

Our Identities at BYU and Beyond

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I am honored to be here today. It is a testament that BYU's education works when a freshman as awkward as I was can enter BYU and emerge ready for the workforce. I can honestly say that my BYU experience has changed who I am for the better. I am sure many of you feel the same.

When I say BYU changed who I am for the better, I do not mean only that I have a more developed skill set to offer employers—I hope I do—but I believe that my BYU experience also changed how I view myself at a fundamental level. That is the topic of my short speech. I would like to share how my BYU experience affected my personal identity. I will also attempt to tackle something more important: that is, pinpointing an essential part of our identity that will endure despite any life experiences that come our way.

Let me give you an example of how my experience at BYU changed who I am. During my education I identified myself as a straight-A student—until I took Economics 110. That class shattered what I thought was a big part of my identity. And that was in my first semester at BYU! Oddly enough, this perceived failure

helped me find a deeper identity. Whereas I used to identify myself as a 4.0 student, my experience with Economics 110 forced me to change this. Instead I started to identify myself not by my GPA but by my work ethic.

Identifying myself apart from my grades helped me choose to graduate with honors. Writing my honors thesis turned out to be more difficult than I had expected, and there were times when I was tempted to give up. I could have, because it would not have affected my GPA. But I finished because I identified myself not by my grades but as a hardworking student who finishes what I start. Looking back, the decision to finish my thesis allowed for one of the best memories I have of my undergraduate studies.

Dr. Dave Jensen, one of my professors from the BYU Philosophy Department, taught me this principle: the way we view ourselves affects our choices. In other words,

Michael William Morgan spoke as the representative of his graduating class at BYU commencement on August 17, 2017.

we choose to do things that align with our self-perceptions. People who identify themselves as tech-savvy will spend time researching technology. Those who identify themselves as good students will study hard. Students who identify themselves as engineers will probably never leave the Clyde Building.

Establishing our identity is important. Who we are affects how we live our lives. But sometimes the aspects of life that help define our identities change, and then we are forced to find a deeper and more fundamental identity. This is a normal experience, as illustrated by my straight-A story. But sometimes this can be traumatic.

For example, this summer I had the opportunity to volunteer at Camp Kesem, a summer camp for kids whose parents have cancer. A major part of who I am—a major part of my identity—comes from my relationship with my parents. I cannot imagine who I would be without these two wonderful individuals. Because I have not experienced cancer in my immediate family, I entered the camp a little naïve.

While there, I was pushing a six-year-old boy on a swing. He was and is the cutest kid. He liked to call himself Wavaba. After I pushed him for a few minutes, he got off and said, “Now I will push my imaginary friend.”

“That’s great!” I thought. “I had an imaginary friend when I was six.” I then asked, “Who is your imaginary friend, Wavaba?”

He responded, “It’s my dad. He died from cancer three years ago.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just stood there watching him push the empty swing. I started to think of those I loved: my family, the friends I have made at BYU, and the professors who have inspired me to study harder and to be better. Indeed, my experience at BYU has been defined mostly by the relationships I have made. If these people disappeared from my life, how would I identify myself?

I don’t mean to be bleak, and I promise to end on a happy note, but it is an important question to ask. What is it about ourselves that will always remain constant? Or are our identities always liable to change? If we identify ourselves fundamentally as students, who are we after we graduate? If we identify ourselves as doctors, lawyers, philosophers, scientists, or whatever our careers may be, who are we when we experience a career change? Or, as many of the children of Camp Kesem understand, who are we after losing a loved one?

This leads me to what just might be the greatest thing I learned during my stay at BYU. It did not come from one specific experience. It came by attending religion classes, by going to church, and by volunteering at the temple. It came from asking the children at Camp Kesem what keeps them going after experiencing something as difficult as a parent’s cancer. What I learned is this: there is a fundamental part of our identity that continues no matter what changes we experience in our lives. That fundamental part of our identity is that we are children of a Heavenly Father who loves us.

Why is this significant? Why bring this up at graduation? First and foremost, the fact that BYU facilitates learning about our relationship with Heavenly Father is unique among universities. We cannot take that for granted. Second, today we become alumni. We will no longer be BYU students. We will have different identities. This is wonderful, and we should celebrate. But remembering our deeper and more fundamental identity will guide our actions, will give us perspective, and will bring us comfort through the most difficult parts of our lives.

I am grateful for BYU, for the experiences it gave me, and for the friends I have made. I am grateful for the opportunity to learn who I am. I am grateful to be a son of God. As we close this chapter of our lives, let us never forget who we are. Congratulations on our graduation! In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.