

College of Fine Arts and Communication Convocation Address

Mark Graham, April 2015

Introduction

I am deeply gratified to represent the faculty of the art and design departments who I admire so much, and to share the stage with Dean Jones who has had such a positive influence on my life.

I am especially happy to represent the art education graduates sitting behind me. These students who have completed the arduous requirements for art educators, including student teaching. Remember 7th grade? Most of us would rather forget 7th grade, yet some of these students have gone back in time to work even with 7th graders.

I have a brief example: These 4th grade students are studying McArthur Grant Award winner Tara Donovan, a contemporary visual artist. Donovan uses ordinary materials in her work. The students are trying to figure out what the work is made of.

[Allie Clip]

“What if art is what you are supposed to do in life?”

How a Mountain Changes the Journey: Overcoming Obstacles

[Image 1 (Nepalfinal2)]

A few years ago, I was in Nepal, attempting to climb a mountain in the Himalayas. It took five days of walking to get to the mountain, along a trek in the Mt. Everest Region.

And as we walked, I pondered what it means to climb a mountain. Setting out to climb the mountain changes the entire journey, giving it different purpose and value. Climbing a mountain makes you prepare differently. You must prepare for every possible disaster and nights of tedious misery in the snow and cold. You need to practice things like lighting a stove with gloves on in the middle of winter in the snow. You may need to buy lots of equipment and train for months.

On the trail when you meet other trekkers from all over the world, everyone talks about where they are going. It might be a mountain pass or Everest Base Camp. But you get to point up at the sky and say, “We are climbing that mountain; we have ropes and ice axes.”

[Image 2 (Nepalfinal3)]

Getting Lost

During my first trips to climb Ama Dablam, my partners became ill because of the altitude, and my Nepalese Sherpa guide had to take them down to a lower elevation to recover. I did not want to go down. I thought, *I am up here, let me see if I can climb this mountain.* I was on the mountain alone for five or six days, climbing and carrying supplies to higher elevations. But one morning I awoke at Camp One buried in snow. I realized I had to go down. So I carefully filled my large pack with everything I could carry. It was a dangerous and slippery descent, because of the snow, and I had started late. I knew of two tents on the descent where I could stop for the night if I could not make it down to base camp. I slowly made my way down while huge wafts of clouds and fogs moved over the mountain, obscuring my path. When the clouds cleared momentarily, I would try to plot a path among the rock cairns that marked the way.

The first tent was at a spot we called ABC or Advanced Base Camp. It contained supplies, but we had taken the poles out of the tent and flattened it, because of the wind. I looked for it, but it was buried in snow, so I could not find it. There was another tent, farther down, in a place we called The Meadows. As night approached, the fog grew worse and it began to snow again. I could not find any sign of the trails, and soon became lost—in a snowstorm, at night. I had been praying all the way down, but I was really praying now. I was trying to find the second tent, which I knew was nestled in a little meadow. It would

have been great for this talk if I felt a voice say, “Go that way,” or saw a tiny light in the distance that marked the way to the tent. But, instead, I went down the wrong side of the ridge.

Later, the snow stopped; it became clear and bitterly cold. I walked back and forth across the mountain looking for the trail, but I was on the wrong side of the ridge, so I would never find it. Finally, I knew I would have to spend the night—in the open, without a tent. I didn’t know if people survived such events, but since I was climbing a mountain, I was prepared. I laid out my pad and sleeping bag in the snow, at 18,000 feet, on what was now a clear and very cold night. I didn’t know if I would survive, whether it would be too cold or if the snow would bury me again. I wrote a farewell note to my family. I melted snow to boil water to make what I thought might be my last freeze dried dinner. I boiled water to put in my water bottles to put in the bottom of the sleeping bag. I carefully crawled into my sleeping bag on top of the narrow pad. I looked up at the steep side of the mountain in the moonlight and wondered if this Himalayan mountainside would be the last thing I ever saw on this earth. I could not move, since I might roll off my narrow pad and lose any hope of staying warm, or even roll down the mountain. I pulled my hat and coat over my head and thought about the medieval mandala I had seen in one of the villages, and wondered where it came from. Somehow, impossibly, I fell asleep.

I awoke later and noticed the night slowly turning to dawn; I knew I had survived. It was very cold, and I had to stay tucked away in my sleeping bag until the sun reached me, but I knew I had survived.

Eventually I got up, packed my immense pack, and eventually figured out where I was and found the cairn marking the way back to base camp. As I walked, the world never looked so good before. I had to stop every few feet take a picture of every cloud and lichen. I walked slowly, so slowly walked down, stopping every few feet to take a picture of another rock or clump of snow—it all looked so marvelous and beautiful to me. I was alive!

As I was approaching base camp, still a far way off, Dawa, the cook saw me, and ran up the trail with a little thermos of hot orange tang. He took my huge pack and then, light as a feather, I walked back to the yellow tents at base camp.

This must be what heaven is like, I thought, Dawa takes your huge load and you lightly walk through the mist toward the golden tents.

Sometimes in the extreme, difficult, sometimes heart-breaking journey, after praying and not being delivered, perhaps there is something to be learned in the extremities of life. Maybe we need to learn how to be miserable to be able to experience joy to appreciate what is around us. Perhaps we have to endure in order to learn that we can endure. And often we are asked to use our preparation.

[Image 3 (Nepal Final 4)]

Patience

President Monson said, “At times there appears to be no light at the end of the tunnel, no sunrise to end the night’s darkness. We feel encompassed by the disappointment of shattered dreams and the despair of shattered hopes . . . we feel abandoned, heartbroken, alone . . . We become impatient for a solution to our problems, forgetting that frequently the heavenly virtue of patience is required.”

Or as Elder Maynes said: “Many of the challenges we face in life can be solved and overcome, however, others may be difficult to understand and impossible to overcome and will be with us until we pass on to the next life. . . . The race that is set before us on this earth is an endurance race filled with obstacles . . . requiring dedication, perseverance, and self-discipline.”

One thing that I learned climbing big mountains: No matter how young or strong you are, you cannot rush up a mountain. You have to prepare your mind to walk slowly all day long.

The Walk is Worth the Walk

Once when my son Josh and I had finished a long climb on El Cajon near San Diego, we noticed there were some other climbers hiking up to the base of the rock. We had hiked up the day before and camped out in the long grass at the base of the climb. It is a long steep hike, and it was very warm and they were looking rather tired.

One of them asked us: “How was the climb?”
We said, “Really good.”
Then he asked, “Was it worth the walk?”
And I realized something important: the walk was worth the walk.

A Great and Marvelous Work

Now, I have described learning how to be patient in climbing a mountain, but most of my nights sleeping in a tent were really not that miserable, as long as I was patient and did not think about things like taking a shower or being able to read a book at night. And one night in Nepal, I was sleeping in a tent and I dreamed about my friend Dan Barney. Dan is a brilliant scholar, and would never ever want to climb a mountain.

But in my dream he appeared and said, “How about you read section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants?”

Which, in the subsequent days I read again and again. The only book I had, after all, was the scriptures and an old tattered copy of the *Hunger Games* we found in one of the mountain lodges. This section of the Doctrine and Covenants became very meaningful to me. It contains marvelous language and great promises:

6 Now, as you have asked, behold, I say unto you, keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion;

7 Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich.

8 Verily, verily, I say unto you, even as you desire of me so it shall be unto you; and if you desire, you shall be the means of doing much good in this generation.

10 Behold thou hast a gift, and blessed art thou because of thy gift. Remember it is sacred and cometh from above—

A great and marvelous work is about to come forth unto the children of men—I think of art and design and BYU and the work that we do here and all of you as a great and marvelous work.

I am talking about mountains, but I of course I am speaking metaphorically. The mountain represents those difficult obstacles and aspirations and wonderful projects and dreams in our life. Some of them we choose, some choose us. A mountain is a wonderful thing to contemplate. Isaiah used the metaphor of the mountain: “The mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the tops of the mountains.” The mountain of the Lord’s house—in many cultures of the world, there are sacred mountains, and this sacred geography gives the world a foundation, like the mountain of the Lord’s house.

Deeper Meaning

Viktor Frankl said, “What man needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task . . . the call of potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him. We may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed . . . to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement. When we can no longer change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

Having a beautiful, inspiring, ambitious idea or goal can change the journey.

Zion’s Camp, to any objective observer, was a failure; many have called it Joseph Smith’s first major failure. Nothing he aimed to accomplish came about. Several hundred men spent three months walking two thousand miles and fourteen of them never came home. Nothing the camp did improved the situation in Jackson County. The saints were still refugees in Missouri as barely tolerated aliens.

Joseph looked for peace and community and unity, but was met on every hand with conflict, dissension, rebellion, and accusations. For years the church suffered one debilitating setback after another. Joseph’s life was filled with dissension, accusations, confrontations, conflict, trouble and failure. But he never forgot or doubted his vision of what Zion could become.

Zion was not redeemed, as Joseph had hoped. During Zion's Camp, some people died, and the close harmony that the prophet hoped for did not materialize. Yet, from that failure, some of the future leaders of the church were forged from their close association with the prophet. "I do not know if that would have happened without the grand vision and purpose of establishing Zion." He never doubted the experience of revelation, revelation that placed the vision of Zion deeply in his heart. He resolutely kept that diamond in his heart of the vision of a Zion.

What appeared as a colossal failure was an important success in other, unanticipated ways. And so we cannot lose our grand vision of Zion, our beautiful goal to seek knowledge, visions and blessings, including the gifts of the spirit.

From the Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh:

When you have faith, you have a lot of energy in yourself.

When you believe in something really good, true, and beautiful, you have a lot of energy in yourself.

You are very alive.

A person who does not have anything to believe in is without energy.

When you have the energy of faith in you, your steps become firmer, your look becomes brighter.

You are ready to love, to understand, to help, and to work.

Dreams are Worth the Dreams

[Image 4 (Nepalfinal5)]

I just want to say something about my friend Meryl, who was part of one of these long walks. She did something unheard of: every morning she would fill a couple of water bottles, and as she walked, gave a drink to the porters who had such heavy loads.

This reminds me of Joseph who was cast into the pit by his brothers. They cast him into the pit and said, "Now we will see what will become of his dreams".

This is always and eternally the world's response to the artist. Now we will see what will become of their dreams. I try to remember that the walk is worth the walk, and the dreams are worth the dreams.

When Catherine and I moved to New York City, we had no idea what we would do; all we had was our dreams. The city was dangerous and in a great recession, it even went bankrupt shortly after we moved there. But we were so far outside the economy, we did not even notice. I was going to art school.

You may ask, "Now that you are an internationally known illustrator, and a professor at BYU, was it worth it—those years of living in loft on the lower east side?"

I have to say, that those were some of the sweetest and most exciting days of our life. The dreams were worth the dreams.

"In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities," said Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki. "In the expert's mind, there are few."

"Amateurs are not afraid to make mistakes or look ridiculous in public. They're in love, so they don't hesitate to do work that others will think of as silly or just plain stupid."

And so we have two things to weigh: the feather and the old dinosaur bone. Two great things to weigh in our minds—to not lose sight of the worthy mountains in our life, and to not lose sight of the lichen and the clouds.

I think the walk was worth the walk.

[Image 5 (Nepal final6)]