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Convocation Address  
College of Fine Arts and Communications  
12 August, 2011

A BEGINNING

I’m grateful to Associate Dean Gary Barton for extending this invitation to speak today. I am humbled to be extended this honor and trust. I accepted because, for a brief moment, I was concerned that my retirement could be held hostage if I didn’t accept the invitation.

Today this eager and impatient, and uniformly, though beautifully, attired group arranged neatly here on the stage, shares much with me. Not only am I as beautifully draped in these elegant robes as them; I’m eager and impatient, too. I’m eager and impatient, today, to begin tomorrow. I’m about to conclude 24 years of service on the BYU faculty—the same number of years between when I entered college as a young skinny freshman and when I finally graduated (I wasn’t actually here all of those 24 years).

Someone once said that young men speak of the future because they have no past, and old men speak of the past because they have no future. The invitation to speak at this program has initiated a lot of reflecting on my past. This hasn’t been particularly easy as I’ve forgotten a lot and I’m not quite convinced of my agedness (though I do take advantage of the senior discount for the Sizzler salad bar). Still, I share the increasing decrepitude of all men and women my age. A famous woman once commented, “Aging seems to be the only available way to live a long life” (Kitty O’Neill Collins: Brainy Quotes). In spite of such often-heard unenthusiastic commentary and jokes about aging, I’m excited about the future, however short.

Both age and an unrestricted message allow me to indulge myself—a little—and address some of my past experiences as they relate to thoughts that are on my mind at this time of both leaving and commencing.

Times and seasons

Several years ago I took time away from my teaching to study aspects of animation at a company that developed computer games. One of the projects I worked on was designing
backgrounds for hand-held games. These backgrounds were referred to as “rooms” and varied in size, content, and themes. When the game was played the protagonist entered a room to face and overcome obstacles and challenges before, if successful, exiting to the next room. Life’s experiences might be measured as “rooms” that we enter, make discoveries, overcome challenges, learn new things, change, and enlarge ourselves. In our mortal context we tend to measure time in these types of ever advancing sequential events.

I’ve passed through many rooms, or, many sequences of experiences in my life—some overlapping and some end-to-end. The nature or context of various rooms might be described by who I was for that part of my life. For example, I lived out of doors much of my youth, as a farm boy; I’ve experienced several phases of being a student (always learning is necessary, unrelenting, and hopefully enduring); for a short, indelible time I served in the military (I still call the floor the deck); I am and will always be a husband and a father (that’s a big room); since I can remember I’ve labored to be an artist; I’m a teacher; and a son.

The author of Ecclesiastes prefers to describe the rooms and the events of each passage as seasons and writes: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven . . .”; then describes various types of seasons, such as: living and dying, planting and harvesting, laughing and crying, getting and losing, rending and sewing, hating and loving, and ward and peace (see Ecclesiastes 3:1 – 9).

In verse 10, the Preacher writes: “I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.” We understand both from our personal experiences and from the comforting words of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith at Liberty Jail, “that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.”

**Work**

These graduates and I will shortly pass out of the doors of the university and begin new seasons, enter new regions, and confront new, and hopefully numerous soul strengthening challenges. It’s exhilarating.

Many things are on their minds as they leave BYU, but probably dominating all others (the 400 pound gorilla in the room) is work—a job. Some have accumulated education debts, some are
about to be cut off from the Daddy Dole, and the family must be fed. But, they’re also excited to apply what they’ve worked very hard to learn.

My Dad grew up very poor, as he grew he studied and worked very hard, went to college, and achieved his goals of providing his family what he was deprived of in his youth. He valued work and taught his children to work. My education about work began, in earnest, at the age of eight when Dad began farming—a career he pursued passionately and successfully for the next 50 years. In early Spring, after we came home from school each day (and also on weekends), Mother would drive my two older sisters, my twin brother and me to the sugar beet field to thin until dark. When the sugar beet seeds were planted they were not spaced far enough apart for maximum growth, so the job of the Hull children, after the seedlings had appeared, was to cut away the extra beet seedlings. Frequently the seedlings were intertwined and it was necessary to bend down or crawl along on our hands and knees and carefully remove the extra, entwined plant and leave only one. In late March and early-April the late afternoons were chilly and our fingertips became very cold and painful.

As the farm grew from 10 acres to 600 acres of irrigated land the opportunities to learn about work increased—not 60 times, it seemed, but 6,000 times. As I grew older and could do more, Dad’s expectations increased. My brother and I learned to hoe weeds, drive trucks and tractors, stack hay, brand cattle—many things. The most important job for us was irrigation. We had to do this very well—Dad taught us to do everything well. If water didn’t get to the end of the rows the crops didn’t grow and the yield diminished and the farm—the family—lost income. He didn’t compliment us for a good job—quality work was implied, expected, part of the job description, but, poor work was done over and over until it was done well.

Being a slow learner (this seems to be true) it took a while to transfer the practice of hard work to attending classes and studying. Too frequently, at the scheduled hour, my art classes didn’t meet where I happened to be. So, inevitably, I missed the day when “the secret to art” was revealed. Those who know it covet and reserve that knowledge all for themselves. So, I had no shortcuts and had to learn the hard way—by perseverance and hard work. I’ve never learned the secret and I’m still trying to discover it, but I’ve learned a lot about art and work.
As Latter-day Saints, we’ve been taught all our lives to value good work. J. Richard Clarke, a former counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, addressing work said, “As Latter-day Saints, if we would be true to our religion, we must perform high-quality work. It is a matter of integrity. Every piece of work we do is a portrait of the one who produced it.” He added, “Continue to invest in your personal development. Expand your occupational horizons by constant study. . . .

The dimensions of most jobs are constrained only by the mind of the uncreative worker.”

I studied graphic design in college and in 1971 accepted a job at the Ensign Magazine as an assistant graphic designer and about three years later I was asked to be the art director. Not long after that I realized that I didn’t have the passion for that work. Influencing that realization was that, in the evenings, I worked on freelance illustration—initially for the much needed extra money and eventually for the joy (and the much needed extra money). My passion for this, for increasing my aesthetic abilities, triggered many years of late nights at the drawing board. In the evenings after spending time with the family and reading bedtime stories (bedtime stories were my thoroughly enjoyed responsibility—we’d lay in bed together and I would read—until I’d fall asleep; I often wonder how the Cat In the Hat ended), I went to the basement and worked. Sometimes, depending on the deadline, until early in the morning or even all night.

Because of my passion for creating art and the ability to work hard, I was prepared, when the opportunity came, to apply for and receive an offer to teach illustration at BYU.

**Failure**

Moving forward in time, I’d like to describe another experience or season that began just a few years ago. My illustration work often includes environments. These are the backgrounds for the story’s characters and essential to the visual description. Often the environment was outdoors—a landscape. Eventually, I became interested in landscape as the story itself. I liked painting outside; from my youth I liked being out of doors—I’m not uncomfortable in the elements. As a boy we had a radio but it didn’t work so the sounds I grew up listening to were the ever present wind blowing past my ears (it included a strong flavoring of companioning dust), bird songs, complaining cattle, water trickling from siphon tubes, and the pop, pop, pop of the old John Deere tractor. Similar kinds natural sounds add to my enjoyment of painting outdoors today.
I began this work humbly—an oblique expression for “terribly”. A few years ago, I somehow painted a very strong piece and entered it a painting exhibition where it sold. A gallery owner in Salt Lake City saw the work and invited me to show him other pieces. I thought I was on the brink of a new creative channel and market. Expectantly, I laid my work out in front of the gallery owner. He stood looking at the work for a few minutes, said nothing, then turned and walked away. I felt a bit like a duck that didn’t make it over the hunter’s blind.

Getting shot down is a great thing if you don’t become bogged down in a morass of whining and feeling sorry for yourself. Though I was devastated, filleted, I hastily fled back to my dungeon, (an unfinished basement studio fits most of the required elements of a dungeon—particularly spiders and the cold in winter). In the dungeon I laid out all the landscape work I’d done, and for several hours I studied each piece until I realized that they were awful. I took out the sander and eradicated every image and began again with deeper study.

Steven Jobs, one of the founders of Apple, was once fired from Apple. Listen to his insight as he described what failure offers:

*The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.*

After starting a company named NeXT and another company named Pixar, Apple bought NeXT and Jobs returned to Apple.

My painting failure strengthened me and today that same gallery in Salt Lake City represents my work.

**The Light in Your Eyes**

Before I conclude, I want to talk a little about the aspect of my season as a teacher that I enjoy the most. My colleagues and I are very pleased at the successes of our students and alumni, yet, to us, it’s their faithfulness and spiritual potency that matters most.

When the paperwork allowing BYU to build the Jerusalem Center was signed it included an agreement that the students living there would not proselyte. After the signing one Israeli remarked, “Oh, we know that you are not going to proselyte, but what are you going to do
about the light that is in their eyes?’ Referring to the light in the eyes of our BYU students, former counselor in the First Presidency, James E. Faust, supplied this insight:

What was that light in their eyes which was so obvious to our friend? The Lord Himself gives the answer: “And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings.” Where did that light come from? Again the Lord gives the answer: “I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” The Lord is the true light, “and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.” This light shows in our countenances as well as in our eyes.

Not long ago my colleagues brought a Los Angeles artist to campus to show and discuss his work. On our drive back up to the airport he was silent for some time and then told me that he’d never been treated so well and never been among such poised and happy young people. He asked me if they were as they seemed. I assured him that, yes, this was how they really are. Because he’d never seen this in other college students, he wondered why. I explained to him that they knew who they were.

We are anxious now for you to leave and to take, wherever you go, and in what employments you embark on, the truths of eternity.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to address you today, and to be blessed with 24 years of serving the very special young talents who have come and gone. I am grateful to work with and to be inspired and mentored by excellent colleagues, my friends. May we each, through our diligence, and inspiration from the Lord, continue to grow in our intellectual and spiritual endeavors, is my prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.