

On Becoming

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My remarks this morning are based on a talk by Elder Dallin H. Oaks called "The Challenge to Become."¹ But first, one of my favorite comic strips is called "Pickles" by Brian Crane, and I'd like to share one with you.² In this comic, Grandpa Earl is explaining to his grandson that he's getting older and will someday pass on. He says:

"Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I wonder, is today the day?"

Grandma yells from the kitchen, "EARL! Did you use my nice china bowl to drain oil from the car?!!"

Grandpa turns back to his grandson and says, "Looks like today may be the day."

I have been going through cancer treatment since 2004, and unfortunately I have had to contemplate mortality more frequently than most people my age. Now, death is not something to be afraid of; like this graduation, it's just a transition that we will all make someday. Yet none of us knows exactly *when* we're going to finish our life, so all we can do is prepare for it. So today I would like to talk about life and living, and how to make your life a happy ending someday.

Thanks to the sacrifice of our savior and redeemer Jesus Christ, if we live worthily in this life, we can all return to our Heavenly Father and live with him forever. We are here on earth because "This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God,"³ and so everything we do here on earth is all in preparation for that reunion. The Savior counseled, "[W]hat manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am,"⁴ and therefore, our Heavenly Father sent us here to earth to try to become more like Him.

When we finally do return to our Heavenly Father, I think he will sit down with us to evaluate the life we lived in mortality. It's the ultimate final exam. I think that, among other things, God will ask us *if we like what we have become*.

You might ask yourself this question right now. What have you become today? You are all ten paces and one handshake away from becoming what you desire: a scientist, a mathematician, a scholar, a thinker, a dreamer, a doer. Many years ago, you chose this path, thinking it was the best direction in your life, but today, you must evaluate yourself: do you like what you have become?

You might even question whether the events today actually change you at all. It appears that I just walk across this

stage, Dean Sommerfeldt waves his magic wand, and poof! I am magically transformed into a physicist. Of course it doesn't work that way. Graduation is not an event - it's a threshold. Today we are celebrating what you have *already* become.

You all have transformed yourself slowly and deliberately over the space of the past four years. Every assignment you completed sharpened your skills. Every lecture you attended gave you wisdom, line upon line (or, in some cases, aided you in catching up on your sleep.) Every piece of equipment you broke taught you accountability. Every parking ticket you received taught you patience. Every exam you took motivated you to prepare better for the next one. And every roommate's dish you washed taught you charity. Yes, each one of us underwent a slow and deliberate transformation into who we are today. College is a process of becoming.

We can abstract this out into life itself. You are the sum total of all your experiences. Some good, some bad, some exhilarating, some painful. You become your experiences. That is why it is so important to reach for what is edifying, uplifting, and worthy of your short time on this earth. Sometimes we cannot choose what comes our way, only how we will react to it. What we choose, and how we handle that which we cannot, are the only things that can develop our character. Life is a process of becoming.

Consider your final interview: "Do you like what you have become?" For that question matters more than whether we had an easy or hard life, or whether we did good deeds or bad, or whether life was fair or not, or whether we exacted justice or mercy upon our fellowmen. It doesn't matter how high or how low you end up. In the end, the only thing that will count will be the *difference* between what you were and what you became. Did you gain character or lose it? By how much did you grow? It's who you become that matters.

Physicists often speak of the concept of potential energy. When you raise a ball up high, it holds potential energy, and when you let it fall, it turns its potential energy into kinetic energy. Now, if you drop the ball farther - off the roof, for example - it releases a lot more potential energy. In fact, you could imagine the ball has unlimited potential, depending on where you want it to go. Therefore, we can only measure this potential as the *difference* between where it started and where it ended up.

Just like the ball, you all have *unlimited* potential, and you can exercise your potential by what you choose to do with

your life. Many years ago, you chose to seek a degree at BYU, and you have accomplished that goal today. I hope that you all can appreciate the difference between what you were four years ago and what you became today.

Yet today we have only fulfilled *part* of our potential. Even though we are concluding this part of our lives, we are also embarking on the next, for “every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.”⁵ You get to decide what next to do with your life. And the choices you make will determine what you become.

This should be a familiar situation. Just a few years ago, we were all fresh out of high school with the world in front of us. Our life was a blank slate, and we all chose where to go -- how to use our potential. Some of us chose the military, service corps, or missionary service. Some chose to become scholars, dreamers, or cogs in the great machine. Some of us chose to remove our choice. And, well, some of us just tossed our cap into the air.

Today we get to make that same decision over again. Can you do better this time? Don't just toss your cap into the air today. Decide deliberately what you will do with your life, and you will be happy. I hope you will set your sights high. Evaluate yourself. Make choices. Only you can choose to what extent you will fulfill your potential, and only you can choose what you will become.

What we become in this life determines what we are in the next, for “that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.”⁶ This life is the *best* opportunity we have to change who we are, and become, hopefully, more like our Heavenly Father.

Now, our Heavenly Father desires *all* of his children to return to Him. He has given us all the tools necessary to do so: mortal experiences, scriptures, trials, and each other. All these things will help develop our character and help us grow spiritually. So use these tools if you can.

Our parents came before us, and they have been in our shoes before. Sometimes I find that the older I get, the wiser my parents become. Learn from their experiences if you can; if you don't, you'll have to earn their experience for yourself. Try to make it easier on yourself.

I also hope that as you depart BYU, you will take the opportunity to thank the people who helped put you in this room today. Remember your parents, spouses, the countless BYU faculty and staff, and all the faithful tithe payers

and benefactors that subsidized your education: *everyone* who worked to help you towards this day. None of us could have graduated without the support of so many others.

I also hope that the kindness and goodness of your professors has helped you to become such. I hope that BYU has inspired you to heed the counsel of King Benjamin: to “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.”⁷ I hope that as you go out into the world tomorrow, you will take this spirit with you, and continue to be the standard-bearers for truth and righteousness that our world so very much needs.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think that one day we'll sit and talk with our Heavenly Father, and we'll all have a chance to go back and review the lives we led in mortality. Are you living up to your potential? Did you do the best you could with what you had? Will you, someday, be proud of *who* you've become? I challenge you all to begin today to work towards that end.

To close, I would like to borrow the words of singer Natasha Bedingfield:⁸

*Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in*

*No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips*

*Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten*

I know we can all fulfill our potential, and I hope that the choices we make will help turn us into the children our Heavenly Father wants us to become. “Do not go gentle into that good night.”⁹ Go make your life a happy ending, for that's what really matters.

- 1 Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, Nov 2000, 32–34.
- 2 Brian Crane, *Pickles*, June 7, 2009.
- 3 Alma 34:32.
- 4 3 Nephi 27:27.
- 5 Green Day, *Closing Time*.
- 6 Alma 34:34, cf Alma 41:3-4.
- 7 Mosiah 5:2.
- 8 Natasha Bedingfield, *Unwritten*.
- 9 Dylan Thomas, “Do not go Gentle into that Good Night.”