

CFAC CONVOCATION ADDRESS, APRIL 2013

Good morning, students, staff and faculty, family and friends. I'm glad to be here, and I'm honoured to be able to share a few thoughts with you. It's a happy day, and a worrisome one too. You're wondering about a couple of things. Like am I, or is my loved one ever going to find a job in this field? Well... Or how about this worry: can I, can my loved one, remain true while pursuing these worldly professions?

This is a very good question. You're familiar with descriptions in 2nd Timothy, and in the Book of Alma, and all over the great sacred texts of the great sacred traditions, of the terrible iniquity that abounds in the world, of the peril, and of the pressing urgent necessities that arise as a result.

John Bunyan, the great 17th century Puritan writer, lays it out for us in his tremendous, towering book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan is concerned with our making safe passage through this lone and dreary world, and returning to our Heavenly Home. He describes the traps and snares that await us as we go. There is a city, he says, called Vanity, and a fair kept there, called Vanity Fair ...

... a fair ... (that lasts) all the year long: (where) are ... sold ... houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms—lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds ... masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver (and) gold ...

People pick on theatre and film and TV, on music and the visual arts and such, but Bunyan's comprehensive list suggests that all of your various professions and occupations might be just as morally dangerous. But he finds the narrative arts, and the entertainment industries, to be particularly bad.

And, moreover, at this fair there is at all times to be seen juggling, cheats, games, plays, fools ... knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind. Here are to be seen, too, and that for nothing, thefts, murders, adulteries, false swearers, and that of a blood-red colour.

Amusing ourselves to death. Is that what you were worried about, parents? You know, these days there really are a lot of jobs available in these various industries. However this description, not to mention your own experiences with a lot of worldly things, might make you wonder if they're even worth your while. Bunyan didn't think so.

(H)e that will go to the Celestial city, and yet not go through this town, must needs go out of the world.

Modern scriptures confirm that view: "Go ye out from among the wicked. Save yourselves. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord." (D&C 38: 42.)

Pretty clear, pretty unequivocal. Pretty discouraging! Why *did* you guys pick this major? Well, hold on. That's not all there is to it. Let me tell you a story. Once, years ago, we had a student who was going to study film, and then decided not to. That's cool. His reasons were *very* cool. He'd been thinking. He wanted to do what was right. More than anything, he wanted to live the first great commandment. He wanted to love God with all his heart and soul, with all his mind and strength.

Now this young man liked film, but he'd been noticing, really feeling that film, and books, and the humanities generally, took him away from this first great commandment. All these flawed people, in constant conflict, constantly behaving in inappropriate ways. My young friend wanted to honour and worship God. He wanted to study something that would allow him to contemplate God's righteous works, and maybe, humbly, add unto them. Eventually he changed his major, and went into the sciences. I don't mean that at all sarcastically. Bless him, and I'll bet he's done really well.

It seems clear, doesn't it? It sounds good. We go out from among the wicked. We save ourselves. And when we do the Lord makes us to lie down in green pastures, and leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls, leads us in paths of righteousness, and through the valley of the shadow of death, and to gardens watered by running streams in which we will abide in peace forever.

That's so very beautiful, so surpassing sweet. Here's a thing, though. Not only does the 23rd Psalm describe this blessed state, to which we all aspire. I want to point out that that description is also blessed, and it is a great blessing too. Hurray for science. But that was art. God measures and calculates, but he's also a poet. Our college deals with divinity too.

You may have noticed that I just sneaked a phrase from the Koran into my paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm. Many of the people here are members of the LDS church. I am speaking, in a sense, from an LDS perspective, but I want to do so in an inclusive way. We just recently had an LDS General Conference. In that conference Elder Russell Nelson, a member of our quorum of twelve apostles, repeated a very familiar refrain. He was talking about missionary work, and how we need to do it. He said that we should invite people to bring the truths they have and hold dear, and that we'll add to them. I wonder if LDS people have thought that through sufficiently. I wonder if we realize that this almost certainly means that people will be bringing truths that we haven't yet discovered or considered. I wonder if we realize that even if people don't come to us, they still have and hold tremendous truths of which we've not been aware, and that we would do well to learn about.

This is where the core curriculum of a liberal arts education comes in. Some of you folks have been worrying about the things your youngsters have been studying. Well, be reassured. So very much of the world's curriculum is not worldly at all. Read *The Analects* and *The Apology*, *The Republic* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*, *The Confessions* and *The Koran*, *The Imitation of Christ* and *Concerning Christian Liberty*. These, and so many other things besides will not only make us more literate, but more righteous.

Yeah, you'll say. But what about permissive modern entertainment? Okay. See what you think of this.

I. The Beatles, *In My Life*, harmonium break. (Fade up at 1:12 [“...the people and things that went before...”], continuing until 1:46, fade down.)

My parents bought me a copy of The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* for my sixth birthday. I loved it then. Still do. That beautiful sped-up piano break that we just heard has almost mythological heft for me. It reaches really far down, and resonates mightily. There is historical and aesthetical substance to this music. The Beatles are really great, for all sorts of reasons. But more, for me this material bespeaks care and kindness and, yes, righteousness. Righteousness? From those backsliding long-hairs?

I want to share a deep conviction here. The whole Judeo-Christian journey is rooted in a difficult and blessed paradox, an irreconcilable double mandate. You're all familiar with the challenging terms. They're also blessed ones. Eat not the fruit. Multiply and replenish the earth. Here at school, immerse yourselves in your studies, and at the same time devote yourselves to your covenants. These are oppositions that needn't lead to enmity, or moral conflict. Rather, they can be peacefully resolved, even combined. We try to do two good and contradictory things, simultaneously, and it works out. With regard to today's topic, this means that you go out from among the wicked at the same time that you embrace and rejoice in the 88th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, and the 13th article of faith, and your arts and humanities degrees!

That means we don't just read our standard works, or circumspect things by a few non-members. We read, widely, searchingly! *The Bacchae*, and *The Birth of Tragedy*. *Black Elk Speaks*. *Night*. *The Plague*. *My Land and My People*. We'll be challenged. We'll be okay!

Let me demonstrate all this visually, with a few film clips. I have agonized a bit about whether I should show you this. You are not initiated. You may not understand the niceties, the subtleties of higher cinematal education. You have not, frankly, paid your dues. But you *have* paid a lot of tuition money. You may even be donors. So, despite your lack of preparation, I have finally felt to share this with you. Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, the greatest moment in film history:

II. Opening, *A Hard Day's Night*. (dvd 1, ch. 1, 0:15-0:33 [has to start exactly...])

A G major 7th chord, with the fourth note sustained. George falls down. Ringo trips over him. John laughs his head off. There is a profound theme here, a profound lesson. It is that you should never run with your hands in your pockets. Also, do not tailgate. Further, this is the exquisite mid-point between those two profundities of artistic production and human expression, between notation and improvisation, between planning your shot, and then being open to the happy accidents, the unsuspected, unexpected profundities that life and art both bring us.

You can learn from films. Actually, *this* may be the greatest moment in film history.

III. Crash, Pee-Wee's Big Adventure. (Ch. 21, but timing is for entire movie: 1:05:57-1:06:29)

Here is more truth, meaning, beauty. From this we learn never to ride motorcycles, or date boys that wear goatees. There's also this:

IV. Football, Blockheads. (Disc 9 of Laurel and Hardy set; ch. 4, Blockheads 36:44-36:54)

See? You can learn from films. All that was worldly. All that is, for me, wonderful. The first great commandment says that we should love God. Pres. David McKay used to emphasize that the great intercessory prayer, as contained in the gospel of John, chapter 17, told us how to do so. How can we properly love and honour God? Well, to love and honour him, we must *know* him, and Jesus Christ, whom he sent. And how do we do so? By living, as much as we possibly can, like them. By being righteous.

That's the first thing, and it comes first. But it's not the only thing, and my young scientific friend that I just told you about only had it half right, which sort of means that he had it wrong. I'll bet you noticed that he neglected an important part of the big, eternal picture. *And the second commandment is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* God is the great, righteous creator, and we are his greatest creation. We can't live the first commandment without devoting ourselves to the second. And the arts help us in our desires to do both.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has got to be about the world's greatest story. We quote and celebrate it, and in doing so we sometimes miss one of its most basic and challenging points. The seminary teacher, the high councilman and the member of the stake presidency walked right on past the man in desperate need. The sinner, or, more pointedly, the good man from a tradition that we depreciate, was in the right. Jesus knew what he was doing. Think of the Woman at the Well. He'd said, and Israel knew, that Samaritan theology was an utter mess, even apostate. Which means that Jesus made an *infidel the moral centre of Christianity's most emblematic story.*

So much of our discourse, practically all of our discourse is devoted to how bad the world is. That's true. That's not true. I have a question for you. What happens if we apply, carefully and with all our hearts, John 17 logic to the second great commandment? We come to know your neighbours through their good works, and then we grow to love them. Your graduates have been learning about their brothers and sisters, who so often say and do such unutterably edifying things. And sometimes they sorrow, or stumble, and we have been learning how to respond carefully and ministeringly to that too. Your graduate's studies have helped them to know mankind. Love, empathy and charity have followed upon that knowledge like the dews distilling. The books and plays and films act as proxies, and they make us better ministers when we go out a-searching, and serving.

Isn't that right students? One more example, me concluding with this exquisite, tender, magisterial scene from Jacques Tati's 1953 French film, **M. Hulot's Holiday**:

(Hulot, ch. 17, 1:04:19-1:05:29; little boys and the ice cream.)

In addition to reminding us how very much we can learn from a man who flaunts the BYU dress and grooming code, this masterful bit of duration and suspense is a perfect, exquisite illustration of fraternity, of dauntless courage in the face of the void, of the second great commandment, not to mention of how a little child shall lead us. It would be so fun to elaborate, but we're out of time. What I want to say is that this is the kind of thing we do around here. It's also, more importantly, the world, and it's really nothing to be afraid of. This is so beautiful, deep, challenging, true. This is the kind of thing that will make you go out and do likewise, or to go and sin no more.

Will you guys be able to find jobs? I'll bet you will, in something or other. It all tends to work out, doesn't it? Also, folks, you are worried about your children, and about the wicked world, and the corrupted and corrupting components of all of these media industries. You should be, but not only, and not exclusively. Again, there is more of good, of decency, of sweetness and regard and love, than you'll ever have time for. Let's key on that, and stop worrying so much.

Our lives will be preserved and our souls will be saved if we live and obey the First Great Commandment, and the Second that is like unto it. Our lives will be preserved and our souls will be saved if we keep current the two emblems of these respective commitments, our temple recommends and our library cards. Best wishes, dear graduates, friends and family members, brothers and sisters. Thank you, bless you, and God bless us all.