

Brigham Young University
Department of Fine Arts and Communications
Commencement Address
Friday April 27, 2007
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An old cowboy told me once—“free advice is worth just about its cost.” I will do my best to prove him wrong. Advice usually comes in numbered clumps. You've got Ten Commandments. Seven habits. Twelve steps. And my favorite of course, 200 movies to see before you die. So I wrote down everything I've learned that can possibly be of any value as you face your great adventures in the real world of media, communications and the arts? Here's the list.

**71 sure fire ways to make your life
a colossal creative adventure
And have an impact for good
Of unprecedented proportion.**

Then someone said, “Oh by the way. You've got eight minutes.”

I am honored to be among you. I come mostly to applaud you. To admire you. To encourage you and wish you the spectacular lives you imagine on the wondrous journey of creativity that can be yours.

Today you leave the sanctuary of theory and the security of creation without commercial expectation. Today you face the uncertain—and even frightening—reality of finding your place, constructing a life, building a career and making a difference in the remarkable worlds of visual arts, communications, music, theater, media arts and movies. Or most hopefully—your own ambitious vision of who you are and what you are destined to become.

My life has been defined by motion pictures. I can't presume to offer pointed advice to so many varied talents and so many diverse aspirations. But in one thing I believe we are all the same. We were born with that inexplicable passion to create.

The world believes the creative process is largely based on the unconscious mind and some mystical interaction of subconscious forces about which very little is known or understood. In using your talents—and as you experience the joys of creativity—I urge you to remember from whence those “forces” truly come. You must never forget that you have been blessed with these gifts. They come from God. And with those talents and this awareness come an enormous responsibility that is not without consequences.

Prophets understand with clarity and have declared, “The spirit of Christ is the medium of intelligence that guides inventors, scientists, artists, composers, poets, and authors—when they set their hands to do that which is for the benefit and blessing of their fellowmen.” (*Bruce R. McConkie*)

Philosophers recognize the connection between great art and the powers of heaven. Ruskin said it perfectly. “All great art is the expression of man's delight in God's work and not his own.”

You imagine a future defined by creativity fulfillment—but it will not be realized without difficult decisions and consequential choices. I learned that early in my career. When I was nominated for an academy award—they announce that Raquel Welch is presenting the Oscar. If I win, the proper protocol is to—kiss the presenter. Now that is a difficult decision and consequential choice. I can sense you don't appreciate the terror I felt because you are too young to remember *Raquel Welch*. Well, you can glean from the grin on the face of your favorite gray-haired professor all you need to know about “this woman.” Oh. And they are saying, “So what's the problem?” But you have to look at it from my perspective. If I kiss this glamorous movie star in her *plunging neckline gown*, not only do I have to explain it to my darling wife sitting in the 5th row. I have to explain it to my *very old fashioned* mother watching on television in Farmington, Utah. On the other hand, if I don't kiss her——well, I have to explain it to the Elder's Quorum.

In the days that followed—What? Oh. Dean Jones wonders if I kissed her. Well Dr. Jones, my father taught me to love my neighbor as myself. So... Besides, you never want to miss a missionary moment.

You can be sure the criteria for making all of the difficult decisions and consequential choices along the path of my passion to be a filmmaker began to take form. In the days that followed the academy awards I was adored. I was applauded. I was sought out, praised and honored by men. It was awesome! But the worst of it is that I really began to believe it. I really began to think I was terrific. That it was all about me. That I was, “way cool and brilliant and gifted and the hot shot young...” And then my 8-year old daughter tugged on my pant leg. With all the flashing lights I hadn't seen her for days. Forgotten her really. It was about me after all! Wasn't it?

“That little gold doll you brought home is really important isn't it daddy.”

“Very important.”

“Do you love it?” she asked.

“I do. I think I do. I love it.”

“Do you love it more than you love me?”

Like an avalanche of stone it fell on me. I wasn't suddenly some break-away brilliant filmmaker or “Autuer”. I wasn't even a real celebrity. I was my little girl's dad. I was the gospel doctrine teacher. But in that brief and blinding moment of counterfeit fame—in the rush of ego and intoxication of self-centeredness——I had brushed my children aside and let go of the iron rod.

I dropped to my knees, embraced my sweet little girl and said, “There is nothing in this world I love more than I love you.”

“Good, may I take it to show and tell?”

Well, the glittering gold Oscar did go to show and tell. It was dressed in doll clothes and pulled about in a little red wagon. It was eventually dropped and broken by a very sick little boy in the children’s hospital who had wanted to hold a real Oscar before he died.

These events put my life as a filmmaker into an important new perspective. They left me determined to measure the probable consequence of every choice by two criteria: my family and the principals of the gospel. The mist of darkness frightened me. The parable of the iron rod was suddenly very real. I grasped hold and have clung in desperation ever since. My failings and foibles notwithstanding, these choices have guided me and been a source of creative confidence. Priorities of family, gospel and iron rod have worked for me and I am impressed to recommend them to you. It’s free advice, but I promise it has great value.

Today you march into the raging flames of popular culture. Media in all its marvelous manifestations is the most powerful and important influence on culture, humanity, politics, religion, morality and ultimately the future of civilization. It is a bold and brutal battle for the hearts and minds of men and women—and increasingly, our children.

It seems a new phenomenon but is in fact a conflict started long ago in a kingdom far away. Hostilities increase. We are relentlessly bombarded with dazzling images, pulsating sounds, mesmerizing music and increasingly messages of potential mass destruction.

But at the same time—it is the most exhilarating place on earth. There is no better place for you to be to focus your energy, use your talent and make a difference. As a warrior in the battles of popular culture you have wonderful weapons and truly terrific toys that will enable you to communicate, educate, enlighten and entertain in ways unimaginable only a few years ago.

Though I have to say, as one who has worked so hard to create spectacular images for the giant screen, it is painful you can now watch my movies on your cell phone.

The challenges are great and those with “ears to hear” may catch the clarion call to speak in the universal language of art to “every nation, kindred, tongue and people.”

Today is called “commencement” for good reason. It is the end of your formal education but the moment of your beginning. And you have arrived just in time. The world is in desperate need of your talent, your passion and most of all your commitment...

—To glorify virtue instead of vice.

—To celebrate beauty rather than ugliness.

- To applaud true heroes.
- To extol good not evil.
- To praise traditional values over secular social experimentation.
- To magnify the light and illuminate the darkness.
- To speak the truth rather than spew rhetoric tainted by political correctness.

So here is my singular advice—the synthesis, abstract and sum total of my carefully crafted list of 71 really good suggestions.

Dare to dream impossible dreams.

That's it? The summary of a lifetime making movies is the lyric to a song? An old cliché? I know. Be fresh. Be original. Be provocative. Even “edgy.” You've heard it. Maybe said it. Fair enough. But in your competitive zeal to “expanded sensibilities” and be the next big thing, take care that you don't “throw the baby out with the bath-water.”

Impossible dreams will never be a cliché to men and women with noble hearts and righteous intent. I hope you are among them because I believe that YOU are the vision that the prophet saw. The year I graduated and sat where you sit now, Spencer W. Kimball said, “The full story of Mormonism has never yet been written, nor painted, nor sculptured nor spoken. For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of god on earth...”

In the 40 years since, there has been a wellspring of marvelous creativity bubbling up within the church. Much of it has come from BYU Alumni. A lot of it from students who were trained right here in the excellent College of Fine Arts and Communications. In word, paint, clay and stone, music, recording and song. A profusion of remarkable fine art and illustration, sculpture, worldwide broadcasts, television, theater, home fronts, literature and films have begun to tell “our story.” Some proclaim the prophecy fulfilled, but I believe it has only begun.

With some important and notable exceptions we have largely been speaking to ourselves and inspiring each other. It is time for us to speak—with an even more excellent voice—to all the world. And I don't mean with movies about missionaries, paintings from scripture or books about pioneers. “Our story” is much richer than our history and much broader than our culture. It is a story of universal themes and eternal truths that appeal to the good in people everywhere. Themes embracing family, traditional values, virtue, faith, Christianity, brotherhood, charity and the list is very long. As you enter the world of media, communications and art I believe you have a remarkable opportunity to tell “our story” by the example of your professional lives—by making difficult decisions and consequential choices. You can tell “our story” by the spirit of who you are and what you do. By the magnitude of your impossible dreams that hopefully embrace righteousness, goodness, virtue unceasingly, and the consequential choices of immortality.

“Tomorrow” is now. You are the vision that the prophet saw when he said, “It remains

for inspired hearts and talented fingers yet to reveal themselves. They must be faithful, inspired active church members to give life and feeling and true perspective,”—and now I paraphrase—“To their myriad creations of great worth and value.”

Impossible dream? Perhaps.

You will need to run where the brave dare not go. You will need to fight for the right without question or pause and I hope each of you can find the courage to strive for “unreachable stars.”

The universe may be a well-ordered whole but your place in it is up to you. You create the cosmic rhythm of your life.

And now more free advice.

Live your life deliberately. Impose your creative will. Use your imagination. Change the pattern of things. Create a life defined by your *actions*—not by a *reaction* to people or circumstances just because you suppose “that’s the way things are.” Do not allow your life to take its course without your permission. When everything seems to be moving you in one direction, look to the right and look to the left. Pause at the curb of the information super highway like a wizened child about to cross a busy street and wonder. Is it the wisest course? Is the crowded pedestrian walkway—though seemingly safe and predictable—truly the path that leads you to your aspirations—to your distant star? Kick over every rock. Open every door. Opportunity is often found in unexpected places and getting to unexpected places usually requires leaving the comfort zone. Exploring the unpredictable. Remember this. Your own creativity is ultimately the only real security.

“What man can imagine he can achieve. Impossible are impossibles only as thinking makes it so. I always have to dream up there against the stars. If I don't dream I'll make it, I won't even get close.” My first film was based on this vision of Henry Kaiser. I called it, “What Man Can Imagine.”

You are the vision that the prophet saw. Dare to dream impossible dreams. Embrace your gifts with gratitude and humility. And one day looking back across your life, you will see there was a destiny. I promise you today that there is great purpose in your life. I applaud your accomplishment. I admire your gifts. I encourage you and wish for each of you the spectacular life that you imagine on your wondrous journey of creativity and life.

God speed.