

A Transforming Excellence

ANDREW TEAL

Elder and Sister Christofferson, President and Sister Worthen, President-Designate and Sister Reese, Church authorities, faculty, fellow graduates, thank you for inviting us to be part of this immensely special day for you all at Brigham Young University. As an Englishman, we don't use the word *commencement*; "graduation" is what we say. *Commencement* is a new term for me—a fruitful and dynamic idea. The word *commencement* for graduation can imply something different—a launchpad rather than a conclusion.

So thank you for this honorary award. I know that whatever else the future may hold, I will know no greater honor than this. I am really humbled, and I freely admit my love and gratitude to BYU and the Church it serves.

"This is an overwhelmingly large and festive celebration," I said as I saw you all. It is a bit like preparation for the Day of Judgment. As well as the grandeur and the splendor of this event, it is also one that is intimate and personal for each of us here.

Gratitude—as has been already made clear in these wonderful addresses we have heard—is

the flavor of the day. Gratitude for all the support and the continual beckoning to each of us to keep on taking steps toward excellence—excellence in achievement and, more significantly, the invitation to travel beyond our closed-in selves to that excellence that is above and beyond us all but also within each of us.

I want to acknowledge first of all my thanks and my love to so many here, most especially to my wife, Rachel, and to our children, Chiara and Luke. It is an absolute privilege to share my life with you. I can't find the words, and I'm pretty good at finding words. Today is my son's birthday, so thank you for throwing him this fantastic party! But without you—my family—and your patient love and understanding, I wouldn't be here today. So I want to say how very much I love you and am grateful for you each day of my life.

But I am not alone in being a bit sentimental today, because you, my fellow Cougars—you who have received your degrees—have achieved so much in your inspiring and wonderful personal journeys. You are now given this university's highest accolade, the degree for which you have

Andrew Teal, chaplain, fellow, and lecturer in theology at Pembroke College, Oxford University, received an honorary doctorate when this BYU commencement address was given on April 27, 2023.

worked. My fellow Cougars, we find ourselves at the center of attention. How many times have people clapped for you today? You are rightly receiving that from our university. Your family, your teachers, and your friends have praised you—all of whose hearts are bursting with pride and love right now. But just as I have reflected my gratitude to my own family, you know that you have not achieved this on your own. Support and love and friendship have surrounded you. So will you join me on this day in reaching out to them? It may not be possible in this multitude to catch your family's eye, and it may sound very cheesy and ever so un-English, but amid all this acclamation for you, can we show how much their love and support means by standing to applaud and to cheer those who have brought you here?

We are so blessed today to become part of the life and history of this amazing world-class university, with its distinguished and distinctive character. BYU models a rare and particular dimension of profound and exacting excellence that stands back from conventional attitudes and judgments and explores the truth in all its wonder, beauty, complexity, and unity. This university has in its spiritual DNA a commitment to *divine* excellence rather than just being married to the flavor and prejudices of each passing moment.

I want for a second to consider that notion of excellence. If we turn to Plato's *Meno* dialogue, we find a discussion of a Greek word and concept: ἀρετή (*aretē*). Meno comes to Socrates with the question Can excellence be taught? Or can it not be taught but acquired through practice? Or can it neither be acquired through practice nor learned but be something that people possess by nature or some other way? *Aretē* has traditionally been translated as "virtue," but it doesn't simply mean virtue in a single sense. It was through Socrates and Plato that *aretē* came to have a primarily *moral* connotation and a connection with the spiritual dimension of education, being a concern with values rather than with economic or success-orientated achievement. It points, as Paul says, to "the most excellent way" of all, love and charity,¹ which is expounded in this way in the Doctrine and Covenants: to "impart of their substance,

as becometh saints, to the poor and afflicted among them."²

Aretē originally meant something like prowess, and in the city states of Plato's day, it particularly meant political brilliance and technical skill. *Aretē* is our guide wherever we are: it is truly inclusive because excellence beckons to each of us. However far we are in our journeys, it beckons us to keep on traveling further. Excellence takes us on hard and steep paths to integrity and trustworthiness in the public world, in our community of faith, in our family, and among our friends.

I have benefited from those hallmarks of BYU's excellence in recent years. Your attention, understanding, truthfulness, and support are all hallmarks of what you have gained through BYU. And now we commence to spread those values and principles ever further afield, imparting that substance to all who need it, because what you know is less important than what you *do* with what you know, and what you have already achieved is less important than what you *will do* with what you have achieved.

Truly, excellent integrity keeps on exploring and causes us to step out of our comfort zones. Our particular university's identity is bound up in that quest for continuing integrity. That is why I am aware of the value of this immense honor today. This is not a degree factory. This is not a gift from sponsors who have a particular outcome in mind. Underneath these robes I am wearing a Mr. Mac suit. I have to point out, for the sake of fairness, that other missionary tailors are also available. But I also have to say it fits wonderfully, but not as marvelously as this degree fits all that I aspire to and hold most valuable. This degree really fits because this university points us toward our eternal nature and destiny. You are committed to following the truth with the conviction that wherever that faithful journey leads, it is the truth alone that will set you free.³ The practical aspects of educational virtues are not excellence unless they are accompanied by the moral qualities of justice and self-control.

How is this excellence learned then? Though we pick it up from our predecessors, Socrates suspected that excellence is not a thing that could

be taught, because knowledge is transitory. Plato's dialogue ends with the suggestion that wisdom is like that of inspired prophets and that therefore excellence is neither natural nor teachable but something that comes about by divine power and revelation—a kind of inspiration from the eternal realm. It is fundamentally elusive though recognizable. This sort of spiritual intelligence is a gift from God.

Our academy and our world today have many obsessions and fixations that seek to limit that excellence. Some journeys, particularly faith journeys, can be mocked, but education that is solely utilitarian—imparting technical skills without moral responsibility or aesthetic quality—or that is subject to the contemporary processes of just polishing your own CV or speaking to the gallery sadly lacks genuine excellence. BYU's commitment is to an education that imparts a respect for and a striving for truth, beauty, and goodness. The elusive *quality* of excellence is right here. Do we want a transforming excellence, or do we want to feel comfortable that we have now arrived? No, this graduation is properly called a commencement. Excellence holds together individual priorities and fulfillment with social responsibility and puts our self and sectional interests in the service of the common good.

Excellence is indispensable. You can't put it on the syllabus at a set time for an hour a week. Spiritual qualities have to pervade the whole of the educational endeavor—and here they do. Our BYU education is not simply a way of social and economic climbing, nor even a way of ensuring benefits for society in general. It is fundamentally about the truth that imparts its substance to all in need.

The elusive spiritual dimension—the demands of truth, beauty, and goodness—relates to the joy and to the pain, to the love and to the agony, of all our brothers and sisters. Our BYU education has something to do with vision—something to do with the eternal spilling out, with the indefinable, and with the divine mystery of our human reality. So we listen to those who have sought excellence in the past as well as to those around us. We have much to learn from them, and we need their inspiration.

President Brigham Young said:

It is our duty and calling, as ministers of the same salvation and gospel, to gather every item of truth and reject every error. Whether a truth be found with professed infidels, or with the Universalists, or the Church of Rome, or the Methodists, the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Quakers, the Shakers, or any other of the various and numerous different sects and parties, all of whom have more or less truth, it is the business of the elders of this Church, Jesus their elder brother being at their head, to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation, to the gospel we preach . . . , wherever it may be found in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, and bring it to Zion.⁴

So God bless you as we commence in gathering all things for Zion. Thank you.

Notes

1. 1 Corinthians 12:31, New International Version; see also 1 Corinthians 13.

2. Doctrine and Covenants 105:3.

3. See John 8:32.

4. Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, 26 October 1859, 265; capitalization modernized. See also Young, *JD* 7:283–84 (9 October 1859).