

**2024 BYU Commencement**  
**“Narrating Our Lives”**  
**April 25, 2024**

**by Macy West**

Good morning, President and Sister Reese, Elder and Sister Gong, Dr. and Mrs. Karad, distinguished faculty, university administration, and honored guests. And last but certainly not least, good morning to my fellow graduates of the Brigham Young University Class of 2024! Your well-earned place here today is the culmination of *years* of hard work. Congratulations!

I’d like to tell you a quick story—it’s really a story about stories. The summer after my freshman year, I was thrilled to receive an offer for an on-campus job I had applied for. On my first day, I immediately noted that the other employees were not only older, but unlike me, they had extensive, relevant work experience. I paid it no mind. I put my head down and got to work. I loved my job and I like to think I performed well.

Several months into the job, I inadvertently discovered that there was more to the story. I learned that I had received the job offer by accident. Yes, that’s right; they never meant to hire me in the first place! There had been a mix-up with names in the interview process and they emailed me the job offer by mistake. But because I accepted the offer so quickly and because they were too kind to say anything about it, they took a chance on me.

Mind you, I *was* unqualified for this job. But I told myself that they must have seen something in me. So I remained confident and did the work as best I could. In reality, I’m not sure that they *did* see anything in me, and I had every reason to feel inadequate. But that’s not the *story* I told myself. By virtue of my unfounded confidence, I actually modified my behavior to meet the expectations of the role. Now, I don’t tell this story to make myself sound especially skilled. I’m not, and I assure you I was very undeserving of the job. I tell it to emphasize how much the *narrative* we ascribe to our lives matters.

A graduation is an event that prompts reflection in two directions: we look back on the past that has led us to this moment, and we also contemplate our futures. The ability to reflect on our lives, to picture ourselves in different places and at different times, is something that has long fascinated philosophers. Martin Heidegger, a 20th-century German philosopher, argued that humans are the only beings for which *being* itself is an issue. That is, we don’t just live; we *think* about living and we worry whether we are doing this whole “life” thing right. And *how* do we think about life and make sense of it? As some have observed, spiders weave webs, beavers build dams, and humans . . . we *tell stories*.<sup>1</sup>

As we look back on our time at BYU, I’m confident that many of our stories share some common elements: desperately searching for parking at 8:55 a.m. for a 9:00 a.m. class and wondering if it’s worth the risk to park in the 15-minute spot, frantically reviewing a study guide in the foyer of the testing center, or navigating around the ever-present campus construction

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Daniel Dennet (1992) writes “Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories” (“The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity” in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*).

projects. We also each have the *unique* ways in which we have left our marks on this campus. I'm reminded of the mac & cheese I spilled on one of the nice chairs in the JFSB, which, despite my best efforts to clean, is still visible to this day.

I'm also confident that our BYU stories share features that remind us how privileged we've been to attend an institution that values Christlike discipleship alongside scholarly pursuits: forums and devotionals that invite us to ponder the nuances of the gospel and ask thoughtful questions, classes where we have undergone periods of intensive learning motivated by the knowledge that enlarging our intellects is of eternal importance, and a lifelong community with which we can take part in the quest for perfection and eternal life. My sincere belief is that, for each of us, it is a story of growth, accomplishment, and overcoming adversity. And my sincere *hope* is that it is also one of belonging, no matter how small or obscure your community.

Now, when I use the word "stories," you might be tempted to think of a "story" in the sense of something fictional or made up, or a kind of self-serving attempt at revisionist history. To the contrary, the stories we tell ourselves about our lives are much more profound than that: our stories are *who we are*; they are the only lens through which we can perceive our reality, and through them we experience our memories.

The interesting part of your story is that you are not only the protagonist, but you are also the narrator. As we've all seen, people observing the same events will often have very different interpretations of those events. This evidences that what matters is not just what happens *to us*, but also the narrative we give to those events. I once heard it said that we live in stories, not in years. So while we might be tempted to think that our BYU experience was merely something that just happened *to us*, *we* actually have some power to dictate the meaning and significance of it.

The way we narrate the stories of our lives is tremendously important because those stories determine not only how we perceive the past, but because they also shape our futures. Here's one small example: researchers have found that people who answer affirmatively when asked to predict whether they will vote are actually more likely to vote *by virtue* of their prediction.<sup>2</sup> The subjects of the study appeared to live up to the predictions they were asked to make. As contemporary philosopher David Velleman notes about this research, "many who wouldn't otherwise have voted, it seems, end up voting because of having predicted they would, *thus conforming their lives to their stories*."<sup>3</sup> As our own narrators, we seem to have a special sort of "predictive ability" in shaping our futures.

The freedom that comes with this predictive ability can certainly be daunting. After all, isn't it just as easy to tell ourselves a harmful story as it is to tell an uplifting one? What if we, as I have more than once, look back on our story only to realize we've created a protagonist that we're not proud of? Here's the best part: our narratives are never fixed. Through our agency and the gift of repentance, God has put the pen in our hands to start over with a clean page when we aren't happy with what we've written. Our agency is our power of authorship.

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<sup>2</sup> Greenwald, A. G., Carnot, C. G., Beach, R., & Young, B. (1987). "Increasing Voting Behavior by Asking People if They Expect to Vote." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72(2), 315–318.

<sup>3</sup> Velleman, David (2005). "The Self as Narrator." *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, 56-76.

And we are not without guidance on what kind of stories we ought to be writing. Sister Camille Johnson, Primary General President, put aptly: “Write a story in which the path you are on is straight, on a course leading you back to your heavenly home to live in the presence of God. Let the adversity and affliction that are part of every good story be a means by which you draw closer to, and become more like, Jesus Christ. Tell a story in which you recognize the heavens are open.”<sup>4</sup>

In his inaugural address to the BYU community last September, President Reese taught that BYU is still in the process of becoming what it is meant to be.<sup>5</sup> I take comfort in President Reese’s vision. If BYU, an institution that traces its origins back some 150 years, is still “becoming,” then of course, so is each of us. Through our agency, we partner with God in his ongoing act of creation. As we narrate each new aspect of our lives, we are continually engaged in our own process of becoming.

No matter what kind of degree you are receiving today, I invite you to recall your miraculous power of narrative self-constitution. The truth is that we are already expert storytellers, whether we realize it or not. We’ve been doing it our whole lives. And now, at the conclusion of the “enter to learn” phase of our BYU experience and the beginning of our “go forth to serve” phase, the responsibility is ours to write a story that we are proud of. And I trust that your story will also involve receiving and accepting job offers that are, in fact, intended for *you*, and for which you actually *are* qualified.

BYU class of 2024, congratulations on the completion of this chapter in your narrative. May it carry you forward joyfully and faithfully. Thank you!

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<sup>4</sup> Camille Johnson, “Invite Christ to Author Your Story,” General Conference address, October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Shane Reese, “Becoming BYU,” Inaugural address, September 2023.