

Greatness

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President Samuelson, Sister Tanner, Elder Kerr, distinguished faculty and officers of Brigham Young University, family members, guests, and, above all, graduates: greetings. It is an honor to be invited to address you in these commencement exercises.

In considering what I might say to you in brief remarks today, I reviewed some talks given by others in the recent past and came across a graduation speech given at Saint Louis University by the renowned philosopher Yogi Berra. I felt I could open with the same greeting he used: "Thank you all for being here. . . . I know this is a busy time of year, and if you weren't here, you could probably be somewhere else." His advice to parents included this: "As parents you'll want to give your children all the things you didn't have. But don't buy them an encyclopedia, make them walk to school like you did. Teach them to have respect for others, especially the police. They are not here to create disorder; they are here to preserve it." To the students he counseled, "Half the lies you hear won't be true, and half the things you say, you won't ever say." Finally, in a comment applicable to me, he said, "To be honest, I'm not much of a public speaker, so I will try to keep this short as long as I can."¹

We honor today the achievement of those who have qualified for academic degrees. Your degree represents the climax of an extended effort, a happy conclusion. Yet this celebratory gathering is called a commencement. The word *commencement*, of course, suggests a beginning or the initial steps in a new undertaking. While education that expands the mind and the soul is an appropriate end in itself, we also see it as equipping you with the means to prosper in life and to accomplish things of value. Education can be a preparation for success, even greatness. As you commence the balance of your life today, I would like you to consider for a few moments the greatness to which you might aspire.

There is a wide variety of ideas about what constitutes greatness in a person. Certainly many have been considered great because of some signal achievement in their lives. Alexander derived his title "the Great" on the basis of conquests; others are considered great for having brokered peace agreements.

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We may think of self-sacrificing heroes who have alleviated suffering and lifted others out of despair. We think of notable leaders who painted and then achieved a vision—victory in war or a better life for their people. Some have ennobled life itself with the greatness of their art, their acting, their writing, or their thought. Still others find greatness in the invention or creation of something that changes the world. I hope that many of you will indeed perform such great deeds, whether widely heralded or not, whether fully appreciated during your lifetime or not.

In the business and professional worlds it has become common to speak of “adding value.” The concept is that one’s efforts should create a benefit that would otherwise not exist. You can readily appreciate that having a job and “adding value” may be two different things. Someone can put in his or her time without really making a significant difference. On the other hand, with diligent effort and a concern to make things better, another person will make a lasting contribution. I hope you will change the world.

Now I would like you to ponder for a moment a statement made about a hundred years ago by President Joseph F. Smith suggesting that the sort of greatness I have been talking about is secondary and that primary greatness is something else. He said:

Those things which we call extraordinary, remarkable, or unusual may make history, but they do not make real life.

After all, to do well those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all mankind, is the truest greatness. To be a successful father or a successful mother is greater than to be a successful general or a successful statesman. . . . It is true that such secondary greatness may be added to that which we style common-place; but when such secondary greatness is not added to that which is fundamental, it is merely an empty honor, and fades away from the common and universal good in life,

even though it may find a place in the desultory pages of history.²

You may readily call to mind persons who have achieved notoriety but whose lives lacked greatness in the fundamentals and were empty, even tragic, as a consequence. Despite the gifts or talent they exhibited, their contribution was limited or even counterproductive. On the other hand, you may know individuals, perhaps some of them here with you today, who excelled in “those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all mankind.”

There have been a number like that in my life, one being my mother’s father, Helge Swenson, who came to this country from Sweden as an 11-year-old boy and had to make his own way through life with hard work. During much of his youth he worked for and boarded with neighbor farmers; his family was too poor for all the children to live at home and tend exclusively to their own farm. There was little opportunity for formal education in his life. After marriage he maintained his family primarily by farming and service as the Utah County agricultural inspector. He was a great man in my eyes because he was a man of integrity, hard work, and deep spirituality, full of love for others and beloved of all. I loved to be around him and aspired to be like him.

When I came to BYU from New Jersey as a freshman, my grandparents met me and took me to my dormitory on campus. As we were moving my things into my room in Hinckley Hall, which was then a men’s dorm (reserved, I’m sure, for premier students), Grandpa Swenson remarked somewhat wistfully, “If I had had an opportunity for education like this, I would really have amounted to something.” His comment surprised me. What did he mean, “amounted to something”? I hoped some day to amount to something by coming close to his level of attainment. He meant, I suppose, that with the advantages of a university education, he could have qualified for any number of

prominent positions and enjoyed professional and public recognition for his likely accomplishments on a much broader stage. I'm convinced that with his native talent and strong work ethic he would have been relatively famous and well compensated in life had he been blessed with the same opportunities that I and most of you enjoy. Even so, he would not have been a greater man. His true greatness would still have been rooted in the same qualities of character he already possessed and in the steady discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ that marked his life to the end.

I remember the comments of Professor James Q. Wilson of UCLA, who was the commencement speaker in 1994 when my daughter received her degree from BYU. He titled his remarks "The Moral Life." He said:

Commencement speakers are supposed to urge you to rise to the highest challenge, pursue the impossible dream, excel at the loftiest ambitions. I will not do that. It is too easy; it is too empty. The easiest thing to do is to support great causes, sign stirring petitions, endorse grand philosophies. The hardest thing to do—and it is getting harder all of the time—is to be a good husband, a good wife, a strong father, a strong mother, an honorable friend and neighbor.

Professor Wilson continued:

The truly good deeds are the small, everyday actions of ordinary life. The employee who gives an honest day's work; the employer who rewards loyalty and service; the stranger who stops to help someone in need; the craftsman who builds each house as if he were going to live in it himself; the man who unhesitatingly accepts responsibility for the children he has fathered; the father who wants the respect of his children more than admission to the executive suite; the mother who knows that to care for an infant is not an admission of professional failure . . . ; the parents who turn off the television even when their children want to watch just

one more hour of some bit of Hollywood drivel; the neighbors who join together to patrol a neighborhood threatened by drug dealers; the hiker who carries his own trash out of the park; the landlord who paints out the graffiti without waiting for the city to do it for him; the juror who judges another on the basis of the principle of personal responsibility before the law—these are the heroes of everyday life. May you join their ranks.³

Several years ago, when I was serving as executive director of the Family and Church History Department, my wife, Kathy, and I visited officials at the Chinese National Archives in Beijing. In one conversation we spoke of the value of history, particularly family history, in our lives here and now. One of the Chinese officials told me about a tradition of honesty that had come down through many generations in his family. It is referred to by them as "the Four Knows." He had an ancestor who served as a government officer long ago in the days of one of the Chinese dynasties. One day the ancestor was approached for a favor and offered a bribe.

The man offering the bribe argued, "No one will know."

My host's ancestor replied, "I will know; you will know; the earth will know; heaven will know."

That man's refusal to dishonor his position has been remembered and repeated through all the generations of his descendants since. As they teach each other the Four Knows, each is motivated to maintain the family tradition of integrity. He may have earned distinction in his own time anciently, but that man's true greatness lies in how his life has influenced his descendants ever since.

To say that the truest greatness is "to do well those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all mankind" means that to achieve this foundational greatness we must look to God as we conduct the daily routine and toil of life. Our lives should reflect our

understanding that we are responsible to Him for what we do and what we become. We search for His will and commit to it in every aspect of our lives. We live our lives to God. In Paul's words, "Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."⁴ If you live not "by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,"⁵ you will establish a foundation of enduring greatness. Then, whether some form of secondary greatness follows or not, you will contribute to "the common and universal good in life."

Jesus said that "every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."⁶ We are told that in this day of judgment, if we have rejected God or neglected His counsel, "our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; . . . and our thoughts will also condemn us."⁷ There is a happy corollary to being judged in these things. It is that the very details of our lives are of interest to God, that He cares about all of it—words, works, even thoughts. His interest and love are infinite in this way, and He will respond to our hopes and pleadings and help us in everything, including matters that seem unimportant or insignificant to others or even to ourselves. Rest assured that you can rely on Him as you strive to establish the foundation of greatness in your life.

Your greatness in the things God has ordained as primary and fundamental will not come in a day or with one grand act. It will be built over time with the sort of patient, persistent effort that has brought you to the achievement that we are celebrating today. Some years ago, then Elder Howard W. Hunter put it this way:

I believe . . . there is no such thing as instant greatness. This is because the achievement of true greatness is a long-term process; it may involve occasional setbacks. The end result may not always be clearly visible, but it seems that it always

requires regular, consistent, small, and sometimes ordinary and mundane steps over a long period of time.

*True greatness is never a result of a chance occurrence or a one-time effort or achievement. . . . It requires a multitude of correct decisions for the everyday choices between good and evil that Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke about when he said, "Over the years these little choices will be bundled together and show clearly what we value" ["The Choice," *Ensign*, November 1980, 21]. Those choices will also show clearly what we are."⁸*

Referring once more to the words of President Joseph F. Smith, "We should never be discouraged in those daily tasks which God has ordained to the common lot of man. Each day's labor should be undertaken in a joyous spirit and with the thought and conviction that our happiness and eternal welfare depend upon doing well that which we ought to do, that which God has made it our duty to do."⁹

All worthy endeavors are God's work. As you excel in the common undertakings of life, both in your home and elsewhere, you serve God and glorify Him. Your life blesses the whole human enterprise. And whether that be spiritually or temporally is unimportant. Both are needed in this sphere, and, anyway, to God all things are spiritual.¹⁰ As the Savior counseled His apostles, the great ones are those who minister to others; the chiefest is the one who serves the most.¹¹ My fervent hope is that with God's help each one of you may attain true greatness. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Yogi Berra, quoted in Dan O'Neill, "Yogi's Speech Ain't Over Till It's Over Your Head," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 27 May 2007, D2.

2. Joseph F. Smith, "Common-Place Things," *Juvenile Instructor* 40, no. 24 (15 December 1905): 752.

3. James Q. Wilson, "The Moral Life," BYU commencement address, 21 April 1994.

4. 1 Corinthians 6:20.

5. Matthew 4:4.

6. Matthew 12:36.

7. Alma 12:14.

8. Howard W. Hunter, *CR*, April 1982, 28;
or "True Greatness," *Ensign*, May 1982, 20.

9. Smith, "Common-Place Things," 753.

10. See D&C 29:34–35.

11. See Mark 10:42–45.

