

Becoming Our Best BYU Self

GERRIT W. GONG

To the BYU graduating class of 2024, families, friends, brothers and sisters, ladies and gentlemen, I gratefully join Commissioner Clark G. Gilbert and Sister Christine C. Gilbert, President C. Shane Reese and First Lady Wendy W. Reese, and each of you at the first April commencement for this new BYU administration. We acknowledge with appreciation and affection Elder D. Todd Christofferson, who is a member of the BYU Board of Trustees, his wife, Sister Katherine J. Christofferson, as well as many other special friends who are with us today.

I offer congratulations and a thank you to Macy West and also thank Hillary Nielsen, our BYU Chamber Orchestra, and all who are participating in our program. I extend warmest congratulations to Professor Dr. Viswanath D. Karad for his lifelong commitment and contributions to peace, global education, and intercultural friendship and understanding.

Some years ago I playfully made up a little saying for occasions such as today. It goes like this: "I hope those sitting on the stand understand how long we can stand to sit."

This morning that little phrase reminded me, "Gerrit, just remember, you are the last thing between these wonderful graduates and their graduation celebrations."

In his poem "Little Gidding," from his poetry collection *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot voiced a memorable thought:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate . . .
. . . heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.¹*

Gerrit W. Gong, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this commencement address on April 25, 2024.

As a memorable fixed point in time and space, BYU commencement can be a spiritual benchmark. Commencement invites us to look back in gratitude and appreciation. It also invites us to look forward in anticipation and exploration.

Today, as I return to a university campus I have loved for many years, I invite you to return with me to three of my BYU freshman experiences that to this day invite me to become my best BYU gospel self.

Three BYU Freshman Experiences

First, when I was a new freshman, a group of students began a madrigal singing group. Each was an experienced madrigal singer. My closest experience to organized singing was that I knew the old joke about not stepping on a banana peel—that is, if you don't C-sharp, you will B-flat.

At a pivotal moment for a new freshman, Alan, Charlie, Christina, Susan, and others smiled and said, "Gerrit, come sing with us."

This was a simple gesture that I remember to this day. These were individuals who I wanted to be with, who I wanted to be like. As I think across the years, I wonder if their opening a circle to include a new freshman—who never before or since has been invited to join any singing group—made me want to make every circle bigger, more inclusive, and more welcoming. For me, building a community of covenant belonging² was real at BYU.

Second, as freshmen, some friends and I were preparing for a wilderness camping trip—a grand adventure for a city kid like me. Before we left, my friend Kirk took me aside and explained, "We take turns driving, so you need to know how to drive the four-on-the-floor stick-shift van."

So I learned to drive stick, a useful skill I later used on my mission and since.

But the real story came as we prepared for the trip.

"Gerrit," my friends said as we were packing, "please go to the BYU Bookstore and buy a box of copies of the Book of Mormon."

"Why a box of copies of the Book of Mormon?" I asked.

"So we can share them with people who we meet on our trip."

Now that was a whole new idea for me—a box of copies of the Book of Mormon on a camping trip—but that is what we did in the normal and natural course of meeting people at gas stations, grocery stores, and elsewhere along the way.

I hope that you have each made amazing friends at BYU and that, as we read in the book of Alma,³ you will continue to encourage and bless each other and those around you wherever you go next. For me, courage and confidence to be true—even different, when necessary—was something nurtured here at BYU.

Third is an experience that was one of many I had with BYU faculty—dedicated women and men who intentionally make the lifelong success of students a major measure of their success.

I took a freshman Book of Mormon class from Dr. Arthur Henry King—a world expert on Shakespeare and rhetoric and a devout adult convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁴ Professor King often said he was a missionary in reverse. He knew from personal intellectual experience how lone and dreary the world is without the light and warmth of restored gospel truth.

Professor King and many other devoted BYU faculty showed by experience and example how academic excellence and open, authentic faith are complementary and can bathe us "in the light and color of the restored gospel" of Jesus Christ.⁵ To this day I am blessed by life lessons in avoiding false dichotomies and in harnessing spirit and intellect so that they can go together.

Now I hope you are thinking: "Elder Gong, I think I get it. You are sharing BYU freshman experiences at commencement to invite us to distill our best BYU experiences in a forward-leaning, forward-learning anticipatory way that will bless us and help us bless those around us."

Yes, please.

Two BYU Commencement Hopes and Invitations

Let me share my two BYU commencement hopes and invitations for each of you.

My first hope and BYU commencement invitation is that you will reflect on and distill with love, appreciation, and gratitude your own personal narrative about the best of your BYU experiences.

From being a freshman to now, think how you have grown spiritually and been enlarged intellectually.⁶ Think how you have developed in character and in commitment to “lifelong learning and service.”⁷ Please pass those blessings forward:

- Come sing with us.
- Please bring a copy of the Book of Mormon and share how you feel about Jesus Christ.
- Express appreciation to a member of the BYU community who has helped you.

My second hope and BYU commencement invitation is that you will continue to become your truest, happiest, freest, most authentic gospel self—in other words, your best BYU self.

Please let this BYU commencement be a personal invitation to you to become on a personal level what President C. Shane Reese has invited BYU as a whole to become.⁸ On a personal level, “becoming BYU”⁹ invites us to become our truest, best BYU selves in lifelong faith, service, and discipleship.

You become your best BYU self as you live forward our “double heritage”¹⁰—our “bilingual”¹¹ ability to speak in the language of our disciplines, professions, and training and in the language of faith as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

You become your best BYU self as you humbly and with courage, faith, and skill live forward being one in Jesus Christ and building faith-filled communities of covenant belonging.

You become your best BYU self as you live forward your opportunities to nurture, build, and contribute—to be open, inviting, and supportive so there are no foreigners or strangers in your households of faith or in your neighborhoods or communities.

Wherever you go, please say to your bishop or branch president, “When the Lord has a calling for me, I would love to serve in our church.”

In our often noisy, cluttered, unsettled world, please continue to focus on that which does not change: who we are spiritually (our spiritual identity), whose we are (covenant belonging), and how we use our God-given agency to continue discovering and becoming our best BYU selves.

Your best chapters in life are waiting for you to write them. Fill them with meaningful service and

contributions as well as with serendipitous delight and spontaneous joy. Build covenant communion with God and covenant community with your family and with those around you.

As more houses of the Lord come closer to many of us in more places, please continue your most precious education. Come—and come often—to the Lord in the house of the Lord. Bring your spouse and children: the spouse and family you have or the spouse and children—the family—that you will have and become.

So we come full circle. Someday I hope you will come again, as I have done, to this beautiful campus. Whether you come in person or in memory, may you preserve the best of your BYU experiences. May you fill your life’s journey with a covenant and sacramental life deepened in meaning and enriched by your capacity and desire to serve and bless with a fulness of joy.

On this day of your celebration and graduation, I salute and celebrate you: the BYU graduating class of 2024, your family, and your friends. I testify of God our Eternal Father, of His Son, Jesus Christ, and of the restored gospel truth, virtues, and values that enable us to be happy and forever. May each of you precious BYU graduates continue with gratitude and appreciation to become your best BYU gospel self, I pray, in His sacred and holy name, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets* (1943), section 5.

2. In my first address as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, I spoke of covenant belonging in my BYU Women’s Conference speech “Strengthen One Another in the Lord” on May 4, 2018 (in *Strengthen One Another in the Lord: Talks from the 2018 BYU Women’s Conference* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019], 146–54). I have also spoken regularly of covenant belonging at general conference, including the October 2019 conference (see Gerrit W. Gong, “Covenant Belonging,” *Ensign*, November 2019).

3. See Alma 17:2–3.

4. Arthur Henry King was twice decorated by England’s Queen Elizabeth II (O.B.E. and C.B.E.) for his work overseas in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (TESOL).

5. President Spencer W. Kimball said:

It would not be expected that all of the faculty should be categorically teaching religion constantly in their classes, but it is proper that every professor and teacher in this institution would keep his subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel and have all his subject matter perfumed lightly with the spirit of the gospel. Always there would be an essence, and the student would feel the presence. ["Education for Eternity," address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967]

6. "A BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service" (The Aims of a BYU Education [1 March 1995]).

7. Aims of BYU.

8. See C. Shane Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response," address delivered at his inauguration as BYU president, 19 September 2023.

9. Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response"; also Wendy W. Reese, "Being 'Doers of the Word,'" BYU devotional address, 9 January 2024.

10. Kimball, "Education for Eternity"; also Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

11. Kimball, "Second Century."