

Who You Are and the Things You Do

KEVIN J WORTHEN

I extend my warmest congratulations and best wishes to each of the graduates today. Graduation is properly a time of celebration—a time to rejoice in the success you have all achieved in earning your degree. It is also properly a time to look forward to what lies ahead—that is in part why we call this ceremony a commencement.

Many of you will go immediately into your first post-college full-time job. Others will head to graduate school. Some will dedicate themselves to the full-time pursuit of raising children. Each of these new adventures will likely be challenging, stimulating, and, in a few cases, close to all consuming—in ways that may cause you to lose perspective.

As you begin this next phase of your life, especially the majority of you who will eventually spend most of your waking hours in a career outside the home, I ask you to reflect on the words of Os Guinness, who astutely observed that, in today's society,

*work takes up so many of our waking hours that our jobs come to define us and give us our identities. We become what we do.*¹

The world would often teach us that *we are what we do*. It does not take long in most social gatherings to realize this. One of the first questions that is asked when meeting a new person in a professional setting is “What do you do?” The answer to that question not only determines the subject and length of the ensuing conversation but also often creates the identity of the respondent from that point on.

Guinness urges us to not fall into the trap of defining ourselves by our jobs but instead to view our jobs—indeed, our entire lives—as a calling and to choose our jobs and how we fulfill them by determining who we are. In his words:

*Calling reverses [the world's] thinking. . . . Instead of, “You are what you do,” calling says: “Do what you are.”*²

I urge you to consider this concept as you move ahead with your lives, because who

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this commencement address was given on 13 August 2015.

you are is extraordinary—“beloved . . . son[s] or daughter[s] of heavenly parents” with “a divine nature and destiny.”³ And as a result of who you are—and who you can become—you can have a profound impact on those around you, not only in your jobs but also in your communities and, most important, in your homes.

Because you have lived in the unique environment that is Brigham Young University for the past few years, you may overlook the depth of the impact that those who become what the university and the gospel urge them to become can have on others on this campus.

In 2005, Naomi Schaeffer Riley wrote a book about religiously affiliated universities in the United States. The book is entitled *God on the Quad*. Riley began her book describing a speech given by author Tom Wolfe at a Class Day address at Harvard in which Wolfe described our current time frame as “the era of the ‘fifth freedom’—freedom from religion.”⁴ In a subsequent interview, Wolfe observed that in our society there has been a removal of what he called this “last hobble” on our freedom.⁵

Having grown up in an environment that largely shared this very secularized view, Riley was intrigued by the increase in popularity of religiously affiliated universities, and she set out, in a somewhat skeptical manner, to visit some of those universities in order to explore what she called “the missionary generation” at America’s religiously affiliated universities.

Her first visit was to BYU. She arrived on campus on September 10, 2001, the day before the date we now refer to as simply 9/11. She described what happened as the events of 9/11 unfolded:

I began the first formal interviews for this book on September 10, 2001. The next day, two thousand miles from home, I sat on the edge of my hotel bed, looking out over the strip malls to the treeless mountains beyond, wondering more than anything

else about how to get home. Home for me is Blue America. I have lived in four states, all in the north-east. I attended two secular colleges and grew up with a sense that religion, while socially beneficial . . . , was not true. In other words, I had already expected to feel distinctly out of place on these campuses. And the events of that Tuesday morning only intensified the feeling.

*Over the next week, the students at Brigham Young [University] tried to welcome me into their lives. While national tragedies tend to bring out the best in many people, the first representatives of the “missionary generation” I encountered **could not have made a greater impression upon me**. Their kindness and compassion, their civic-mindedness, their understanding and interest in national and international affairs, the quiet comfort they were able to find in their faith, and their ability to relate to this stranger in their midst gave me cause for optimism.⁶*

These BYU students had a profound impact on Riley because they understood who they really were, and they were able to communicate that to her in a way that we may not always discern since we are already here. You can have a similar impact on those around you if you understand and realize who you really are.

After describing her initial experience at BYU, Riley continued her introduction to the book by writing:

At the end of his Class Day address, Tom Wolfe worried that the “religious self-discipline that ran through the American people from one side to the other” and held this country together through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has now disappeared. Wolfe predicted that the twenty-first century would be a period of “reevaluation,” in which we will have to “create an entirely new ethical and moral framework.” Searching for a person who “[could] lead mankind into [such] a new era,” Wolfe asked his audience, “Where else should we find such a person but at Harvard?”⁷

Riley then asked, tellingly, in the last words of her introduction, “Where else, indeed?”⁸ Her unwritten—but clear—answer is perhaps at places like BYU.

As you begin this next phase of your lives, do not underestimate your potential for good in the world. Many in the world are searching for the kind of competence, compassion, and vision you have developed as a result of the gifts God has given you, including your education here. If you will remember who you are—sons and daughters of heavenly parents with a divine purpose for your lives—you will find that who you are will define everything you do and that the things you do will make a profound difference in the world.

May it be so is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1998, 2003), 45; emphasis added.
2. Guinness, *The Call*, 45.
3. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995.
4. Tom Wolfe, quoted in Naomi Schaefer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006; originally published 2005, St. Martin’s Press), 1; see Wolfe, Harvard Class Day address, 8 June 1988, excerpted in “The New Cookie, the Second Shoe, and the Final Freedom: Excerpts from Author Tom Wolfe’s Class Day Address,” *Harvard Magazine* 90, no. 6 (July–August 1988): 63.
5. Wolfe, quoted in Riley, *God on the Quad*, 1; see Bonnie Angelo, “Master of His Universe” (interview with Tom Wolfe), *Time* 133, no. 7 (13 February 1989): 90–92.
6. Riley, *God on the Quad*, 12; emphasis added.
7. Riley, *God on the Quad*, 12–13.
8. Riley, *God on the Quad*, 13.