I don’t feel a day older than the day when I first walked through the doors of this building, and that was when I was seven years old. I don’t know how I heard about it, but KBYUtv was looking for a child actor. Somehow I knew that over at Wasatch Elementary across Ninth East. So after school, without telling anyone, I came over. I found the secretary and she said they weren’t auditioning for this part, and I said, “Oh that’s all right: I’m the person that you want.” And she was either so amused or annoyed—I don’t know which—that she called John Apgar, the director, and he came into the office and took me to the studio, and he had me do some little scenes. When I finally got home at about seven o’clock, I told my very worried parents that they “didn’t have to worry. I was now a movie star.”

And that’s how I began my life in the College of Fine Arts and Communications.

I wish I had the time to tell you what’s been going through my mind over the past few weeks. There were tremendous contributions from faculty members and students to my life. Many of them I met during those 14 years before I actually enrolled as a student. I was in this building a lot: I was taking lessons here, part of the BYU Children’s Chorus, playing children and youth roles in plays and operas and television programs—various presentations. I found every possible opportunity to get involved in what was happening in the costume shop and the scene shop and the art studio and the make-up lab. I had a wonderful childhood in this building. Other kids play sports and build tree-houses and I feel sorry for them.

My boyhood dreams always had to do with the arts. Because my parents taught us the gospel when we were very young I was naturally interested in what the prophets had to say about my childhood aspirations. This quote from President Spencer W. Kimball, which I think you probably know well, was one of many that captured my imagination:

“Take a da Vinci or a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare and give him a total knowledge of the plan of salvation of God and personal revelation and cleanse him, and then take a look at the statues he will carve and the murals he will paint and the masterpieces he will produce. Take a Handel with his purposeful effort, his superb talent, his earnest desire to properly depict the story, and give him inward vision of the whole true story and revelation, and what a master you have!”

And that’s how I would have read that, as a 14-year-old boy, when it was first given. I focused on words, like teenagers do. Words like “masterpiece,” “talent,” “effort,” “vision.” And famous names like “Michelangelo” and “Shakespeare.” I wanted to do something great, like they had done. I wanted to make a difference in the world.

Well, as we all do, I grew up. I had wonderful experiences in my youth. I went on a mission, got married, and served the Church. And then one night in a hospital delivery room, I had an experience that changed me forever. It changed my perspective. Completely.
Holding my firstborn in my arms, I knew that I would never think of the arts in the same way again. Up to that time it never occurred to me that what artists and what parents do are very closely connected. The creator of all things isn’t just an artist—putting things together to make them beautiful. He is our Heavenly Father, using all his creativity and all his artistry to help us develop and to grow.

President Uchtdorf taught this truth in General Conference: “God Himself said we are the reason He created the universe! His work and glory—the purpose for this magnificent universe—is to save and exalt mankind. In other words, the vast expanse of eternity, the glories and mysteries of infinite space and time are all built for the benefit of ordinary mortals like you and me. Our Heavenly Father created the universe that we might reach our potential as His sons and daughters.”

Well that night in the hospital I could not sleep. I remember singing over and over again a little lullaby about awakening because I was awakening. I could see that parenting is truly the work of creation. Of helping another living soul open up and become like God. At the same time, with the call of fatherhood now beating strongly in my own heart, many years of insights and experiences were starting to come into focus for me, and I could see myself becoming an artist of a completely different kind.

The years that followed were packed with professional creative activities and Allison and I were in the middle of the most important work of our lives—which is to raise two wonderful boys. But the interplay between these two parts—the professional and the creative part and the more important part, parenthood—brought many questions to my mind like, What if I approach making this film or staging this play or writing this lyric in the same way that I approach being a parent to my sons? Because as a father my question is not, What do I want to do? But, What do my children need? Not, What do I want to say? but, What would it help them to hear? I ask myself, What if my primary concern was for the needs of my audience? Their flourishing in the gospel and their experience in mortality, what if that was my primary objective? And all of those kinds of questions brought a much more fundamental question to my mind. And it was something like this: What would I need to be and become in order to use the arts in the work of creation for the sake of helping Heavenly Father’s children learn and grow and become like Him?

So today I’d like to share with you a few personal experiences that have helped me in my personal quest to answer that question. And I am nowhere in the journey except at the beginning, so I share these as kind of report along the way, mindful that you have your own reports to make about this journey towards understanding how we use what we’ve been given and how we become the kind of people that can do the work of creation. The work of helping Heavenly Father’s children return home.

Here’s an experience:

When I was a student here Walter Rudolph, who was the manager of KBYU-FM, arranged with his good friend Giorgio Tozzi to come to BYU. I wish you knew him. Giorgio came and gave a concert with the Philharmonic Orchestra and it was up in the Tabernacle and then he taught a master class here. Giorgio is a world-renowned bass/baritone who had sung in all the major opera houses of the world—500 performances in the Metropolitan Opera alone—and his recordings are still a benchmark for opera singers all around the world. You may know him because he dubbed the voice of Rossano Brazzi in the film version of South Pacific. He’s the one who sang “Some Enchanted Evening.”

Because Giorgio had such a wonderful experience at BYU he agreed to fly up from California once each week to give a day’s worth of voice lessons, as long as those voice lessons were open to everyone in the
School of Music. Because I had the opportunity to speak with him, I also had the opportunity to volunteer to meet him at the airport and drive him down to Provo every week. Now the first thing I noticed about Giorgio was that he was intensely interested in me. When he talked about himself it was only to tell me about his family, whom he loved, or to answer one of my questions or to teach me a principle.

I always, always said that what attracted people to Giorgio was not music or singing: it was doing good. One time he said, “David, I wasn’t a kind person before I played Hans Sachs.” Hans Sachs is the warm and generous central character to Wagner’s Die Meistersinger. He said, “The role of Hans Sachs changed me. Being Hans in the opera helped me learn how to love other people.” That has stuck with me for 25 years. Here was an artist who was at the top of his field, who could have easily become self-absorbed. Yet he was constantly focused on meeting other peoples’ needs.

For example, once Giorgio was teaching a baritone by the name of John. While John was singing Giorgio stood up, came up close to him and felt right under his rib cage. He said, quietly and sensitively, “Are you wearing an extra belt under there? John, are you wearing a strap?” John went beet-red and said, “How can you tell?” Giorgio said, “I couldn’t tell from your singing, but I could tell you were worried about something. You know, John, you don’t need that belt. What you need to do is plant a seed of faith like Alma said. You need to plant your seed and let it grow. It’s all in chapter 32. That is what’s going to help your singing.” Those of us who were close enough to the piano to hear this interchange were absolutely astounded. Here was a man who cared enough about us to teach us on our terms, and so had gone out and purchased and read a Book of Mormon.

I was having those kinds of experiences long before my son was born, but they prepared me to think differently about the work of great artists and the true work of creation. Because of Giorgio I ask myself, Would my artistic work, over the course of my life, help me to focus on my family and on other people? Would my work as an artist be selfless and kind? Would it help me be willing to do what others needed me to do so that they could learn and grow? For their sakes, would I be willing to pray always, study the scriptures and keep my covenants?

Giorgio saw us only twelve times that semester but just being around him changed us. When he died earlier this year I found this tribute to him written on the internet. They express very well how I feel.

"Being a singer who knows Giorgio Tozzi meant that you knew you could do it—you knew you could do it because he did it, and you were just like him...and you knew this because he told you so every time he saw you. There was no more positive man towards a young singer than this man—you felt this positivity and the resulting confidence until you opened up one of his recordings and actually tried to imitate what he was able to do. His legato is still unparalleled, his diction was flawless, his sound was warm and uniquely human, and his stage acting was natural and deeply moving....He was an unusually humble man, particularly considering his amazing gifts. For my part, today I lost something with no definition or descriptive words. Giorgio Tozzi is otherworldly. He lives on in every person he touched."

As you can see, Giorgio’s greatness as an artist was not just his singing, not by a long shot. What made his singing great was the greatness of his fatherly interest and care for us, which he invariably expressed to us, with all the feeling of a tender parent.
As you can tell, part of Giorgio’s greatness as an artist was his capacity to listen as a father would listen to a child he loves. You might wonder what listening has to do with being an artist, since many artists are primarily interested in talking. One writer said, “When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life when someone listens to us.” You should know that I am the product of many, many great listeners who have helped me unfold and be enlarged as a person. Chief among these are my father and mother, my beloved companion, Allison, and my two sons. I could spend the rest of our time together just listing and thanking all those that have listened to me. It’s an essential service that all of us require and blessedly, our Heavenly Father is waiting and ready to listen to us any time.

I’d like to tell you about one person who listened to me and helped make a big difference.

When I was a student here I was given the opportunity to direct and design the opera Carmen in the de Jong concert hall. When I received this assignment, I realized I would need to help the other students explore the opera without acting out the immoral behavior of the characters. I began studying source materials for help—the novella by Mérimée and the poem by Pushkin. Over time I developed a production concept set design that I thought could help them understand their roles in the right way and give them meaningful opportunity to perform.

That summer I made this little set model of three little cardboard pieces. They were on the stage and they would move around and make the configurations. I took this little model wherever I went. Allison and I were just newly married and we were sitting up in bed with the score and these three pieces and saying, “What if they looked like this? What if they looked like that?” And as wonderful as it is to think about directing that opera, even more wonderful is the experience of doing it together. She never came to a rehearsal that I remember. She came to performances. But just the experience of doing it together was wonderful.

I took that little set model wherever I went, and that summer I went to an opera camp. One day at the camp I was sitting over in the corner working with my little pieces and the former Assistant Director of the Chicago Lyric Opera walked by. He asked what I was doing and I started explaining the concept when he cut me off and said, “We need to talk.” So the next morning at breakfast we talked. And did not like what he had heard. He strongly encouraged me to rent a muslin drop set and study a traditional staging of Carmen on a video tape and then recreate it as closely as possible. I explained I’d be willing to do that except that our students had no way to relate to the standard interpretation of the opera. I thought they would be very silly-looking if they were pretending to do something they knew absolutely nothing about. (I didn’t mention that I am equally naïve about what those characters are supposed to be doing—and happily so!) But he was not convinced. He was certain I was doing the wrong thing.

A few days later I was sitting in the very same corner, interestingly enough, working with my set pieces when that man’s teacher, Ross Allen, walked by. Mr. Allen was the retired head of the Indiana University Opera Theater, a nationally recognized stage director, and a guest on the Metropolitan Opera broadcast. “Ooh!” he said, looking down at me and licking his lips like he always did. “What delicious thing are you up to?” Once again I started explaining my concept and this time I wasn’t interrupted. After several minutes of talking very fast and moving my little set pieces around Mr. Allen said, “This is very, very interesting. I want to hear more.” So we met twice during the opera camp, with him asking a lot of questions about how I was going to handle this character situation or deal with that staging problem.
I knew he had directed *Carmen* dozens of times, and could have given me ready answers to his questions. But he was interested in answers that were different from his. Answers that came from a world beyond what he knew. When he left he said, “David, you send me a tape of that production.” I thought that was a very nice gesture but I didn’t take him the least bit seriously.

Fast forward a few years. I arrive at Indiana University to start a master’s program in Opera. A member of the Church mentioned that a party would be that night, sponsored by the university’s classical music station. So I went and we were in a dark, crowded room and I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. It was Mr. Allen. He said, “David! Where’s that tape? Tell me about your production!” We talked for several minutes and then he invited himself over to our apartment. About a week later we watched all four acts of the opera as it was performed on the de Jong concert hall stage, with several rew windings as we went and much discussion throughout. “I never thought of that,” he said several times. “I love that!” “Why did you do it that way?” Whenever I explained my deepest thinking, which naturally reflected my background as a BYU student and as a Latter-day Saint, he was most fascinated. Then he said, “Let’s do this every week!” I said, “Do what?” He said, “I’ll give you an opera to study and then you come up with a concept, and I’ll ask you questions about it.”

I was certain I was not up to that. He said we’d begin with *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)*. Thankfully, that was one opera I knew. As a child I had been in the production at BYU as one of the three boy sopranos, and as a student I got to direct scenes from the opera, as part of the opera workshop.

Since returning from my mission in Taiwan I had wanted to set the opera in China and address its spiritual themes and the rich, ancient traditions of Chinese culture. Mr. Allen was delighted with that idea and he continually asked me what the connection was between my thinking about the opera and my service as a missionary in Taiwan.

(Referring to pictures):
I wanted to bring you some of the first renderings I did for our meetings together. This is a picture of the act where they have the three tests of water—and it looks like a baptismal font. That’s the inside of a Chinese temple and this is a little overlay and there’s silk here with fire behind so you can see them crossing from one place to the next, and you get the idea that they’re passing the test of fire. Then to give the full sense of the concept there were some costume renderings for the main characters and designs for the other acts.

I met Mr. Allen at his home almost weekly during my time at Indiana University. Let me just remind you, this was not a class. The university could not have afforded this intensive one-on-one tutorial for a lowly master’s degree candidate. Since Mr. Allen was too old to drive I would take him to opera productions throughout the Midwest on the weekends. Our conversations on these drives and throughout the week covered soup to nuts: history, psychology, geography... you name it. I became very grateful for my BYU general education that allowed me to at least keep up with these conversations. And I was especially grateful for the Gospel perspective which informed everything we talked about.

I learned then, and I have learned many, many times since, that most people of real stature in their fields appreciate ideas that go beyond what they already know and what is popularly accepted. They hunger for these ideas and use them to illuminate their work and to keep their work fresh and interesting and influential.
I would hope we wouldn’t underestimate the ideas growing in us because of our exposure to the arts here—here at BYU where the gospel has everything to do with what we’re doing.

I think you can see that Mr. Allen was a giant of an artist who created much more than opera productions which have long-since been forgotten. Taking a parental interest in me and in others he helped to create us, and that’s a creative work that is still going on. One of the most important lessons that Ross Allen taught me is that listening—really listening—to others requires that we learn a lot of things. People who are narrowly educated, who only know about their own discipline, don’t have the breadth or the confidence to really climb into the world of another person. They may be politely attentive to what others say but they can’t go on a journey with them. So what does that mean for you?

Keep in mind that great parents grow in order to serve their children, and great artists develop in order to serve and bless others. For you to fully grow and develop, you will regularly have to get out of the practice room, the studio, the rehearsal hall, the editing bay. You’ll have to get out of the HFAC—as much as I love this place—and invest yourself deeply and whole-heartedly in your studies across the campus. This means working hard at things—things you’re not good at yet, which is difficult for talented people. As you take other subjects seriously, try to remember why you’re doing it. The temptation is to say, “I don’t need that class because I’m going to be a dancer.” Or “I don’t need to get a good grade in this course to make a film, or to paint well, or to play trombone in a symphony.” But that’s not why we try to be good students in every class. Remember, you’re going to have the opportunity to influence people from all walks of life, with every imaginable background and perspective. Taking your studies seriously now—studies in every field and discipline—is how you prepare for that privilege in the years to come.

There’s one more lesson from Ross Allen.

When studying at BYU, it’s hard to avoid worrying about how or whether we’re going to fit in “out there” in the world. The truth is, in my experience, when we do creative works to meet the real needs of people, we become very attractive and valuable to decision-makers in our fields. They’re not looking for people to fit in, to keep things going as they’ve gone before. They’re looking for people who can solve problems, find new opportunities, establish new vision, and enlarge other’s understanding. That’s a key point for me, and it has everything to do with my first experience as a professional director.

At the last minute, as a substitute, a company in the Northwest hired me to direct a production: *South Pacific*. It was explained to me that there had been some anti-Mormon sentiment in the arts community, and I was encouraged to refrain from mentioning that I was fresh from BYU. There were only a few days to prepare and I had to ask myself, “What can I do to help these people to have a meaningful experience? How can I help this cast grow and develop in their understanding?” I went over to the library and photocopied pictures of WWII sailors. That would be easy to do today because we have everything digitally, but it was quite an affair.

(Referring to pictures):
Here’s one of them: these sailors reading letters on the deck of the ship. Here’s another: this looks like it’s right out of the musical, soldiers who were there doing construction work on a tropical island. Nurses—there are lots of nurses in this show. It was good for these opera singers to see this because most of them were about 60 years old.
We put these pictures all around the rehearsal hall. There were about 50 of them at about eye-level. The first day of rehearsal we walked around the room and talked about what we saw. Then each day we would reference these pictures as we considered the historical and the sociological background to the story, and, especially, its personal implications for each one of us. Now I had never seen this done in a professional setting but it’s the kind of creative thing that the BYU faculty members had done to engage me and that’s exactly what my parents had done for us kids growing up, to help us grow and develop.

So there we were, a group of very seasoned professional and a completely inexperienced director, exploring the things that matter to us. And it was absolutely thrilling. It was exhilarating. I went home every night feeling so grateful that I had the chance to do something that required so much of my heart. My heart was certainly out on the table and opening night came. We were performing in an outdoor amphitheater that was surrounded by lighting towers that were made of metal. As fate would have it, there were 30mph winds that night, and a lightning storm doing a spectacular job of keeping us entertained, off in the distance. The audience and actors were distracted, to say the least. Not surprisingly, the next morning my first review as a professional director came out on the front page: "South Pacific drags along." I was devastated. I didn't want to go back to the theater; I thought I'd let everyone down. When I finally forced myself, with my wife’s help, to go back, I found hanging over the door a giant scorecard. The theatre, which had been full the night before, held 700 people. On the scorecard, next to the name of the newspaper, was a single digit: 1. Next to the title, South Pacific, was the number “699”. Why would they do that?

The general manager took me aside, before our little meeting, and said, “This cast has had such a profound personal experience preparing this production. They know an unfair review when they see one.” So one of the cast members wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper, which was published, and a couple nights later another reviewer came and a much more positive review appeared in the newspaper a short time later.

That experience taught me that when we sincerely use our creative talents and use our creative abilities to serve other people and to meet needs, others can see it and appreciate it. Not just those who are doing the work but also those who are viewing the work. They can tell that something meaningful, something important, is going on in this work.

I was invited to direct two more productions for the company and after that I was offered to be the artistic director. The longer I worked there, the more opportunities I had to reflect my gospel understanding in the work that we were doing. The company still drank at their cast parties and there was still plenty of bad language—though never around me. From time to time I heard costumers discussing whether their designs would pass my modesty standards. There was never resistance. What continued to surprise me is that the company wanted me to continue to meet their needs in the way that a boy from BYU would do.

Once we were preparing a production that called for a woman to seduce a man. Both artists had come in from the east coast and they were intrigued that during rehearsals we focused on what I call the “character of evil,” rather than the superficial and often ridiculous acting out of evil behavior. In the dress rehearsal, with about 800 people in attendance, the female actor got very caught up in the moment and she ripped off the man’s shirt, with buttons flying everywhere. The Chairman of the Board, an executive of a national company, who was a devout Catholic and a very thoughtful, well-educated
man, turned to me and said, “David, is that what you want?” Before I could answer he said, “Because that does not seem like you.”

That same point was driven home a year later, when our chain-smoking property master, JoAnn, brought in a box of fake cigarettes—the kind with the red foil at the tip and you blow on it and a puff of cornstarch comes out. I picked one up and held it between my fingers. The next thing I knew my hand was burning and the fake cigarette was on the floor. She had slapped my hand hard and she said, “Don’t even pretend that! Don’t you be like us, David. We want to be like you.”

An artist’s greatest creative tool is who they are, which is expressed in everything they do. It can’t help but be that way. The same is true for a parent. Joseph Smith said, “It is vain to hide a bad spirit from the eyes of them who are spiritual, for it will show itself in their speaking and their writing, as well as their other conduct.”

It’s also been my experience that when we’re trying to fit into the world, we don’t have the power that we would otherwise have. We don’t even have the power that our colleagues in the world would have, not knowing any better. But when we’re truly and deeply ourselves, opportunities to bless other people abound. They recognize light in us and they’re drawn to it. You know the scriptural foundation of this principle: “Light cleaveth unto light.”

Many years ago I was teaching a master class at Di Capo Opera Theatre on East 76th Street in New York. The singer was a well-known regional performer who had played the role of Tosca many times. She was singing the prayer aria, Vissi d’arte. Immediately it became clear to me that she had no clue what it meant to say a prayer. So I excused the both of us from the audience and we walked to the back of the stage. I asked her what she knew about praying and she said, “Not much.” I told what I knew and then briefly shared a personal experience. Then I asked her to sing the aria again, this time with her eyes closed. She stared at me like she didn’t know what she was going to do. Almost as an afterthought I said, “Why don’t you imagine you’re looking in the eyes of God.” She said okay and soon she was singing with an unusually pure and unaffected and personal expression. When she finally opened her eyes tears were streaming down her cheeks and it was very reverent in the room.

After a few moments someone asked, “So what did he tell you?” She looked at me like she was being asked to divulge a secret. I told her to go ahead. She said, “He told me to look into the eyes of God,” as if it was the strangest thing in the world. Then she turned to me and said, “That was incredible. But can I ask you a question? How do you know God has eyes?” At that moment it seemed like the entire audience sat right up in its chairs. We began a very vigorous discussion about the corporeal nature of God. People shared evidence of God’s body as it’s suggested in painting and sculpture and music and drama. All of it led to a very important moment and a question: why would it be important to think of God as having a body, like we do? Someone said, “Because if He’s like us, He can understand us. And if He understands us, He can help us.” Can you imagine? We then talked about the evidence that God really does understand us and help us and I concluded with a brief testimony of Heavenly Father and His Son. The master class ended but people stayed afterward, for over an hour, talking about their own thoughts and feelings and discussing some of their most meaningful experiences.

President Packer taught that when people want more than what they already have, they want to reach up, not over. Our fundamental spiritual work as parents and artists is to stand on higher ground. Now that I’m no longer a teenager, I can see that’s the most important part of what President Kimball was teaching:
Take a da Vinci or a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare and give him a total knowledge of the plan of salvation of God (which is to let him understand and have a witness of the gospel for himself) and personal revelation (which is to let him understand and receive the Holy Ghost and follow its promptings) and cleanse him through the Atonement of Christ with its purifying and empowering influence. And then what a master you have.

Clearly the responsibilities of artists and parents are different, but in fulfilling these responsibilities, what is required of us personally and spiritually is the same thing. We’re required to do our work on the Earth in such a way as to build the kingdom of God, and that kingdom is ultimately people—us, His children. In doing our creative artistic work we can help Heavenly Father’s children grow and become.

There’s an even more sacred and significant work than what we’re doing everyday here and that, of course, is the work of parents. Imagine my wonder when I read these words from President Ezra Taft Benson, delivered here at BYU: “We seek that which is praiseworthy, lovely, virtuous, and of good report; and we salute Beethoven, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo.” (All those artists that I’d admired.) “In due time, we will have more of our own giants—particularly great father-patriarchs and noble companions and mothers of men.” Great fathers; noble mothers. That is the crowning creative work of our existence.

I’m so grateful that you have the opportunity to study the arts at BYU as part of doing that work—as part of becoming a creator like our Heavenly Father. I’m so grateful for faculty members who understand their role of helping us prepare for that most important creative work. I know that we are members of the true Church of Jesus Christ. I’m grateful that it’s not easy. I’m grateful that Heavenly Father trusts us enough to give us real challenges, which can so often obscure the real work that we’re here to do, which is to be good, to love one another, and to help one another along the path back to Him.

I want to bear testimony that President Thomas S. Monson is God’s living prophet on the earth and that we’re led by a prophet, seer, and revelator. After twelve years of working with the church I can say that I have never heard any disparaging comment about artists, or the work of artists in the Church; nothing but gratitude for you. And not just for what you do, but for what you will do as you continue to develop your talents for the purpose of the real work of creation.

I express our love for our Heavenly Father and the sense of privilege we have in being able to study here. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.