

College of Fine Arts and Communications Convocation Address Ed Adams, April 2015

Thank you, Dean Jones. From here, y'all look beautiful sitting out there. This is my favorite event of the year.

Although I am director of the school, I get the opportunity to teach a Comms 101 class a couple of times a year. It is typically a class of 100 students. The first day I ask each of the students to stand, tell us your name, where you're from and why you are taking this class. And so it begins. It often starts by students quietly stating their hometown and state and sitting down. As it progresses, just saying your hometown doesn't seem good enough. Others begin to make a pronouncement, as if they work for their local chamber of commerce. Over time I've written some down. I've had students say as they introduce themselves:

"I'm from Hershey, Pennsylvania: The sweetest place on Earth."

"I'm from Beaver, Oklahoma, (beaming with pride) the cow chip capital of America."

"I'm from Weed, California." (Now in my mind, *Where do you go with a town called Weed?*) The Student then finished: "Weed like to welcome you!"

Another: "I'm from Schenectady, New York, founded by the Dutch in the 17th Century and one of the greenest places on God's earth."

Or another, "I'm from Midland, Texas, the most exotic place in West Texas." Now I, myself, having lived in West Texas, can say that I'm not sure there is an exotic place, but obviously this guy was placing dibs on Midland as that place.

Then there's the 4 to 5 students from Mesa, Gilbert, Chandler Arizona. Which usually brings a "woohoo" from other Valley of the Sun inhabitants in the class. They are always quick to remind us that Utah might be the center of the church, but the Mesa/Gilbert area is where Zion is located.

Then, there are those students who are from Provo and Orem, who feel like they have to almost apologize. I challenge them. I asked one student, "Why are you cowering when you say you're from Provo?"

Her response was, "Because I'm not from someplace great and green like Schenectady or exotic like Midland Texas."

Everyone started somewhere.

A couple of years ago a music faculty member, Doug Bush, spoke from this spot. He painted a picture for us of his wonderful, bucolic upbringing in Montana. My story is not quite the same.

I'm from Flint, Michigan. I grew up in the area from the time I was three until I left on a mission. Some of you may have heard of it. It was the birthplace of General Motors. David Buick started his first factory there. Louis Chevrolet's first factory was built there. There were also fisher bodies, AC spark plugs, brakes, radiators, and suspension springs manufactured there. My great grandfather caught a train from the boot-heel of Missouri (*Mizz-oura*) during the great depression to work in the factories there. He was a drifter, who made a living making "home brew, moonshine in the woods" along the St. Francis River and gambled in the local pool hall, so Flint potentially offered a respectable way to make a living. When he showed up there it was known as Buick-town.

Today, Flint is now known by many other titles: The most dangerous city in America. The most impoverished city in America, the most miserable city in America. My favorite: America's most apocalyptic, violent city—that you've probably never heard of.

During last couple of decades, Flint has been declared as the most violent city in America, on a number of indexes. It has gotten worse from when I was growing up—although the seeds of violence were readily apparent then. Even when I was growing up, incidents of theft, property crime, burglary, and robbery were higher then, than they are today

I lived in Flint's Northside—we lived 2 miles from the Buick factory. It was a factory area so large it was called Buick City. In our neighborhood, the homes were no larger than 900 square feet, built in 1920s. It was a multiracial neighborhood—this otherwise wouldn't be significant if it hadn't been during

the tension of the civil rights era, and of the 1967 Race Riots of Detroit which carried into the Michigan cities of Saginaw, Pontiac, and into our neighborhood of Flint.

People were attacked on the streets and parked cars turned into bonfires. National guardsmen walked our streets. The scene would unfold again the following year when Martin Luther King was killed. Our neighborhood was a frequent stop for the police. Gunshots, domestic violence, break-ins were common.

Immediately west of our home were two abandoned houses. One was boarded up. The other was a hangout for teenage gangs. The language of our neighborhood was course and the people, at times, were brutal. I witnessed my father taken away in ambulance twice. My father's temperament and disposition were predisposed to this violent culture.

It was in this environment my family were introduced to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and joined the church. However, by the time I was thirteen, my father drifted away from church. Within a few years my mother and brother stopped attending. This would be during my junior high school years and a profound time of decision-making in life.

School was a daily gauntlet where students fought, consumed drugs and smoked. Weapons were not uncommon, and there were corners and hallways of the school you didn't walk alone. There was a culture of violence, harassment and fighting.

I didn't want to fight. I learned to think out possible options for when I would be inevitably be jumped and outnumbered before or after school. I learned to assess situations, look for alternatives, create a little humor and persuasively talk my way out of conflict. I learned to negotiate this difficult landscape. I learned to take refuge in the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and to feed a developing testimony. These attributes have helped serve me well throughout life and my career.

This was where I started in life. For some of you here, you have similar or other kinds of trials, challenges and moments of adversity. For those of you on this stage, they may have come while growing up, or trials may have occurred during these years attending school. These could have been moments of homesickness, loneliness, depression, difficulty with relationships, loss of family members, extended illness, or even hospitalization. For some of you, these may have been the most difficult years you have experienced.

Elder Maxwell while experiencing cancer and treatments associated with that insidious disease shared the following:

That mortality presents us with numerous opportunities to cope with those of life's challenges which are 'common to man[kind].' In addition, there are also our customized trials such as experiencing illness, . . . persecution, betrayal, irony, poverty, false witness, [and] unreciprocated love. . . . If endured well, 'all these things' can be for our good and can 'greatly enlarge the soul,' by excavating the soul we are promised an enlarged capacity for joy.

There is a quote: "Your present circumstances don't determine where you can go; they merely determine where you start."

Regardless of the challenges and trails you have endured, many of you have been blessed with a beautiful starting point here. Here at BYU. You have a BYU education.

Looking out, I see supportive, loving families. Today is a day for commencement—a beginning or a start. Some of you will launch into careers you've trained for for years. Some of you will go onto grad school, and some of you will move to places where no one knows you. What a blessing to begin anew—to take the good and discard the bad, to create new lives—and to start again.

Elder Jeffrey Holland, in a 2009 talk at BYU said,

"I plead with you not to dwell on days now gone, nor to yearn vainly for yesterdays, however good those yesterdays may have been. The past is to be learned from but not lived in. We look back to claim the embers from glowing experiences but not the ashes. And when we have learned what we need to learn and have brought with us the best that we have experienced, then we look ahead and remember that faith is always pointed toward the future. Faith always has to do with blessings and truths and events that will yet be efficacious in our lives."

Let me witness to you your past does not determine where you are going. May all of you take what has helped formed you in the past, refined by this education, strengthened by your parents, siblings and spouses, edified by your BYU experience, and fortified by faith. Now, you can commence anew. What a blessing and an opportunity.

I hope you wear well and honorably the badge of BYU, and that your testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will ever serve as “your iron rod.” This I leave with you in the name of Jesus Christ.