have.

Refining the Rough Cut

Once we have moved through the development process and conceptually formed an idea, it is time to bring this abstract creation into physical existence through production. Film and television production is a grueling experience made up of long days and weeks, often in a hotel away

from family and friends. It requires constant collaboration—sometimes with hundreds of people—and immense flexibility to adapt to the daily problems that inevitably arise.

Many challenges will cause you to creatively stretch in ways you can never prepare for. In this industry, truth is often stranger than fiction. For example, I was asked at one point, "How many parachuting Elvis impersonators can we hire?" Or another request came this way: "We see this beautiful swimming pool. We'd like to build a plexiglass stage in the middle of it and then place a grand piano in the center. And we'd like to make it look as though someone is walking across the water before they sit down and play. And we'd like that in two days!"

During this physical production period, tempers run short, exhaustion is inevitable, and being your best self is always put to the test. Creative problem solving is vital to survive it!

As problems arise during the production process, there is an oft-repeated joke that we will just "fix it in post." While the editing process gives us amazing opportunities to shape and refine our creations, it is rarely a good idea to delay a fix that should have been taken care of during production. Fixing it in post will almost always be more painful and costly, and it will often lead to a substandard solution to what we could have done during field production. Our choices become much more limited when we reach this point.

Similarly, in our own lives, while the Savior's Atonement provides endless opportunities to fix it in post, delaying the changes that we need to make in our lives today robs us of the peace and blessings the Lord wants to provide to us right now.

Once a project is through the development and production phase, we move into the editing and postproduction phase. I must admit that one of the more nerve-racking experiences is viewing the first rough cut of any new program. A rough cut is the first attempt to structure what was captured during production. It will often have sections missing, unfinished elements, and temporary graphics and music. At times it requires a tremendous amount of imagination to see the full picture. Those moments that were painstakingly

crafted during development and production don't work, the interview we were so excited about when we filmed it lacks the magic of the moment, or the story and pacing feel flat, resulting in pages of notes. It can be discouraging after so much work has gone into getting to this stage.

But as we wade through this creative process of refinement, awkward cuts are smoothed out, the nuances of scenes emerge, and story arcs become clear. The performances are trimmed and tucked, sometimes significantly. While there will always be things that we wish we had done differently, one of the beautiful outcomes of this intense refinement is that new discoveries and opportunities arise, shaping our program in surprising new ways. As the rough-cut edit progresses to a fine cut and then on to a locked-cut version, it is now ready for color correction, sound design, and the final graphic elements. Our creation that started as a spark of an idea is now complete.

While I still feel those initial pains during the editing process, I have learned over the years to trust and have faith in the process of refinement. In our own lives, when we focus on and intentionally care for each moment, making small—or sometimes large—corrections, our story begins to take shape. We will undoubtedly have times when it is hard to see how our rough cut—the life we are creating—can ever become something beautiful. We all have scenes and moments from our stories and the choices we have made that we are not proud of. Only through the power of His Atonement can we refine and smooth those awkward, badly performed moments in our lives. Only when we allow the Master Editor, our Savior Jesus Christ, to shape and cocreate with us can our story's true potential emerge.

Overcoming the Antagonists

While each creative process is a unique journey, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that in every story there will be antagonists—forces working to thwart our story's progression. These antagonists may take the form of people, ideas, choices, or circumstances in our lives. They may be openly hostile or use subtle enticements that are counterfeits of truth. "Opposition in all things"⁷ is a central

theme in our Father's primary story. His eternal plan requires that we learn, strive, overcome, and, ultimately, choose to turn to Him.

We might experience something akin to writer's block in which feelings of fear, perfectionism, external pressure, self-criticism, and shame can prevent us from shaping the story that we intend.

In a 2008 general conference talk, Elder Neil L. Andersen stated:

*Challenges, difficulties, questions, doubts—these are part of our mortality. But we are not alone. As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have enormous spiritual reservoirs of light and truth available to us. Fear and faith cannot coexist in our hearts at the same time. In our days of difficulty, we choose the road of faith.*⁸

When we draw on these spiritual reservoirs and exercise faith, we come to see these antagonists for what they are:

- Perfectionism is an illusion that paralyzes progress. Our loving Heavenly Father gives us chance after chance to iterate, to refine, to become better. Progress is enough when it is aligned with our desire to become more like our Savior.
- Excessive self-criticism can be crippling, but only when we forget where and who we come from and when we cease to recognize our eternal nature and our divine inheritance.
- External pressures can pull us away from our core. Only by choosing intentional, spiritual creation can we create and align our primary story with God's plan for us. Focusing on subplots will never bring us a fullness of joy.
- And finally, regarding shame: Shame is a powerful lie. It parades as repentance, but it is not. Shame urges us to hide, to stop, to turn away, and to believe we aren't worthy of our Savior's love and His Atonement.

These antagonists and more can easily derail us if we allow it. Instead, as we walk through the spiritual, intentional refinements that the Savior offers us, our story can become more beautiful than we could have imagined.

Your time here at BYU is an important scene in your life story. As the recently released brand message for BYU states:

We believe a world yearning for hope and joy needs the graduates of Brigham Young University. As disciples of Jesus Christ, BYU graduates are motivated by love for God and His children. BYU graduates are directed by living prophets and prepared to serve, lift, and lead. This preparation demands a unique university model: at BYU, belief enhances inquiry, study amplifies faith, and revelation leads to deeper understanding.⁹

As you intentionally blend your secular and spiritual learnings, I know that with faith and focus, blessings and magnificent creations will manifest themselves in your lives. As you choose to serve, lift, and lead, following in the footsteps of our Savior Jesus Christ, you will find the path that leads to your divine inheritance—your path back to Him.

I love the vision and aspirations of BYU. I love the students here and the faith you all demonstrate as you lead out in this complicated world. It is my prayer that each of your journeys—your creations—will be filled with intention, faith, love, and service to one another. I hope that each of you will draw on your divinely endowed creativity to fulfill the measure of your creation.

I leave these thoughts and prayers with you in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Moses 3:5.
2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Happiness, Your Heritage,” *Ensign*, November 2008.
3. Romans 8:16–17.
4. David O. McKay, quoted in Francis M. Gibbons, *David O. McKay: Apostle to the World, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 288. In his talks, David O. McKay often recited the whole poem “Life Sculpture,” of which several versions with various titles had started appearing in newspapers in 1850: for example, “Life-Sculpture,” *Portland Transcript*, 27 April 1850, 1; also “A Beautiful Thought,” *Southern Literary Gazette*, 17 August 1850, 2. See also “A Beautiful Thought,” *Juvenile Missionary Herald*, January 1851, 186; William Croswell Doane, *Rhymes from Time to Time* (Albany: Riggs Printing and Publishing, 1901), 67. The poem has been frequently attributed to Bishop William Croswell Doane (1832–1913) as well as to his father, Bishop George Washington Doane (1799–1859).
5. Moses 1:39.
6. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” TEDGlobal 2009 talk, 23 July 2009, [ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).
7. 2 Nephi 2:11.
8. Neil L. Andersen, “You Know Enough,” *Ensign*, November 2008.
9. “For the Benefit of the World,” BYU Core Brand Message (10 August 2022).