

AMERICAN HERITAGE SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT EXERCISE

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Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
American Fork, Utah
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Graduates of 2011, leaders, teachers,
and my brothers and sisters:

This is a proud and happy time for graduates, for parents, for teachers, and for friends. I am pleased to participate with you. I congratulate you graduates and I join in your pride and happiness.

I.

I enjoy graduation exercises. They are a time to honor graduates for goals attained and knowledge and skills certified. But the gaining of knowledge and skills is an incomplete view of the significance of education. Of equal or greater importance are the significance to graduates of what they have learned and the question of how they will use their learning.

Graduates, I understand that as a group you have very high test scores compared with other high school classes statewide. That identifies you as graduates with great potential. You have attended this highly regarded school, from which I understand that individually you have received a rigorous education, including high standards of personal behavior as well as intellectual performance. Your graduation certifies your great potential.

The scriptural theme for your graduation, “The Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind” (D&C 64:34), is a suitable direction for a class with that duty. It is now up to you to turn your potential into performance: for you to determine—and for us, your parents and friends and other applauding observers to see—what you will do with your potential and your certification.

II.

I speak to you as one who has had lots of experience with graduations and the decisions that follow them. To begin, I sat where you now sit in June, 1950, exactly 61 years ago. Like many of you, I had my high school experiences in two different schools. My first two years were at Uintah High School in Vernal, Utah. My last two, and my graduation, were at B.Y. High School, once known as B.Y. Academy, in Provo. I understand that American Heritage regards B.Y. Academy as an important part of its cultural heritage, since American Heritage was founded shortly after B.Y. High was closed in 1968.

The fact that I graduated 61 years ago is bad news and good news. You may think that I am out of touch with your

generation. That would be bad. But the good news is that I have had long experience observing what follows high school graduations, and that experience may be helpful to those of you who have “the heart and a willing mind.”

The significance of my 61 years of observation is that I graduated from high school at approximately the time your grandparents were born. I have therefore had an opportunity to live through and observe the life span of three prior generations that graduated from high school—my own generation, for over 60 years, and the post-high-school generations of your grandparents and your parents.

I will concentrate on only one of these generations. I will speak of what I have observed in the lives of some of my own high school classmates for over the 61 years since our graduation. I do this to identify and illustrate some principles and values I believe are important to graduates in any year and from any institution. Some of my memories concern classmates from Uintah High School, and some from B.Y. High School. I have changed all the names to preserve confidentiality.

Two of my classmates, Sue and Jack, married one another. I hadn't heard from either of them for many years. Then Sue contacted me with some sad news. In high school Jack was what we called “a good kid.” Sue told me he was now an alcoholic. He was not able to support his family, and he was ineffective at almost everything he tried to do. It all began with a few drinks he thought would help him forget some problems. Before he knew what was happening, he was addicted.

Now, alcohol governs his life, and he cannot seem to break free of its grip.

I saw another classmate some years later. Mary spoke admiringly of her husband. I had never met him, but I could tell that she loved him and that they were united in working for the things they agreed were important. She told me with obvious pride that she was working to help support a boy on a mission. I think this couple probably didn't have a lot of money. But I felt sure from the look in her eyes that they had something some of our wealthy classmates would trade all their money to possess. Mary and her husband were happy and at peace in doing what they knew to be right.

Next example. As a high school student, Frank didn't seem to care about the consequences of what he did. For him, a rule was something you didn't have to keep when no one was looking. He seemed to have no concept of right and wrong. His behavior seemed to be governed by “Will I get caught?” I haven't seen Frank since we graduated, but I know something about where his attitudes led him. About 40 years ago I went into a store, and gave a check for some purchases. The clerk pulled out a large book to see if I was on a list of people whose checks should not be accepted. (Today that job would be performed by a computer.) While the clerk was flipping through this list, I saw the name of my friend, Frank. He still hadn't learned to live by the rules, and I suppose he was on many lists of persons who could not be trusted.

When I was at BYU some of my classmates' sons and daughters would come up to me and say, “Do you

remember my father” (giving his name) or “my mother” (giving her name)? In one of those inquires, a young woman said, “Do you remember Bob?” When I answered enthusiastically that he was one of my closest friends, and told her a little bit about her father as a young man, her eyes shone with pride. I already knew something about the accomplishments of her father and mother. They were the kind of people who did something unselfish and good for every person they knew. They could always be counted on to help where they were needed. As I met their daughter, I thought to myself, “She will be like her mother and her father. She will make some fortunate fellow a wonderful wife, and some fortunate children a great mother.” I loved it when students lovingly told me about their mothers and fathers.

Bill was one of the brightest boys in our class. He seemed to have everything. He married a fine girl and he progressed rapidly in his profession. He made a lot of money and achieved positions of great prominence. But in the process he let himself lose touch with and cease to cherish his most precious possessions. I think he just forgot that a wife and children require time also. Divorce followed. Bill’s children are grown now and have children of their own, but neither the children nor the grandchildren have the blessing and stability that come from parents and grandparents who are together and united.

I remember two other classmates, whom I will call Al and Susan. They didn’t graduate. One summer evening as a group of carefree teenagers were racing their cars on the highway outside of town, there was a rollover and Al and Susan

were killed. I remember another classmate, Milo, who was killed soon after our high school graduation, a combat casualty in the Korean War. Those three lives were cut short. By now, my fellow students and I have lived over four times as long as Al and Susan and Milo. I ask myself, “How well have we done with our added years?”

If you were asked to speak to some graduating students sixty years from now, what will you say about your classmates? Or, more to the point, what would one of your classmates be able to say about you? If that is an important question, what are you going to do about it?

III.

Now, in this concluding part, I will, as you supposed I would, give you graduates some specific advice about your personal application of the values you have been taught in this American Heritage School. I will also remind you of some of those common sense and common religious values we have each been taught by our parents and in classes in our churches or synagogues.

Before you were born there was a best-selling book titled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. This included such values as “clean up your own mess” and “don’t hit people” (p. 4). If all adults practiced those values, it would clean up the environment and it would clear out the criminal courts and the divorce courts.

Common sense and values are vital. Unfortunately we live in a value-neutral time that causes such subjects to be neglected in most formal education, unless they are on the favored list of the

“politically correct.” You are fortunate to have been educated in a school where values are not off-limits. Now that you are graduating from high school, I urge you to reaffirm your commitment to the values you have been taught here and to the common sense and religious values that are part of your personal heritage. These should guide you in every application of your formal education.

Here are some examples of what I mean by the values and common sense that should guide the application of your knowledge.

Item: No one can enjoy rights unless someone else fulfills responsibilities.

Item: We are responsible for our personal acts, and we shouldn't try to shift the blame to others for our bad choices.

Item: Our society is held together by personal integrity, personal responsibility, and unselfish service to others. We cannot survive a generation of uninhibited pursuit of personal gratification.

Item: This nation was not built by government programs. It was built by private efforts and private initiatives. Whatever promotes private initiatives is good for our nation and its people.

Item: Our continued existence as a people and as a nation depends on those men and women who are willing to sacrifice their own pleasures for the benefit of others. I refer to parents who are willing to subordinate their own pleasures and comforts to bear children and raise them as responsible citizens of a free nation.

I know that you believe these things because of what you have honored here

and because what I have heard said in this ceremony. I continue:

Item: Wickedness never was happiness.

Item: What persons *are* contributes far more to their happiness than what they *possess*.

Item: I conclude with one more non-politically-correct example of common sense and values—the vital importance of honesty or truthfulness. This quality of honesty is vital because it is the foundation of all personal relationships and all organizations. If a person cannot be relied upon to tell the truth—not just usually but invariably—you can never have a wholly satisfying relationship with that person, whether he or she is an employee, employer, spouse, or friend.

You should also remember that honesty or truthfulness is not valuable unless it is absolute. How much trust can you place in a person who tells you the truth 95% of the time? How much value is an employee who does not steal from her employer 95% of the time? The 95-percenter is like a leaky bucket: The hole may be small, but it renders the entire vessel unworthy of its purpose. Unless the hole can be mended, the bucket—or the person—is bound for the trash heap.

In the long run, the course of absolute honesty and total truthfulness is not only the best course but also the easiest. A person who is only partially honest and only partially truthful is always having to make hard decisions about whether each new circumstance of life calls for honesty or deceit. The person who lies and then must tell another lie to cover the first, and then another and another, is a person to be

pitied. At some point, one of those covering lies will be exposed, and the whole overlapping structure will come down with a clap of thunder. How much better to commit one's self to the way of absolute honesty and truthfulness. A person with that commitment will waste no time or energy on deciding whether, or when, or the extent to which, he or she will compromise with principle.

Be absolutely honest in all your work relationships and truthful in all your communications. You will win affection and respect from everyone, and the door of new opportunities will open before you.

I conclude in that same spirit of honesty and truthfulness, calling upon the 61 years of post-high-school experience I described earlier.

I know that you graduate in challenging times—wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and the prospect of financial disaster. Values and standards honored for thousands of years are being denied and

cast aside, men's hearts are failing them, and fear is upon all people. But take heart. There have been challenging times before. We, the generations of your predecessors, have survived them, and so will you.

The answer to all of these challenges is the same as it has always been, and you should hold fast to it. We have a Savior, and He has taught us what we should do. At the end of His ministry He declared:

“These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

As His witness I testify that His teachings are true and that the way He marked out is the way to peace in this world, and everlasting life in the world to come. I close this testimony in His Holy name, the name of Jesus Christ, and add the words of an ancient prophet-king: “And now, if you believe these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10).

