

# Choose to Celebrate

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Today is a count-your-blessings day; a day to celebrate. And on a day like today, you have countless reasons: You've finally passed American Heritage; you've landed a job that pays more than the Cougareat; you're finished with 8 a.m. classes; you can stop eating frozen burritos; you don't have to trudge across the quad in two feet of snow; you don't have to memorize every element of the periodic table; you don't have to rack your brain for the most clever way to ask out that prospective eternal companion; and you can stop doing your roommate's dishes.

And, of course, it's also a bittersweet day: You'll stop eating frozen burritos; you won't have those much-loved roommates to eagerly listen to your latest dating fiasco (although some of you might have chosen an eternal roommate); you won't have professors with an unrequired interest in your personal, academic, and spiritual success; and you'll no longer trudge across the quad in two feet of snow.

But mostly, today is a day of celebrating both where you've been and your leap into the uncharted territory we call life—that thing that happens while we're making other plans. Isn't it ironic how the things we often complain about are the very things we miss the most? Life is funny that way.

I remember when my husband, Jim, graduated from medical school. I had been a third-grade schoolteacher. With our one-year-old son, Jeff, we were moving from our small basement apartment to Seattle.

With another couple also going to Seattle, we rented the smallest U-Haul truck made and loaded up our meager belongings: a baby crib, a sofa, a kitchen table, an old brass bed that had belonged to Jim's grandmother, and our books. We were leaving familiar stomping grounds, family, and friends, not really knowing what was ahead. We were excited by the possibilities of the future but nervous about the risks.

We found a small one-bedroom apartment that cost \$96 a month—somewhat less than Deseret Towers. With a monthly salary of \$196, we were left with exactly \$100 a month to live on! Are you wondering how we managed? It wasn't easy! We paid our tithing and for entertainment played in the tide pools and fed the ducks. We established warm, tender friendships with neighbors who were also struggling

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graduate students, and we helped with each other's children. Jim served in the elders quorum presidency, studied nonstop, worked late at the hospital, and was on call every other night and every other weekend from early Friday morning to late Monday night. Oh, how I looked forward to those off-call weekends when our little family could be together! But between those weekends, I often felt like an abandoned mother.

And so at the end of four years of medical school, followed by six more years of specialty training, Jim began his career. I turned to him one evening and said wistfully, "You know, those weren't such bad times."

To which he replied, "You didn't say that then."

What will you say about your years at BYU? May I make a suggestion? Just as you celebrate this day, choose to celebrate these years. I know there were struggles and hard times. But celebrate what was happy: the day you opened your letter of acceptance; the aha moment when you really knew that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God; the exhilaration of finally understanding supply-side economics; the relief you felt when you passed physical science; the appreciation for a professor who gave you a second chance; the gratitude for a friend who listened and cared; the liberation found in forgiveness and forgiving; the quiet awe of knowing you were where your Father in Heaven wanted you to be.

Recently, on the nightly news, a social science researcher shared his findings of what people felt mattered most in life. At the end of his multiyear study, he reported that it was relationships with the people we love. And so I encourage you to celebrate the people you've met and love, some of whom you may not see again in this life: the professor who changed who you are because of who he or she was; the employer who recognized your strengths before you did; the bishop or Relief Society president or home teaching companion who

blessed your life with real compassion; the brother or sister you came to know in ways you never would have at home; the classmate or roommate or friend who became your soul mate, or maybe even your helpmeet.

As you celebrate these things, you will begin to feel a deep sense of gratitude, which is an essential part of celebration. I have learned that we can actually increase our happiness by reflecting on our blessings; by expressing gratitude to our mentors, family, and friends; and by thanking our Father in Heaven. Before you get too far from your BYU adventures, will you just take some time to write a note or two of celebration to those who have believed in you, who have buoyed you up, who have cheered you on? And will you thank the Lord for allowing you the uncommon privilege of attending and growing at Brigham Young University? I know it may not have all been sweetness and light, but it's hard to be grumpy in gratitude. Celebrate where you've been!

And celebrate where you're going. As you put Provo in your rearview mirror to face the unexpected, choose to celebrate what's to come, to be happy wherever you find yourself, in whatever finds you—because there will be potholes and detours and highway patrolmen handing out tickets. Come what may, celebration is a choice—your choice! Choose you this day!

In the predawn of Memorial Day, I was awakened by the rolling sound of thunder, flashes of lightning, and the hard pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof. This was no ordinary rainstorm; it was a torrential downpour—"chucking it down," as they say in Britain. Then I heard another sound. It was the chirping and singing of the birds. Were I a bird, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been singing at that moment. I probably would have been looking for dry shelter or a map to Hawaii. Listening to them, I wondered, "Are the birds smarter than I? Why do they choose to sing during a thunderstorm?"

Recently *Time* magazine devoted an issue to the science of happiness. A list of practical suggestions, based on extensive research, named eight steps one could take to lift one's personal level of happiness. The list did not include money, recreation, position, or even college degrees.

Let me share the list with you:

1. Count your blessings.
2. Practice acts of kindness.
3. Savor life's joys.
4. Thank a mentor.
5. Learn to forgive.
6. Invest time and energy in friends and family.
7. Take care of your body.
8. Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardships.

[Taken from suggestions from University of California psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, *Eight Steps Toward a More Satisfied Life*, in Claudia Wallis, "The New Science of Happiness," *Time*, 17 January 2005, A8–A9]

Doesn't each of these actions include a choice to celebrate? Would one of these steps work for you?

My great-grandparents, Jane and Robert Dansie, were asked by Brigham Young to help settle the southwest corner of the Salt Lake Valley. To the west of Fort Herriman, Robert Dansie dug a one-room home into the hillside for himself, his wife, and their five children. Over time, 10 children followed. Their daughter, Isabelle, recounted, "One day someone set the dog on the cow. The cow became so frightened that she started to run across the top of the dugout, her weight forcing her feet and legs through the roof, where she became lodged. Mother said dugouts were very nice, but she did not care to have her ceiling decorated with cow legs." Luckily, good neighbors helped to free the cow and repair the roof.

I've never lived in a dugout—although there was that basement apartment. I've never had cow legs puncture my ceiling—although I've had my share of drips. I used to wonder if my great-grandmother was unhappy because she lived in a hillside and ate sego lily bulbs, wild rabbits, and occasional mutton. I think I might have been. But from all I've learned about her, it seems she chose to celebrate her challenges, to be happy. Amidst difficult conditions, she built a happy family who worked hard together but also had fun together.

She was known for making people feel welcome in her home—even if it was in a hole in the hill—and seeing that no one went hungry either for food or a kind word. Hers was an example of hard work and service and charity. Hers was a legacy of songs in thunderstorms, of celebration in hardship.

I think of Father Lehi, who taught that we "are free to choose liberty and eternal life . . . or . . . captivity and death" (2 Nephi 2:27). We can choose to be happy or to be miserable. Both have eternal consequences. Choosing to be miserable assists Satan in his work.

When we served in the England London South Mission, I asked one of our missionaries, Elder Cole from Ireland, how he handled difficult days. He said, "I think of my mother's favorite scripture."

"What is that scripture?" I asked.

"And it came to pass," he answered, adding, "It doesn't say, 'It came to stay.'"

After their wedding, one of our sons and his wife moved to Los Angeles for school. Not long after arriving, their car was broken into. The thieves smashed a window, stealing a wallet and other valuables. The harsh realities of big city life became strikingly clear. Such an event could have been frightening and debilitating. But instead, they went into their studio apartment and threw a Welcome to Los Angeles party, complete with sparkling cider and streamers. Their choice that night set a

tone for their adventures in LA and is one they still recall with great fondness.

Jim served as the bishop of a singles ward. One Sunday evening after a day of meetings and interviews, he came home and asked me a question: “When we first got married with no money and years of schooling ahead of us, did you ever think we wouldn’t make it?” Then he said, “I’ve been listening to young couples who want to marry but are afraid they can’t make it financially.”

Jim and I were perplexed at this outlook because, as a young couple, we never believed we wouldn’t make it. We kind of knew it would be hard, we sort of knew our faith would be tried, but we started the journey anyway, waiting for open weekends, wading through tide pools, and feeding the ducks. And somehow we knew we would make it.

Dear graduates, I testify that you can make it too. Such an outlook probably sounds naïve. We will all face our own life struggles that will try us to the breaking point. But I believe that “making it” has less to do with *what* happens to us than *how* we choose to handle it. To paraphrase Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus drank from the most bitter cup without becoming bitter” (see “Irony: The Crust on the Bread of Adversity,” *Ensign*, November 1989,

63, and “The Precious Promise,” *Ensign*, April 2004, 46). Isn’t that “making it”?

I believe this quote is true: “Happiness is not a state to arrive at but a manner of traveling.”

As you reflect on your BYU days, I pray that you will choose to celebrate all that was happy and good and productive. I pray, too, that you will choose to move forward with that same attitude toward all you undertake and all that undertakes you.

You can make it! You must make it! May you do so with a heart of celebration. And may the Lord continue His watch over you as you let your celebrations so shine among all you meet.

Class of 2005, I congratulate you for your decision to obtain a higher education and for accomplishing that goal. I also congratulate you family members and others who have supported and sustained your beloved students. Finally, I congratulate you who have chosen education as your life’s work—there’s much joy in learning and in sharing that knowledge with others. Thank you, all.

On this day of celebration and in all our future days of celebration, may we all choose happiness. God bless you. May you choose to feel the love of the Lord in your life daily is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.