

Celebrations and Memories

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

I am always grateful to participate in these commencement activities and once again add my commendations and congratulations to those being honored as well as to all who have supported and continue to support, encourage, and commend our graduates. I see not only many happy and proud faces but also some signs of significant relief and perhaps even a little apprehension with respect to what the future holds. For some, this special celebration is being shared in a rather brief period of time with other cardinal life events, such as an engagement, a marriage, the birth of a child, a new job, or a move to a new and distant place. For all, this is a wonderful time to both celebrate and remember.

As is always the case, our graduates are diverse in age, experience, birthplace, citizenship, major, and many other ways. All, however, share the singular achievement of a Brigham Young University degree, which will help guide and define each one for the rest of mortality. Beyond that, I have no specific information to share.

I have been attending commencement and graduation exercises for many years. Some are

much more memorable than are others. For a number of you here today—and this includes more than the graduates honored—this occasion will have an influence on the rest of your lives. It will have nothing to do with what I or the others on the program will say. You will receive good counsel, well-deserved commendation, and encouragement. I suggest you listen carefully, because all the messages have been thoughtfully and prayerfully prepared. Nevertheless, they likely will not be the primary source of the memories you will cherish, except, perhaps, for the speakers themselves and their families. Let me illustrate what I mean, if I may, with a very personal experience that has had great influence on my family and me.

I was about ten years old when I had the privilege of attending the commencement in which my father received his PhD degree. He, like many of you here, was not a traditional student in that he had not gone directly from

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high school to the university and progressed through undergraduate and graduate studies without interruption, except for perhaps a mission.

No one in my father's family had ever gone to college or a university before. After he graduated from high school, my dad spent a year in business college and obtained employment as a bookkeeper. Even though this was the time of the onset of the Great Depression, because of his tremendous frugality, hard work, and planning and also because of the efforts of his parents—my grandparents—he was able to serve a full-time mission when relatively few others had that opportunity. When he returned home, he was again gainfully employed but harbored a rather closely held dream of a university education. After his mission Dad met my mother, and things obviously developed as they should, since you see me standing here.

As my father shared his dreams with my mother, already a university graduate and a schoolteacher herself, she encouraged him to proceed with his education, although he was not receiving the same encouragement from his parents, siblings, or friends. Most thought he was very fortunate just to have a job when few others did.

One very important detail in understanding my parents' situation is that at that time married women were not allowed to teach school. Since they had no other obvious means for financial support if Dad quit his job to go to college and Mother quit her teaching to get married, they made the decision to delay marriage so that both could live at home with their parents while Mother taught and Dad studied. By the way, we do not recommend this as an ideal approach and are grateful that there are additional alternatives available today, as many of you have demonstrated.

Dad began college as a twenty-five-year-old freshman, and Mother taught and saved what she could. He graduated in three years, going year-round, and shortly thereafter they

were married. I arrived about a year and a half later, and my four siblings took their turns joining the family. Mother stayed home and Dad worked in various areas of education and administration while working on his master's degree, which he received a year or two later. Rather than satisfying him, however, his university experience only increased his desire for learning and helped focus his ambition of becoming a university professor. Thus—again with Mother's encouragement—he began a PhD program while working full-time.

As I look at you doctoral candidates, you will best understand what I next explain. When the time arrived for the dissertation, it became clear that my father would need to work on it full-time if he ever wished to complete his degree. So he resigned a very good administrative leadership position at a vocational school to finish his dissertation. Because by this time he had four children with another on the way, he also found the need to work nights as a laborer so that his days would be free for his academic work and his children could still eat and wear shoes. I see some of you nodding knowingly.

Well, he successfully completed his work and received his PhD. I remember his smile, my mother's grateful tears that this was all over, and my feeling of tremendous pride in his achievement, even though I had precious little understanding of what it really meant. Now, decades later, I realize that this struggle to reach an important academic goal, celebrated in a happy commencement exercise, has had broad and lasting influence. Many of his descendants have followed with similar achievements in education, law, business, medicine, and other fields, but with fewer obstacles and discouragements because of the examples they have been able to follow. Even today one of the participants in our stage party is wearing my father's doctoral robe and hood.

Please remember that while none of you will have exactly the same experience or story as

that which I have just related, all of you have a story and are part of a grand legacy that will bless not only you and those with you today but will reach on through the generations and over space to bless many others for years to come.

And as we think of your sacrifices and those of your families and others who deserve credit with you for your accomplishments, we must never forget those throughout the world who may feel as my father did in his late teens. Although they may not have the opportunity for a university education or a BYU experience themselves, they still faithfully pay their tithes

and offerings, which allow us to study, learn, grow, and serve at this unique and wonderful institution known as Brigham Young University.

May God bless you and yours and all who play a role in the tremendous enterprise of education in this unique university sponsored and supported by the Lord's apostles and prophets. Our Father in Heaven and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, live and direct Their important work upon the earth today. I know you join me in sustaining and thanking our prophet leaders for the privileges we enjoy here. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.