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CFAC Convocation Address: I Fit for Them

Earlier this semester I was at a theatre conference in Los Angeles when I received a phone message from my wife. The mother of my dearest childhood friend had passed away and the family wanted me to speak at her funeral. I texted my friend, Wayne, and asked him about the plans for the services. He texted back, "I'm giving a sketch of Mom's life and then you are supposed to elucidate the meaning of life and the meaning of death; good luck." I called him and asked, "What is the meaning of life, and what is the meaning of death?" "I don't know." He said. "That's why I'm giving the life sketch."

My purpose this morning is to celebrate the marvelous accomplishments of these beloved students, and to invite us all to contemplate the meaning of life and the meaning of death.

I remember as a BYU sophomore back in the early 1970s listening to the title song of John Denver's latest release, Rocky Mountain High, and being struck by the lyrics in the opening lines:

He was born in the summer of his 27th year
Coming home to a place he'd never been before
He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again
You might say he found a key for every door.

What are doors? They could be thought of as thresholds between different times and spaces. For example, today we came into the HFAC from the outside through a door. Going from being single to married is a door. Graduation is a door from a place of learning to a place of earning (we hope). Moving from one job to another is a door. Having a child is a door. Life is a door. Death is a door. Learning is a series of “Aha” doors.

Universities are places of learning, and they are filled with adversity. It’s like living in a crucible: a place of melting down and reshaping, of being tested and tried, and when we emerge, we are transformed and changed. It’s not easy. It’s only a few years, but it seems like a lifetime.

Robert Frost wrote a poem called *In Hardwood Groves*. Think of seasons. Think of graves. Think of being born again. Think of baptism. Think of flowers, keys, crucibles and doors.

The same leaves over and over again!
They fall from giving shade above
To make one texture of faded brown
And fit the earth like a leather glove.

Before the leaves can mount again
To fill the trees with another shade,
They must go down past things coming up,
They must go down into the dark decayed.

They *must* be pierced by flowers and put
Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.
However it is in some other world
I know that this is the way in ours. (Untermeyer 1946, 227)

Consider this pattern of going down and coming up again. What is that place to which leaves fall and from which they mount again? What is that place that must be pierced, not only by flowers but by dancing flowers? What is the “dark decayed.”

Perhaps it’s the same place Saul went to when on the road to Damascus he saw a light from heaven and heard a voice. For three days he couldn’t see. He was in a place of “dark decayed.” And on the third day Ananias placed his hands upon Saul’s head and restored his sight and he was filled with light, the Holy Ghost. He died and sometime in the summer of his 27th year, he was born again. (Acts 9)

Perhaps it’s the same place Alma the younger went to when he, like Saul, was persecuting the saints and an angel appeared to him and he was in a coma for two days and two nights, and on the third day he awoke and spoke.

25 Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters;

Alma further explains . . .

29 . . . I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the marvelous light of God. My soul was racked with eternal torment; but I am snatched, and my soul is pained no more. (Mosiah 27:25, 29)

“You might say he found a key to every door.”

Something happens in the crucibles of “the dark decayed.” Saul was changed to Paul, and Alma was born again, and both became children of Christ. As Peter explains, such transformations are “not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God,” the Savior’s atonement, “which liveth and abideth forever” (1 Peter 1:23).

At the suggestion of SOM colleague Eric Hansen, I recently read the biography of President Marion G. Romney. His was a remarkable life, and the book remarkably life changing. In October Conference of 1943, Elder Romney taught, “We must not be hard of heart. We must assume our proper relationship to our Father in heaven, recognizing that in His infinite wisdom He knows what ought to be done. Therefore, we should be willing to subject our personal opinions and actions to His will” (Howard, 131).

Marion Romney and Ida Jensen were married on September 12, 1924. Throughout their lives they enjoyed “a deep and quiet friendship.” Early in 1967 Ida suffered a debilitating stroke, and the family prepared for the worst.

Romney gave her a blessing, and “pleaded with the Lord to heal her.”

However, her condition steadily worsened, until incoherently her life lingered on. Romney “read everything he could find relating to faith. He fasted, not . . . to ask for divine intervention. . . . Rather, . . . that he might know how to show the Lord that he had faith.”

Although he returned to his duties as a member of the Twelve, he sat by her side in the hospital every minute he could. Late one night, after returning from a trip and sitting by Ida for an hour, he went home, deeply discouraged. He picked up his Book of Mormon and began reading where he left off.

Blessed art thou, . . . for those things which thou hast done; for . . . thou hast not . . . sought thine own life, but has sought my will. . . . Thou has done this with such unwearyingness, . . . that I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. (Helaman 10:4-5)

The Lord’s words to Nephi were Romney’s answer. Kneeling in prayer he told the Father “he was willing to let her go or . . . care for her in whatever condition the Lord wanted her to be in.” As he finished his prayer he felt a voice, “It is not contrary to my will that Ida be healed.” He dressed and returned to the hospital, arriving just before 3 am. He blessed Ida with the promise “that she would recover her health and mental powers and yet perform a great mission upon the earth.”

As he finished the blessing she opened her eyes, and in a frail voice asked, “For goodness sakes, Marion, what are you doing here?” He responded, “Ida, how are you?” She replied, “Compared to what, Marion? Compared to what?” (Howard, pp. 86, 134, 137-142)

There is a mystery in this journey into the dark decayed, a mystery that may have something to do with life being bound by mortality until we find our way to the sacrifice that invites us to embrace eternity. That sacrifice has everything to do with the relationship between life and death.

In 1876, Brigham Young appointed Karl G. Maeser as principal of Brigham Young Academy. During one of its many financial crises, Maeser informed his wife and daughter they were moving to Salt Lake to accept a position at the University of Deseret. Obediently, they packed their bags, then sat on them for days.

Finally his daughter asked when they were moving. Maeser answered, "I have changed my mind. I have had a dream - I have seen Temple Hill filled with buildings - great temples of learning, and I have decided to remain and do my part in contributing to the fulfillment of that dream."

I teach a directing course each semester. On the first day of class we discuss a statement by Mshai Mwangola, a performance scholar and teacher from Kenya. “Theatre is a space of responsibility.” She said. “It is a space of growth, not exhibition.”

In the House of the Lord we perform ordinances by proxy giving life to the dead. In temples of learning we perform experiences by proxy giving life to the dead.

Temple work is not about the ordinance workers; it's about the patrons and those for whom they labor. Teaching in "temples of learning" is not about the teachers; it's about the students and their transformations. Universities are filled with sacred spaces. We enter them to change and to be changed, in part, by seemingly small, sometimes imperceptible moments of learning, "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there little" (2 Nephi 28:30). Like repentance, learning is a process of giving up certain behaviors and embracing new ones, one step at a time.

True mentors place others ahead of their own personal programs and preferences. They seldom if ever are concerned about "being right" or "getting the credit." My fellow teachers, our responsibility is to mentor the next generation that they may replace us in our disciplines, within and without the academy, and then we must graciously and charitably work with them to create the future. "For charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked" (Moroni 7:45). My beloved graduates, your responsibility is to achieve more than your mentors have accomplished and to excel beyond their discoveries. You must create the future while preserving the roots of your discipline. This you must do graciously and charitably.

For example, throughout his life Abraham Lincoln did not let personal agendas and preferences compromise right decisions. When he was elected President, Lincoln assembled a team of strong men to serve in his cabinet. Most of them were his political rivals. Salmon P. Chase, however, took the rivalry further than the others. While serving as Secretary of the Treasury Chase openly criticized the President's policies and practices and sought to win the 1864 Republican nomination away from President Lincoln. Still, the President kept him on as his treasury secretary.

However, by the last week of June in 1864, Lincoln's forbearance for his ambitious secretary was finally exhausted. When Chase offered his periodic letter of resignation, to Chase's complete surprise, Lincoln accepted it. He explained his actions to Massachusetts congressman Samuel Hooper,

I will tell you how it is with Chase. It is the easiest thing in the world for a man to fall into a bad habit. Chase has fallen into two. . . . He thinks he has become indispensable to the country. . . . He also thinks he ought to be President; . . . These two unfortunate [habits], Lincoln explained, had made Chase "irritable, uncomfortable, so that he is never perfectly happy unless he is thoroughly miserable. And yet there is not a man in the Union who would make as good a chief justice as Chase, and, if I have the opportunity, I will make him Chief Justice of the United States. (Goodwin, 635)

Four months later Chief Justice Roger Taney died, and on December 6 Lincoln announced Chase's appointment. When asked why he would do such a "magnanimous" thing, Lincoln explained,

To have done otherwise I should have been recreant to my convictions of duty to the Republican party and to the country. As to his talk about me, I do not mind that. Chase is, on the whole, a pretty good fellow and a very able man. His only trouble is that he has "the White House fever" a little too bad, but I hope this may cure him and that he will be satisfied. (Goodwin, 680)

"Lincoln later told [Michigan] Senator [Zachariah] Chandler that personally he 'would rather have swallowed his buckhorn chair than to have nominated Chase,' but the decision was right for the country" (Goodwin, 680).

Emily Dickinson wrote a poem called *I Fit For Them*. Think of sacrifices. Think of the dark decayed. Think of mothers, mentors, Marion G. Romney and Abraham Lincoln. Think of our savior.

I fit for them –
I seek the Dark
Till I am thorough fit.
The labor is a sober one
With this sufficient sweet
That abstinence of mine produce
A purer food for them, if I succeed,

If not I had

The transport of the Aim –

In this crucible of transformation, the purpose of life is to die, sometimes daily, at least regularly, and not just at the end of our lives. May we leave yesterday behind us and with faith step into the dark decayed, beneath the feet of dancing flowers, where we experience change and transformation.

Following that, the purpose of death is to live, to step out of the darkest abyss and into the marvelous light of God.

What might BYU look like if we were all willing to swallow our buckhorn chairs and fit ourselves to do our part in contributing to the fulfillment of Karl G. Maeser's dream? May we mentor over and over again the branches of the future generation and firmly graft them into the roots of the past generation, that the fruit thereof will be most sweet and white and will fill our souls with exceedingly great joy (1 Nephi 8:11-12).

I am a witness to the influence of mentors in our lives.

I am a witness to the mystery of the One whose personal crucible transformed time into eternity.

I bear testimony that what we have talked about today is at the heart of the atonement. He died that we might live. And the only way we can live is by following His example.

In the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.