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Let me begin my remarks by offering the new graduates a simple congratulations. Given current trends, if I were communicating my message by social media or email, I would amplify the sentiment by adding an exclamation point—or two or three or four!

With the advent of online communication, exclamation points have taken on new life and new meanings. They seem to be everywhere. But not everybody is happy about it. One columnist recently wrote a piece entitled “Exclamation Proliferation and Why It Has to Stop!”¹ Another found the current use of exclamation points self-centered, calling the punctuation mark “the selfie of grammar.”² A character in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld series asserted that “multiple exclamation marks . . . are a sure sign of a diseased mind,”³ and another character in that same series proclaimed that using “[five] exclamation marks . . . [is] a sure sign of someone who wears his underpants on his head.”⁴ Surveying all this criticism, one columnist declared that, given both its ubiquity and its ambiguous meaning, “there is really only one rule when it comes to the

exclamation mark: don’t use it.”⁵ As near as I can tell, no one is following *that* rule.

There is a good reason why the exclamation point has not been banned. With a single mark, an exclamation point can communicate powerful messages in a highly effective and efficient way. When novelist Victor Hugo wanted to know how sales for his book *Les Misérables* were doing, his telegram to his publisher contained only a single question mark. His publisher responded with a single exclamation point, letting Hugo know that sales were strong.⁶ In that same vein, Elder S. Gifford Nielsen gave a memorable general conference talk a few years ago highlighting “scriptures about ‘the gathering’ which ended with” an exclamation point.⁷ He identified sixty-five such passages, noting that the exclamation point showed what he called a “strong missionary emotion.”⁸

So exclamation points persist, and I suggest that a brief history of the function and meaning of the exclamation point can provide valuable lessons to you graduates as you move on to the next stage of your lives.⁹

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this commencement address on April 27, 2023.

To truly understand the function and meaning of the exclamation point, we have to trace our way back to the form of communication used in ancient Greece. As one author explained it, “In early democracies such as Greece, . . . elected officials *debated* to promote their points of view,” and “eloquent and persuasive *speech* was considered more important than *written* language.”¹⁰ Written text existed only to record the spoken message; it was not designed to be read aloud by itself.¹¹ To save space and effort, there were no spaces between words and no marks at the ends of sentences or paragraphs. The text was therefore one long string of letters. This made it very difficult to read, especially the first time through. As described by one author, punctuation began when “ancient librarians, teachers and learners developed a system of signs to help understand the anatomy of sentences, and to know where to stop for breath.”¹² Over time, not only were there spaces between the words but also periods at the ends of sentences as well as commas, semicolons, question marks, and eventually exclamation points to signal to the reader how a text ought to be read.

There is some dispute about the exact origin and meaning of the exclamation point,¹³ but one theory is that it originated as a way to convey a message of joy. As one author explained, “The [Latin] exclamation of joy was *io*, where the *i* was written above the *o*. Because Latin letters were all capitals, an *I* with an *o* below looks like today’s exclamation point.”¹⁴ Over time, the message shifted a bit. By the fifteenth century, when the use of the exclamation point had become standard practice among printers, they called it an “admiration mark.”¹⁵ In the mid-seventeenth century, the name shifted to exclamation mark or point,¹⁶ signifying any expression of strong sentiment, whether the emotion was “fear, anger, joy, or some other form of excitement.”¹⁷

But even then, the exclamation point was not through evolving. Over the years it has been given different names¹⁸ and different meanings, and its popularity has ebbed and flowed. It was not until the 1970s that it was given a place on the typewriter keyboard.¹⁹ But through it all, the mark has been incredibly resilient—even in times when it

was not highly regarded. Somewhat reluctantly admiring its tenacity, one author claimed that the exclamation point was “the *cockroach* of the punctuation world,” explaining that “the exclamation [point] will, despite and because of all the things that make it terrible, survive us all.”²⁰

So, what does this have to do with you, the class of 2023? What do I hope to accomplish by associating the exclamation point with your graduation from BYU? Three things.

First, when you see an exclamation point and reflect on its function and history, I hope you think of the importance of creating space in your daily life for things that give you eternal perspective—things such as daily scripture study, daily prayer, and daily contemplation. Just as adding spaces to the ends of words allowed the ancient Greeks to turn a cacophony of letters into a comprehensible message, creating sacred spaces in your daily lives will allow you to make sense of the sometimes seemingly chaotic events that swirl around you. And I hope the resulting greater presence of the Holy Ghost in your daily life will be like commas, semicolons, and even exclamation points that will enable you to have greater understanding of both the messages you receive from God and the events that occur in your daily life.

Second, when you see an exclamation point, I hope you recognize that there is something in our eternal DNA that wants to exultingly celebrate good things. We all “shouted for joy” in our premortal existence when we heard our Heavenly Father’s glorious plan for us.²¹ And when the Pharisees asked Christ to rebuke His disciples for rejoicing and praising His mighty works, Jesus proclaimed that if *the people* “should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.”²² Given that innate impulse to express our joy and admiration for good things, the development of something like an exclamation point was almost inevitable. That may explain the mark’s resilience. Thus I hope seeing an exclamation point will prompt you to look for ways to celebrate the good things that happen in your life and especially in the lives of others around you. The desire to enthusiastically express joy and admiration for the accomplishments of others is a divine trait that

we should all cultivate. That will help us build bridges of understanding, avoid contention, and be peacemakers, as President Russell M. Nelson has encouraged all of us to do.²³

Third, when you see an exclamation point, I hope you recognize the need for resilience in your life. Just as the exclamation point has survived and thrived—even in times when it was less popular, and even when it was left off the keyboard—we should be optimistic about the future regardless of our present circumstances. We should trust that God will keep His promise “that all things [will] work together for good” for those who love Him.²⁴ The exclamation point can remind us that as long as we have faith in Christ, the best is yet to come.

In that regard, I find it instructive that very few books end with an exclamation point, with Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) being the rare exception that proves the rule.²⁵ By contrast, a fair number of books use exclamation points at the end of a chapter. We call those chapters cliff-hangers. In those books, exclamation points are used not to pronounce the end of the story but to invite the reader to continue reading to find out the exciting conclusion. The exclamation point should remind us, as someone once said: “Everything will be okay in the end. If it’s not okay, it’s not the end.”²⁶

So, class of 2023, congratulations—exclamation point. We joyfully celebrate and admire your accomplishments with the assurance that because of Christ, the best is yet to come. May that truth resonate with and elevate your spirit on this day of exclamation is my prayer, in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Diana J. Simon, “Exclamation Proliferation and Why It Has to Stop!” *Arizona Attorney* 58, no. 6 (February 2022): 12–16.

2. Philip Cowell, “What Overusing Exclamation Marks Says About You,” *Words’ Worth*, BBC Culture, 2 March 2017, bbc.com/culture/article/20170301-what-overusing-exclamation-marks-says-about-you; quoted in Florence Hazrat,

An Admirable Point: A Brief History of the Exclamation Mark! (Boston: Godine, 2023), 11.

3. Eric, in Terry Pratchett, *Eric* (London: V. Gollancz, 1990); quoted in Hazrat, *Admirable Point*, 11.

4. Salzella, in Terry Pratchett, *Maskerade* (London: Gollancz, 1995); quoted in Hazrat, *Admirable Point*, 11.

5. Cowell, “What Overusing Exclamation Marks Says.”

6. As related in Rose Eveleth, “The History of the Exclamation Point,” *Smart News*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 9 August 2012, smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/the-history-of-the-exclamation-point-16445416; see also Hazrat, *Admirable Point*, 11–12. See also Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (New York: Gotham Books, 2003), 136.

7. S. Gifford Nielsen, “Hastening the Lord’s Game Plan!” *Ensign*, November 2013.

8. Nielsen, “Hastening the Lord’s Game Plan!”

9. For a comprehensive explanation of the history, current uses, and even future of the exclamation point, see Hazrat, *Admirable Point*.

10. Keith Houston, “The Mysterious Origins of Punctuation,” *Literature*, BBC Culture, 2 September 2015, bbc.com/culture/article/20150902-the-mysterious-origins-of-punctuation; emphasis added.

11. See Hazrat, *Admirable Point*, 24.

12. Hazrat, *Admirable Point*, 24.

13. One historian traces the origin back to a specific Italian scholar and poet: Iacopo Alpoleio da Urbisaglia (see Hazrat, *Admirable Point*, 25).

14. Simon, “Exclamation Proliferation,” 13; citing Eveleth, “The History of the Exclamation Point.”

15. In Spanish it is still known as a *signo de admiración*. See Megan Garber, “‘Screamer,’ ‘Slammer,’ ‘Bang’ . . . and 15 Other Ways to Say ‘Exclamation Point,’” *Technology*, *Atlantic*, 5 April 2013, theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/04/screamer-slammer-bang-and-15-other-ways-to-say-exclamation-point/274687.

16. See Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, 136–37.

17. Melissa Donovan, “Punctuation Marks: The Exclamation Mark,” *Writing Forward*,

6 September 2022, writingforward.com/grammar/punctuation-marks/punctuation-marks-exclamation-mark. The exclamation mark “adds emphasis to a sentence, indicating emotional stress that could be caused by fear, anger, joy, or some other form of excitement.”

18. Among the many names it has had over the years are Bang, Christer, Control, Dembanger, Gasper, Pling, Screamer, Shriekmark, Shout pole, Slammer, Smash, Soldier, Spark-spot, Startler, and Wonderer (Garber, “‘Screamer,’ ‘Slammer’”).

19. “Typewriters didn’t have exclamation marks until the 1970s. Prior to their addition to the keyboard, an exclamation mark was generated by typing a full stop (period). The typist would then backspace and add an apostrophe over the period” (Donovan, “Punctuation Marks”).

20. Garber, “‘Screamer,’ ‘Slammer’”; emphasis in original.

21. Job 38:7.

22. Luke 19:40; see also verses 37–40.

23. See Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” *Liahona*, May 2023.

24. Romans 8:28.

25. Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) ends with Tiny Tim saying, “God bless us every one!”

26. A version of this saying has been attributed to a number of different sources. See “Everything Will Be Okay in the End. If It’s Not Okay It’s Not the End,” Quote Investigator, quoteinvestigator.com/2023/01/01/everything-ok.