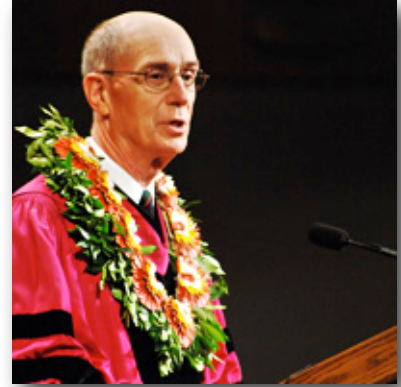


# *Learning Forever*

Commencement Address at BYU-Hawaii

December 13, 2008

PRESIDENT HENRY B. EYRING



**P**resident Wheelwright, Commissioner Johnson, the dignitaries assembled, graduates, their families, faculty, and others gathered to honor the graduates: Aloha.

My memories of graduation days on this campus are of flowers piled high, warm smiles, cameras everywhere, and on one occasion a dash through a brief opening of the heavens which I took to be a friendly tribute to the graduates. We celebrate not the end of an education but a great step forward in an eternal learning journey.

Speakers for generations and across the world on such occasions have pointed out that this marks a shift in the setting in which learning will immediately recommence. That may sound like bad news to those who may be tired of tests, papers, examinations, and labs. But it is in fact good news. My intent today is to help you feel like celebrating both the end of this part of your learning and the commencement of the next.

Some of you graduates may have decided that you don't need more education or that you can't afford it or that you have more important things to pursue than more school. But whatever you choose, you will go on learning as long as you live and are conscious. So, the question is not whether or not you are about to commence another stage of learning. Your choice is simply how to get the most benefit from the inevitable. You will go on learning, or unlearning. Your choice is how to make the best of it.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. When I graduated with a bachelor's degree I passed comprehensive exams. The physics exam had a lot in it about vacuum tubes but made no mention of transistors because they had not been invented. Exams in those days could not mention the global economy because no one saw it coming. The biology texts mentioned genes and chromosomes but not DNA. The history exams did not even hint at the economic rise of China or the emergence of many of the countries which are in the daily news, or the disappearance of others.

Now I didn't waste my time learning about transistors, or genes, or China as we knew it in the 1950's. Some of the facts I have forgotten. Other things I learned now seem obsolete. But the way I learned them stood me in good stead when the flood of change and unfamiliar events hit me.

In school there were teachers, and degree programs, and classrooms, assignments, and exams. You will not always have those tools to help you learn, but you can choose even when they are missing to create great times for your learning. You know that must be true because of the promises God has made to you. He has told you that our spirits are eternal. You will learn from all your experiences and you can choose learning that will last. You remember the promise:

“Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

“And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.”

This opportunity to go on learning forever is not a choice; it is in God’s design for us. But there are important choices we can and must make to make the most of our opportunity. I will speak today of three on which much depends.

First, we can choose our teachers. Second, we can choose what we will try to learn. And, third, we are free to decide how hard we will work in our eternal education.

You may well object that choosing your teachers will not be easy. Suppose you go to work right after graduation as I did. I didn’t really have much choice about that or where I would work. I was commissioned an officer in the United States Air Force and ordered to Albuquerque, New Mexico, before the graduation ceremony. So, I commenced my next stage of learning without a commencement.

I won’t give you the details of the first months of learning on that first job. It all seemed to be accidental and outside any control of mine. I started in a training program. A senior officer in the headquarters on the base had a heart attack. Out of hundreds of people in the training program they selected my name, I know not how, to take the vacant headquarters job on a temporary basis. A green lieutenant, I was surrounded by Generals, Admirals, Colonels, and Captains.

Because of their rank and my inexperience, they all were ready to become my teachers, all day, every day, because if I failed they would fail.

Now, they were bosses, not friendly teachers. But among them were one or two I knew I wanted to have as my mentors. Now, I had learned as you have that teachers sometimes see in a student someone who seems to have the capacity, the humility, and the determination to learn. So they give that student careful attention.

Colonel Marlow and then Colonel Brumley chose to be my mentors, my teachers, my champions. I stayed in that temporary job for two years, my full tour in the Air Force. I received assignments and recognition completely beyond my capacity or what I deserved. It was the fruit of the labors of those mentors to make something of a young man. You can’t choose your teachers but you can work to be chosen as the student of great mentors.

As I look back on the mentors who have helped me the most, I can see great variety in their personalities and their skills. But there is one thing they had in common. They were good people...really good people. Few of them expressed faith in God. But all of them had enough of the light of Christ shining down on them that they met the criteria, which the Lord set for you to recognize the mentors and the teachers who could bless your learning best:

“Wherefore, take heed, my beloved brethren, that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil.

“For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night.

“For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to

persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

“But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him.

“And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge ye shall also be judged.

“Wherefore, I beseech of you, brethren, that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ.”

You will surely pursue learning in places where the teachers seem to have no faith in God nor even believe that He exists. I am not sure that Colonel Marlow or Brumley, or General Doriot, or Professor Christensen had faith. But they all seemed to have a deep and true sense of right and wrong. You can find teachers in every setting whose influence draws you toward keeping the commandments of God. And you can discern those whose influence would draw you away from the light of Christ, the spirit of truth, and toward darkness and sadness. It may not be obvious to you at first. Satan teaches his servants to be imposters.

In a long lifetime in many settings, I tried to invite people to choose to teach me. Some are still in memory my teachers of light. In fact I am still shaped and taught by some of them although they are gone physically from life. Others, I soon dropped after I came to know their lives and felt their influence. You can choose who you will try to win as your teachers. And you must choose wisely. It makes all the difference.

There is another choice for you to make in your adventure of endless learning. It is this: Of the many things I might try to learn, what will be the best? The range of possible things to learn is endless. But your energy, your time, and your opportunities are limited.

Let's consider an example. Suppose, for instance, you are blessed to find a job in a business. In even the simplest business there are a myriad of things you could try to learn. I will give you an example where I wish I had thought through early and more carefully what I wanted to learn.

I was one of the founders of a business which made equipment called “peripherals” for computers. The computers we served were called in those days, “mid range.” The peripherals were things like printers and external storage devices. The company prospered wonderfully for a time. And then the type of computer for which our equipment was intended disappeared with the invention of a smaller class of computers. The business struggled and then failed. But the experience was an important and valuable part of my eternal education.

The physical principles upon which we designed those computer peripherals were true. I could have given attention to becoming a master of the technology. But the peripherals themselves were driven out by discoveries of equipment that was more useful. I got from that a burning interest in learning to identify principles which would be true in all times and in all conditions. And I still am trying to learn how to distinguish what makes an object or a service or an organization useful in satisfying the real and lasting needs of people. That has guided me in

designing the education, which is still underway in my life. It can guide you as you design the curriculum for your lifetime education.

That is true whether you become a teacher, as I did, or a computer designer, a parent, or a company president, or any or all of those over a lifetime. Times will change and so will you and your life. But in every situation you can try to learn to recognize principles, which will be true whatever the situation. And you can try to discover what brings lasting value to people. I frequently give myself an exam to see whether I am improving in my search to recognize lasting principles and enduring values in the lives of the people I try to serve.

Let me give an example from my recent experience. President Monson has asked me to call new mission presidents. In this season of the year I have been calling three, four and sometimes five a week. In the process I have been learning more about a principle and a value that will last.

The principle is to get the facts before you act. That is why I spend as much time as it takes before I issue the call to find out all I can about the man and his wife that will determine whether or not they should leave home, family, and their work at this time for three years. Many other people have already tried to do that pre-assessment. But the valuable principle I have learned in the school of experience is to dig a little deeper to be sure of the facts.

The lasting value I have had confirmed in these calls is trust. They need to trust that the call is from the Lord. Their missionaries will need to trust that the president and his wife are inspired. The members where they will serve will need to trust the missionaries with the opportunity to teach their friends. The mission president they are replacing next July will need to teach the missionaries that they can trust the unknown arriving president. I take those values into account both in the way I make the call and the way I answer their sometimes-tearful questions about what it will take for them to be successful.

I learn more about the principle of getting the facts in every call. And I will learn even more about the value of trust when I meet those new mission presidents after they have been learning in the field for a few months or years. And I will be looking for more principles that work and more universal values that last. That will be part of my learning forever.

Now, the third choice you will make about your next step in education is how hard you will work at it. I can, by looking into your faces and the faces of my many students over years, see the challenge. I know the look that says, "How about taking a rest break? I've had enough for now."

We all need a sense of celebration and release from time to time. All work and no play will make Jack, or Jill, a dull boy or a dull girl. And yet the temptation to take a rest from learning will attack you again and again and it will be nearly overwhelming for some of you.

I give you two suggestions for staying motivated in your pursuit of eternal learning: One is fear. And the other is love. You may already be feeling about the right amount of fear. Job losses are massive and in every day's headlines. The economic times we are going through may be extended and will be repeated. There will be times of prosperity, in the world around you and in your own lives. But the cycles are sure. Jobs will disappear, industries will falter, and governments will topple. You will face times when if you do not learn new skills and understand new ideas you will fail to be able to sustain yourselves and those who depend upon you.

Some people adapt and survive well in the worst of times. They are the people who have kept learning. They are the ones who read, and study, and listen, and think consistently and with

determination sure that they need to keep preparing for greater challenges ahead. They are the ones who, with the help of God, have found true principles they can apply in a new job and a new world. They are the ones who can see how to create something of compelling value even in the times of scarcity and in times of over-riding fear. If you are prepared by never having stopped learning in the light of Christ you need not fear.

The other encouragement I can give you to work hard at your life-long learning is to remind you that you have loved learning. At least you have loved some of it. There was at least one book, at least one moment listening to a teacher, at least one paper you wrote, at least one problem set you finished, at least one project completed, when you felt a glow of satisfaction and enjoyment. That glow was love. You have felt the love of learning.

So, let me make a suggestion or two to help you work hard over a lifetime at learning. One is not to sell all your books just to avoid the baggage surcharge as you travel home. Keep the ones you read all the way through and studied more than once. They may become outdated in time. But just having them with you may remind you and draw you to reading new books and learning new ideas by remembering how learning was once a joy and so can be again.

Another suggestion is to be a teacher of what you are learning. Parents have that opportunity. There is nothing quite like having your child whom you love ask you for help on elementary school math problems which you can't understand. Your love for them will send you to the Internet for some tutorial on how to teach math.

The teacher always seems to learn more than the student they love. By choosing to help others learn, in the home or in a graduate program, or on the job you will find yourself motivated to work hard at your own learning. You will work harder if you do it for others rather than only for self-improvement. The drive for self-improvement usually fades soon after you buy that expensive software to learn a language. But a missionary companion who needs your help or a child starting language study will keep the fire to learn burning brightly.

Now, I need to close with thanks for what you graduates have done for this place and this university. Many of you have blessed your fellow students. You have taught them and you encouraged them. You have set an example of humility in wanting to learn and of determination in the effort to learn. Your fellow students may not have thanked you yet. But they will be forever grateful. May I add to the thanks you have already expressed to those who helped you, teachers, parents, and friends.

And since it is harder for the faculty to thank each of you students, I will try to do it for them. Because they were blessed to have you as students they were stretched and lifted. They spent hours because of your questions, trying to understand and so explain things they thought they already knew well enough. One of the last times I visited with my father he was near death in a hospital. He was a world famous scientist. He had used the most complicated mathematics to do his work.

And yet he motioned me closer to his bed and said, "Hal, I want to show you this. I've found a new way to introduce a student to calculus. It's so simple. I think you will love it." He knew it would have to be simple for me to understand it.

But it was his love for students like me that kept him trying to learn even as life was closing down. I don't know what the classes are like in the world to come. But because of students like you my guess is that your teachers will be in those classes and perhaps waving a

hand to catch the teacher's eye to explain a new way they have found to teach students just like you.

I leave you my love and my blessing. I love you for what you have done for this great university while you were here. And I love you for letting me try to be your teacher for a few minutes. Because of you I moved along in my learning. Thank you.

And I leave you my blessing that you will be optimistic and determined as you try to learn in the light of the Master Teacher, to learn from His disciples, to learn what He would have you learn, and to be endlessly diligent.

I bear you my witness that you are children of God and that He loves you. He sent His beloved Son to be born in the manger in Bethlehem. The Savior taught truth in His ministry and through living prophets and still teaches us through the Spirit. You have been blessed to study in this place and you will carry with you forever what you have learned here and used to teach and serve others.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.