

# *Narrating Our Lives*

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Good morning, Elder and Sister Christofferson, Elder Gong, Elder and Sister Gilbert, President and Sister Reese, Professor Dr. Karad, members of the board of trustees, distinguished faculty, members of the university administration, and honored guests. And last but certainly not least, good morning to my fellow graduates of the Brigham Young University class of 2024! Your well-earned place here today is the culmination of years of hard work. Congratulations!

I would like to tell you a quick story—it is really a story about stories. The summer after my freshman year, I was thrilled to receive an offer for an on-campus job I had applied for. On my first day, I immediately noted that the other employees not only were older than me but also, unlike me, had extensive, relevant work experience. I paid it no mind. I put my head down and got to work. I loved my job, and I like to think I performed well.

Several months into the job, I inadvertently discovered that there was more to the story. I learned that I had received the job offer by accident. Yes, that is right. They never meant to hire me in the first place! There had been a mix-up with names in the interview process, and the employer emailed

me the job offer by mistake. But because I accepted the offer so quickly and because they were too kind to say anything about it, they took a chance on me.

Mind you, I *was* unqualified for the job. But I told myself that they must have seen something in me. So I remained confident and did the work as best as I could. In reality, I am not sure that they did see anything in me, and I had every reason to feel inadequate. But that was not the story I told myself. By virtue of my unfounded confidence, I actually modified my behavior to meet the expectations of the role.

Now I don't tell this story to make myself sound especially skilled. I am not, and I assure you I was undeserving of this job. I tell this story to emphasize how much the narrative we ascribe to our lives matters.

A graduation is an event that prompts reflection in two directions: we look back on the past that has led us to this moment and we also contemplate our future. The ability to reflect on our lives—to picture ourselves in different places and at different times—is something that has long fascinated philosophers. Martin Heidegger, a twentieth-century German philosopher, argued

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*Macy R. West spoke as the representative of her graduating class at BYU commencement on April 25, 2024.*

that humans are the only beings for which *being* itself is an issue.<sup>1</sup> That is, we don't just live; we think about living and we worry whether we are doing this whole "life" thing right. And how do we think about life and make sense of it? As some have observed, spiders weave webs, beavers build dams, and humans—we tell stories.<sup>2</sup>

As we look back on our time at BYU, I am confident that many of our stories share some common elements: desperately searching for parking at 8:55 a.m. before a 9:00 a.m. class and wondering if it is worth the risk of parking in the fifteen-minute spot, frantically reviewing a study guide in the foyer of the testing center, or navigating around the ever-present campus construction projects. We also each have unique ways in which we have left our marks on this campus. I am reminded of the mac and cheese I spilled on one of the nice chairs in the JFSB; despite my best efforts to clean it, the spot is still visible to this day.

I am also confident that our BYU stories share features that remind us of how privileged we have been to attend an institution that values Christlike discipleship alongside scholarly pursuits: forums and devotionals that invite us to ponder the nuances of the gospel and ask thoughtful questions, classes in which we have undergone periods of intensive learning motivated by the knowledge that enlarging our intellects is of eternal importance,<sup>3</sup> and a lifelong community with which we can take part in the "quest for perfection and eternal life."<sup>4</sup> My sincere belief is that for each of us, our BYU stories are stories of growth, accomplishment, and overcoming adversity. And my sincere hope is that they are also stories of belonging, no matter how small or obscure your community.

Now when I use the word *stories*, you might be tempted to think of a story in the sense of something fictional or made up—or as a kind of self-serving attempt at revisionist history. To the contrary, the stories we tell ourselves about our lives are much more profound than that: our stories are *who we are*. They are the only lens through which we can perceive our reality, and through them we experience our memories.

The interesting part of your story is that you are not only the protagonist but also the narrator. As we have all seen, people observing the same events will often have very different interpretations of

those events. This evidences that what matters is not just what happens to us; what matters is also the narrative we give to those events. I once heard it said that we live in stories, not in years. So while we might be tempted to think that our BYU experience was merely something that just happened to us, we actually have some power to dictate the meaning and significance of it.

The way we narrate the stories of our lives is tremendously important because those stories not only determine how we perceive the past but also shape our future. Here is one small example: Researchers have found that people who answer affirmatively when asked to predict whether they will vote are actually more likely to vote by virtue of their prediction.<sup>5</sup> The subjects of the study appeared to live up to the predictions they were asked to make. As contemporary philosopher J. David Velleman noted about this research, "Many who wouldn't otherwise have voted, it seems, end up voting because of having predicted that they would, thus conforming their lives to their stories."<sup>6</sup> As our own narrators, we seem to have a special sort of predictive ability in shaping our future.

The freedom that comes with this predictive ability can certainly be daunting. After all, isn't it just as easy to tell ourselves a negative story as it is to tell an uplifting one? What if we—as I have, more than once—look back on our stories only to realize that we have created a protagonist who we are not proud of? Here is the best part: our narratives are never fixed. Through our agency and the gift of repentance, Christ has put the pen in our hands to start over with a clean page when we aren't happy with what we have written. Our agency is our power of authorship.

And we are not without guidance on what kind of stories we ought to be writing. Sister Camille N. Johnson, while she was the Primary general president, put it aptly:

*Write a story in which the path you are on is straight, on a course leading you back to your heavenly home to live in the presence of God.*

*Let the adversity and affliction that are part of every good story be a means by which you draw closer to, and become more like, Jesus Christ.*

*Tell a story in which you recognize the heavens are open.<sup>7</sup>*

In his inaugural address to the BYU community last September, President C. Shane Reese taught that BYU is still in the process of becoming what it is meant to be.<sup>8</sup> I take comfort in President Reese’s vision. If BYU—an institution that traces its origins back some 150 years—is still “becoming,” then of course so is each one of us. Through our agency we partner with God in His ongoing act of creation. As we narrate each new aspect of our lives, we are continually engaged in our own process of becoming.

No matter what kind of degree you are receiving today, I invite you to recall your miraculous power of narrative self-constitution. The truth is that we are already expert storytellers, whether we realize it or not. We have been doing it our whole lives. Now, at the conclusion of the “enter to learn” phase of our BYU experience and the beginning of our “go forth to serve” phase, the opportunity is ours to write a story that we are proud of. And I trust that your story will also involve receiving and accepting job offers that are, in fact, intended for you and for which you are actually qualified.

BYU class of 2024, congratulations on the completion of this chapter in your narrative. May it carry you forward joyfully and faithfully. Thank you!

## Notes

1. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward S. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

2. For example, Daniel C. Dennett wrote, “Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories” (*Consciousness Explained* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1991], 418).

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

4. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).

5. See Anthony G. Greenwald, Catherine G. Carnot, Rebecca Beach, and Barbara Young, “Short Notes: Increasing Voting Behavior by Asking People if They Expect to Vote,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 72, no. 2 (May 1987): 315–18.

6. J. David Velleman, “The Self as Narrator,” in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. John Philip Christman and Joel Anderson (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 65–66.

7. Camille N. Johnson, “Invite Christ to Author Your Story,” *Liahona*, November 2021.

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