Dean's Convocation Remarks

J. Scott Miller  
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This is, indeed, a joyous occasion, and a celebration. I use the term ‘celebrate’ intentionally, invoking as it does both a sense of rejoicing as well as solemn ritual. Today’s convocation will involve ritual and rejoicing. Culturally, perhaps we don’t celebrate enough; it seems, at times, to make us uncomfortable to praise, or even acknowledge, overt success. To a certain mindset, lauding achievement is perceived as the gateway drug to pride, boastfulness, and arrogance. Having learned from the Book of Mormon where that can take us, we tend to avoid making too big a fuss.

But today, sitting here before you and me, are 183 people who deserve a good celebration. Getting into BYU has been harder for them than for any previous group of graduates. Their lives may have been thoroughly disrupted by a change in the minimal missionary age. They have had to deal with the usual campus bureaucracy compounded by changing web-based learning management systems (ask them about Blackboard, or Learning Suite). They have experienced a host of very different classroom styles across a variety of disciplines. Many have learned a second or third language. They have even passed through the gauntlet of American Heritage! The journey to this place has been punctuated by a series of struggles and challenges, and none have come through unscathed or unchanged along the way.

The nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman penned a few lines that describe a child who, like our graduates, went forth each day into the world to observe, learn, and grow. You are probably familiar with it. It opens:

"There was a child went forth every day;  
And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became;  
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years."

Whitman describes something more than just passive observation on the part of this child: he became that which he saw, suggesting the kind of engaged learning that takes place at a BYU classroom, later on in the poem, as he partakes of the influence of his family and begins to move from mere observation to inquiry, from description to metaphysics:

"The family usages, the language, the company, the furniture— the yearning and swelling heart,  
Affection that will not be gainsay’d—the sense of what is real—the thought if, after all, it should prove unreal,  
The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time—the curious whether and how,  
Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and specks?  
Men and women crowding fast in the streets—if they are not flashes and specks, what are they?"

This enigmatic question—"If men and women are not flashes and specks, what are they?"—is one that your graduates have, in one way or another, asked as students of the humanities, and will continue to ask. "What are they?" is the question that informs all of the human disciplines: language, philosophy, music, art, literature, and more. And it is another singular human gift—the ability to ask that question, and pass our answers down through generations we will never know—that whispers our inner divinity. Take any individual human being, even those most corrupt or flawed, and examine them closely, with eyes intent on seeing them as God sees them, and you will find, as Shakespeare’s Hamlet noted, "a piece of work" unique in the universe.

Hopefully these graduates have ‘ventured forth’ into sufficient experience, and have learned to see others from enough angles and perspectives, that they have developed a perspective on humankind that kindles fire in their bones and informs all their human interactions. This insight into human nature, and the skill to communicate with and understand others, prepares our graduates to go forth and add something to that ongoing human conversation.

Like me, many of our graduates may have started out with very different intentions for their lives. But if they are here today, they have at some point puzzled over the question Whitman’s child confronts, later on in the poem, as he partakes of the influence of his family and begins to move from mere observation to inquiry, from description to metaphysics:

It comes as a surprise to some to learn that a majority of our graduates come to the humanities gradually, through a unique and personal process that mirrors the way one gains a testimony. Doubtless you may have asked your graduate—or wanted to ask—a variation of a question we often hear: “What can you do with a degree in the humanities?” If you will indulge me, I will try to answer that question with a personal story.

I began my undergraduate career at BYU, decades ago, as a chemical engineering major. My choice was driven by pragmatics and a desire to answer the parental question (“What will you do when you grow up?”) with the ‘best’ answer: I will major in the subject that currently yields the highest starting salary upon graduation. As I ‘went forth’ into the world, and my Japanese mission, I experienced that magnification of insight and love that comes from learning a new language and exploring new cultures. Upon returning to BYU, and ‘becoming’ a chemical engineering major, I arrived at the conclusion that I would make a very mediocre chemical engineer, indeed. Internships were non-existent at that time, but I did something similar, took a summer off and taught English in Japan. There I found a great love for teaching, and as I commuted long hours by train and subway around Tokyo to teach classes I read a variety of literary classics. To make a long story short, it was over the course of that summer, reading authors like Tolstoy and Joseph Conrad on a Japanese train, that I came to the realization that I could not live without participating in the great conversations of humanity that these authors represented. I came home from Japan, changed my major to comparative literature, and aimed for a career in teaching. Some of those I have taught have become lawyers, doctors, even competent engineers! Some sit behind me here today as professors. Most have become mothers or fathers. All of us have somehow found a way to go forth and add something to that ongoing human conversation.

This essay is one that currently yields the highest salary upon graduation. As I ‘went forth’ into the world, and my Japanese mission, I experienced that magnification of insight and love that comes from learning a new language and exploring new cultures. Upon returning to BYU, and ‘becoming’ a chemical engineering major, I arrived at the conclusion that I would make a very mediocre chemical engineer, indeed. Internships were non-existent at that time, but I did something similar, took a summer off and taught English in Japan. There I found a great love for teaching, and as I commuted long hours by train and subway around Tokyo to teach classes I read a variety of literary classics. To make a long story short, it was over the course of that summer, reading authors like Tolstoy and Joseph Conrad on a Japanese train, that I came to the realization that I could not live without participating in the great conversations of humanity that these authors represented. I came home from Japan, changed my major to comparative literature, and aimed for a career in teaching. Some of those I have taught have become lawyers, doctors, even competent engineers! Some sit behind me here today as professors. Most have become mothers or fathers. All of us have somehow found a way to go forth and add something to that ongoing human conversation.

Like me, many of our graduates may have started out with very different intentions for their lives. But if they are here today, they have at some point puzzled over the question Whitman’s child confronts, later on in the poem, as he partakes of the influence of his family and begins to move from mere observation to inquiry, from description to metaphysics:

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forth and play important roles in all fields, having learned how to think clearly, act well, and appreciate
life. In answer to the question, “What can you do with a humanities degree?” I answer with a rhetorical
question: “What can’t you do?”

Now you, as an audience, have your own set of challenges today. You are here to support
your graduate, and witness--some of you with relief, others with great surprise--their walk across this
stand to accept the credential that symbolizes their remarkable achievement. Your act of witnessing,
your joy and pride in their well-deserved celebration of accomplishment, is the easy part; your love for
and interest in your graduate will very likely lead to spontaneous shouts of joy and perhaps even some
tears.

The difficult part, however, is sitting through the other 182 moments of celebration in this
cavernous venue, because, let's be honest, you don't know the other graduates. You may be familiar
with half a dozen or so--your graduate’s roommates, their friends, etc.—but most are strangers. So I
invite you to practice ‘going forth’ and looking through new, open eyes as the graduates walk across the
stage. Try to avoid the propensity to ignore strangers. See each graduate as an individual who goes forth
this day, and hopefully every day hereafter, to serve others, their souls on fire with love for humankind.
As you begin to see women and men as more than flashes and specks, you not only practice the
humanities, but take a step closer to seeing them through God’s own eyes.

Thank you.