

Adding Stars to Your Life's Sky

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. It is a pleasure to be with you.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote:

*If the stars should appear [only] one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown [in the heavens]!*¹

Gazing upward into the blazing splendor of the night sky, we see thousands of distant stars and even more distant galaxies. This is truly amazing—and our reaction to it is equally remarkable. Think about what we do when we stargaze. Seeing light that left some distant suns about the time Columbus sailed for the New World, we immediately start creating associations between completely unrelated spheres—stars that are tens or hundreds of light years from each other and often even farther from the earth.

Making such mental connections gives the stars familiarity and meaning, and we begin to see them not only as separate points of light but as constellations—a scorpion, a hunter named Orion, or the Big Dipper.

There are practical uses for such astronomical inkblots. Try this: show your significant

other pictures of various constellations and ask what he or she sees. If his answers are various types of weapons or characters from Middle Earth or if she replies, “I see a diamond engagement ring,” three out of four times, perhaps you should imitate the ancient mariners who navigated by the stars and make a course correction.

One example of my own astrological incompetence is that for many years I thought I was seeing all of Ursa Major, or the Big Bear, which, candidly, to me looked a lot like a big dipper. In fact, I thought the Big Dipper and the Big Bear were simply two names for the same group of seven stars—until a wise friend explained that the Big Dipper is not actually a constellation but merely an asterism, or part of a constellation. I learned that you must include another twelve stars for the Big Dipper to become the Big Bear. Now, obviously I had seen those twelve stars before, but I had failed to recognize how they connected to and expanded what I already knew.

Michael W. Middleton was an assistant athletic director and director of the BYU Cougar Club when this devotional was given on 26 May 2015.

Similarly, in the few minutes we share today, I propose to offer four points of light for your consideration, in hopes that by thinking about them together and by connecting them to stars already in your life's sky, they will provide you with additional illumination and with greater direction in your life while at BYU and beyond.

A First Star: Work Is Work

Work is work, and that's okay; it is acceptable, normal, expected, and part of the plan. Whether you are a BYU student, faculty member, or staff employee, if you don't like work, you have come to the wrong university, and likely to the wrong planet. Schoolwork, missionary work, homework, and housework—the part-time job you have now and the career vocation you may one day take on—each of these will be work in all of its four-letter glory.

A former teacher of mine weighed well over 300 pounds the first time he went skiing. New to the sport and unfamiliar with the resort, he asked for directions, and a cruel stranger sent him to a black diamond run.

Exiting the lift for the first time, he experienced a short-lived slide of sheer terror, which ended when he crashed violently, embedding himself into the deep snow at the base of a mogul. From there it was uphill both ways, and he was tangled in his skis and stuck—by his own description—like a beached whale in the snow.

He found that by gyrating his entire body, he could plow forward a few inches at a time. As difficult and tiring as this painstaking process was, much more frustrating were the scores of experienced skiers speeding by him with no concern for his plight. Finally, a female skier swooshed to a perfect stop next to him—and the several-foot-long trail in the snow that represented his efforts over the last forty-five minutes.

"Do you need any help?" she asked brightly. To him it was so painfully obvious that he did that his temper got the best of him and he

looked up at her and curtly replied, "No, lady, this is what I came here to do." Insulted, or puzzled perhaps, she skied away, leaving him to another hour of belly flopping before he was finally free to hike down the mountain carrying his rented skis.

On days when I feel stuck—when progress is slow or nonexistent; when my life's tasks seem difficult, repetitive, or fruitless; or when any help sought seems unforthcoming or insufficient for my needs—it has helped me to remember that wonderful line, "This is what I came here to do," and to recognize that life's work and life's struggles, even the most difficult and mundane aspects for our existence, are truly, at least in part, what we came here to do.

The very injunction from Heavenly Father to Adam and Eve and to us as their posterity that we would earn our bread by the sweat of our brows (see Moses 5:1) implies that not every task in this life will be easy or enjoyable. Even in all His glory, God Himself talks about His work (see Moses 1:39), and we would do well to consider and emulate His focus, His devotion, and His power of engagement.

We learn that our immortality and our eternal life are His sole vocation. Nowhere in the scriptures are we told about God's hobbies, what He does with His downtime, or how many exciting vacations He has taken. It is both inspiring and frightening to realize that a Being of perfect understanding and unlimited power is focused on and committed to our eternal growth and happiness. I testify that He works at this much harder than you or I do.

Always our example, from His earliest years Christ was ever about His Father's business. Jesus explained, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day" (John 9:4), and "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34).

We too then must work, remembering that we have been commanded to work out

our “own salvation with fear and trembling” (Mormon 9:27). Using verbs that are diverse, instructive, and powerful, the scriptures lovingly command us to learn of the Savior (see D&C 19:23), to “strip [ourselves] of all uncleanness” (Mormon 9:28), to “prepare every needful thing” (D&C 88:119), to “counsel with the Lord” (Alma 37:37), and to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32).

Not only must we improve ourselves and repent of our sins, we also must be ready and willing to work in the fields of eternity to bless our own families and the lives of others. Those of you who are preparing for missions, please notice that the letter you will receive from the prophet will say that “you are hereby called to serve” and “assigned to labor.”

All of us would do well to clearly define where and how we are currently called to labor, recognizing that our work, of necessity, should and must always be inexorably tied to the work of our Savior and our Father. We are to be men and women of action and accomplishment. It is inconsistent to expect God to guide our footsteps if we are unwilling to move our feet.

Among the Savior’s many miracles recorded in the New Testament is the healing of ten lepers who approached Him, pleading, “Master, have mercy on us” (Luke 17:13). The Savior did, sending them back to their families, their friends, and their former lives. However, an important part of this story that initially escaped my attention is how He healed them, revealed in three small but potentially life-changing words. Luke 17:14 tells us the lepers were healed not as they stood on the roadside or knelt at the Savior’s feet but rather “as they went.”

And so it will be with us. As we act, our paths will become clear, weak things can become strong (see Ether 12:27), and seeds we have planted in faith will swell and sprout and grow so that we know of their goodness (see Alma 32:33–34).

Yet all too often, in both temporal and spiritual matters, more of us talk the talk than walk the walk or, in this case, work the work. With the tasks that are your responsibility, do you sign your work with excellence, giving your best regardless of recognition or reward, or do you work just hard enough to get by?

When I was a teenager, my father was called to be the Centerville Eighth Ward’s welfare coordinator. I quickly learned what this meant: each month he was one of the volunteers, and I was another. We worked in a grain-processing plant owned by the Church in which large bags of oatmeal and other products were packaged into smaller containers for use in the bishops’ storehouses.

Working by his side, I learned a lot from my dad’s example. Although he was in his later years, he was often the one who climbed the steep ladder into the loft to buck forty-pound bags into the hopper, while younger men joked below. He was always the one insisting we finish the shift, even when the quota was already reached. Every night he was the one ensuring the facility was cleaned and secured and ready for the next use, regardless of who stayed to help. He taught me without words that exactness, effort, and sacrifice should be part of our daily labor and that an obscure, two-story oat plant was not only part of the Lord’s kingdom but also a proving ground for His servants.

A Second Star: Time Is Precious

As we work, may we each consider that our time and our strength are limited. One of the constraints of a mortal probation is that we must be selective about how and where and with whom we spend our time.

Mortality’s “arena of agency” forces us to make choices. As immortal children of an eternal Heavenly Father, it is expected that we will not only learn to discern between good and evil but also to choose wisely from among good, better, and best.²

On the wall of the east transept of the Memorial Church at Stanford University are engraved these mighty words of St. Francis de Sales:

*The best thoughts, affections and aspirations of a great soul are fixed on the infinitude of eternity. Destined as such a soul is for immortality, it finds all that is not eternal too short, all that is not infinite too small.*³

As you choose your majors, your friends, and your classes at BYU, you are shaping eternity. The Savior has told us, “Settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you” (JST, Luke 14:28), and then He instructed that all who are wise stewards should first sit down and count the cost of the things they want to accomplish (see Luke 14:28).

While life lasts, you have the unparalleled opportunity to change and to grow. It does not matter what mistakes you have made, what sins you have committed, how often you have failed, or how awfully you have fallen short of your dreams or your potential in the past. Your future days are spotless and beckoning.

Unfortunately none of us knows which day in mortality will be our last. In 1989 I was a volunteer helping at BYU New Student Orientation. That was the day I met Chris Felsted—on the last day of his life. I found Chris on the ground where he had collapsed; he would never get up again. As we realized his peril, a friend started CPR while I summoned the paramedics.

One of you seated here today may be the recipient of the BYU scholarship that bears his name, funded by the endowment his loving parents created with his college fund in memory of their amazing son who was admitted to BYU but who graduated to his heavenly home before his first day of class. The uncertainty and fragility of mortality remind us that every

day is sacred and every hour is important, for whether you perceive that your life at this moment offers much or little, your life—the only one you have—is now.

Poets and philosophers have observed that tombstones each have a date of birth and a date of death—two dates that are often only separated by a simple dash—and yet the summary of our choices is displayed and the range of our opportunities in eternity is determined by what we do with the dash. Your time at BYU, just like your time in mortality, will have a beginning and an end. Choose wisely what you do with your dash.

As you do, please remember that many of BYU’s best classes are not found in the catalog. They have no official course numbers and are taught only for those with eyes to see, often in the simple examples of the amazing people BYU has drawn here to be your friends and your faculty, your coworkers and your custodians.

For example, for me Compassion 401 was taught by a loving former BYU professor named J. Douglas Gibb. Let me share a sample of the curriculum. I didn’t know Dr. Gibb when I arrived for the first day of a communications class he taught. I only knew that the classroom was overcrowded and that before we could get started he would need to dismiss many unregistered students who were now trying to add the class.

Looking us over, he simply asked, “How many of you are registered for this class?” About two-thirds of us raised our hands. “Read chapter one,” he told us. “See you on Wednesday.” And with that, we were excused.

I went into the hallway but decided to turn back and watch. Dr. Gibb talked to every student in the room. Where there was a necessity, for graduation or other circumstances, he added someone, but mostly he just got to know the students, one by one. No one left the room without feeling his concern and receiving his help.

Almost embarrassed, he explained, “I’ve reached the point in my life where I just don’t want to offend anyone—not even my cat.”

Both then and now, Dr. Gibb is the type of man I want to be, and over the short dash of my undergraduate time at BYU I came to know him both as a friend and as a mentor. He changed my life and the lives of many others by the way he taught both inside and outside BYU’s classrooms.

A Third Star: Storms Are Certain

No matter who you are, your life will have storms; you will encounter discouragement, doubt, and defeat. The difficulties you will face will amaze and overwhelm you at times, but it is your very response to such trials that will build your character and determine your destiny.

A student in the young single adult ward in which I serve as bishop once explained, “One of the life lessons I’ve learned from playing video games is that if you find a path without any enemies, it doesn’t lead anywhere.” This may be the only actual valuable similarity between Halo and real life. Please don’t play hundreds of hours trying to prove me wrong.

Opposition in life is necessary, but setbacks and struggles need not become frantic fear or debilitating discouragement. A tall freshman girl who came to Provo from Kansas said her upbringing in the Jayhawk State had made her a good basketball player and an experienced trash-talker long before she enrolled at BYU. Arriving on campus she quickly found out when and where basketball tryouts would be and went to the Richards Building on the appointed day.

Once there, however, her fears got the best of her, and though dressed and ready to play, she never went in. For three hours she paced in the hallway, unwilling to leave but unable to risk failing at a dream so big. Many years later she learned from the coach that BYU’s basketball team that year had played all season one

player short. The coach had been looking for a tall forward who could play inside, but the right girl never stepped up.⁴

Please make your life a series of risks taken and opportunities realized. Never back down when you have a talent and know how you want to use it. This former student carried this experience with her, and throughout her life it has given her the resolve and the power to open many other doors, both for herself and for others. I share this story with her permission; her name is Sheri L. Dew, the current CEO of Deseret Book, who recently returned to campus as a convocation speaker.

All of us who plan to reach the tree of life must be prepared to encounter mists of darkness and to endure shouts of derision from a building that is both tall and spacious. Whether your intended career is business, politics, science, sports, or music, there will be plenty of negative voices and a myriad of opportunities to give up or tap out. Consider the criticism and setbacks experienced by several prominent people along with the eventual outcomes.

Early in life Albert Einstein was called “the dopey one,” and he struggled to speak.⁵ He was asked to leave one school and was refused admission to another.⁶ He worked as a patent clerk before changing humanity’s understanding of the universe and becoming the personification of genius.

Wilma Rudolph contracted both double pneumonia and polio as a child.⁷ Eventually her once-paralyzed left leg was fitted with a metal brace in hopes that she could somehow hobble her way through life. Instead, one step, one struggle, one race at a time, she endured until she became the fastest woman in the world and the winner of three Olympic gold medals.

Thomas Edison was fired from two jobs⁸ and described as “addled” by one of his teachers.⁹ Before he died he was the holder of 1,093 U.S. patents, with inventions including the

phonograph, the motion picture camera, and—after more than 1,000 unsuccessful attempts—the incandescent lightbulb.

Another who had faced great adversity, heartbreak, and failure once described his feelings with these words: “I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth.”¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln also saved the nation and changed the world through his wisdom, character, and courage.

So if you have failed a test or had your heart broken or been fired from a job or lost a loved one or an election or an intramural basketball game, welcome to the club. You are now in the company of the greatest heroes in earth’s history. What you do next will make all the difference.

We humbly worship One who was “a man of sorrows” and well “acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3), who “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6). He was ridiculed and reviled and rejected and then betrayed in the closest and most cruel manner imaginable (see Matthew 26:47–49). The scriptures say that He had “no form nor comeliness . . . that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2) and that we hid our faces from Him (see Isaiah 53:3), even as “he was wounded for our transgressions,” healed us “with his stripes” (Isaiah 53:5), and engraved us everlastingly on the palms of His hands through the miracle of the Atonement (see Isaiah 49:15–16).

A Fourth Star: Know Who and Whose You Are

Our divine origin and our eternal possibilities should determine our aspirations, our attitudes, and our actions. One of the great examples of this idea of identity determining destiny was displayed at the 1997 NCAA Cross Country Championships.

The national meet was held on a Monday, meaning that Sunday was the last day of

preparation prior to the race. As other teams scouted the course, took training runs, stretched, and strategized, the BYU women’s team attended church, hosted a fireside, and held a team testimony meeting. The Sabbath day was sacred, and they were not willing to compromise.

At their team meeting, one of the coaches read these prophetic words:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. [Isaiah 40:31]

Caisa Monahan, a five-foot three-inch sophomore from Hawaii, read the team a less-sacred text—the children’s book *The Little Engine That Could*, pointing out that the Little Engine is the only train in the story that is blue.

At the racecourse the next day the team gathered in a circle, put their arms around each other, and prayed. On the tarp where they stored their bags, one of the team members had written, “We will win because we love each other, and because we love each other, we will do for each other what is too hard to do for ourselves.”

When 184 of the nation’s best cross-country runners were called to the starting line, seven of them were wearing Cougar Blue. The starter’s gun fired. Each girl did what was needed. Each trusted in herself, in her teammates, in her coaches, and in God. When four runners were in for each team, the Cougars trailed undefeated Stanford, but there was still a chance depending on the placement of the fifth runner from each school.

In the last hundred meters of the 5K race, Caisa Monahan was inadvertently knocked to the ground. Her teammate Emily Nay sprinted past her to finish as the Cougars’ fifth runner and lock in BYU’s score. Now the championship depended solely on where Stanford’s fifth runner placed.

Courageously, Caisa got back up and beat the Stanford girl to the finish line, displacing her by one spot to give BYU the victory by a score of 100 to 102. They became the first BYU women's team to claim an NCAA title, winning by the narrowest margin of victory in national cross-country history.¹¹

President Kevin J. Worthen has invited us to climb mountains, both physical and spiritual, because he knows that part of the strength that is a mountain becomes ours as we ascend. As we follow his inspired counsel, our views become broader, we draw closer to the divine, and, like the mountains, we become steadfast and immovable.

It was on a high mountain that the prophet Moses learned who and whose he was. This mighty prophet whose teachings and ministry are seminal to the beliefs of three major world religions was powerfully taught, face to face, by God. The message was clear and repeated: You are my son; you are "in the similitude of mine Only Begotten," and "I have a work for thee" to do (Moses 1:6).

Couldn't the same be said of each one of us? I testify that it is true—that you are a son or daughter of our Heavenly Father; that you have traits, gifts, and callings that make you like the Savior; and that our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have work for you to do.

Moses would later stand against the most powerful nation on earth, feed thousands in the wilderness, part the waters of the Red Sea, and lead his people to the Promised Land—all because he knew who and whose he was.

We come to BYU and attend church and read the scriptures not only to come to know about Christ but also to come to know Him. As we serve in our callings and our communities, we are given opportunities both to be like Him and to become better acquainted with Him. As King Benjamin stated, "For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?" (Mosiah

5:13). As we come to know who and whose we are, it becomes easier to sign our work with excellence and to see our efforts not only as part of a personal test but also as part of an eternal plan.

Thought to have made some of the greatest musical instruments ever created while living in Italy in the 1700s, Antonio Stradivari was a craftsman whose name became synonymous with his work. In her piece "Stradivarius," Mary Ann Evans, who wrote under the pen name George Eliot, imagined the self-defining drive that might have allowed Stradivari to create violins that would come to define who and whose he was:

*"When any [man] holds,
Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine,
He will be glad that Stradivari lived,
Made violins, and made them . . . the best.
The masters only know whose work is good:
[And] they will chose mine, [for] while God gives
them skill
I give them instruments to play upon,
God choosing me to help Him."*

...
*"[For even God Himself] could not make
Antonio Stradivari's violins
Without Antonio."¹²*

Individually and collectively our destiny lies in the ability to connect the points of light in our lives so that we can see the broad patterns of eternity. As we work hard, choose wisely, overcome opposition, and exercise faith in the Atonement and the plan of salvation, we will recognize that our destiny is not merely to gaze into the night sky but to create and organize the stars and to dwell eternally in the heavens.

The Savior Himself taught, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

May we truly come to know Them as we work and study and serve at BYU and beyond.

May we live each day of life with gratitude, deciding what we will do with our short dash of mortality. May we weather the winds and survive life's inevitable storms with courage and perspective that is fueled by knowing with ever more certainty both who and whose we are. And may we continue to connect points of light in our lives, recognizing that they illuminate the pathway home.

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), section 1.
2. See Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign*, November 2007.
3. St. Francis de Sales, maxim no. 245; see *Maxims and Counsels of St. Francis de Sales for Every Day of the Year*, trans. Ella McMahon, 2nd ed. (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1884), 114.
4. See Sheri L. Dew, *No One Can Take Your Place* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 196–98.
5. Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 8.
6. See Banesh Hoffmann with Helen Dukas, *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 25, 27.
7. See Ruth Ashby and Deborah Gore Ohrn, eds., *Herstory: Women Who Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 1995), 277–79.
8. See Francis Arthur Jones, *Thomas Alva Edison: Sixty Years of an Inventor's Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 15–28, 43–44; and Rudolph Valier Alvarado, *The Life and Work of Thomas Edison* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2002), 9–10, 20–21.
9. Jones, *Sixty Years*, 7; also Alvarado, *The Life and Work*, 7.
10. Letter from Abraham Lincoln to John T. Stuart, 23 January 1841; in John G. Nicolay, *A Short Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Century Company, 1921), 64.
11. See Michael W. Middleton, "Women's Cross Country Wins NCAA Championship," *Brigham Young Magazine*, spring 1998, 6–7.
12. George Eliot, "Stradivarius" (1873), in *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), 228, 231.

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