

An Eternal Perspective

KEVIN J WORTHEN

Graduation is a time for celebration. It is also a time for calibration. We therefore look backward and forward. We recognize and applaud the past accomplishments of the nearly 6,000 of you who will be awarded degrees this day. At the same time, we encourage you to consider the future and where you are headed.

As you focus on both the things that have happened in the past and the choices you face in the future, it is important that you consider both from an eternal perspective and that you try to fit isolated events and decisions in your life into a broader, larger picture.

The importance of doing so is suggested by a story from the book *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White. The book is about the legendary King Arthur of England. The first part of the book focuses on the education Arthur received as a young boy and, especially, the training he received from Merlin, the magician who helped prepare Arthur for his future kingship.

Merlin used a variety of means to teach these lessons to Arthur. On one occasion, he told Arthur the story of Elijah and the rabbi:

This rabbi . . . went on a journey with the prophet Elijah. They walked all day, and at nightfall they came to the humble cottage of a poor man, whose only treasure was a cow. The poor man ran out of his cottage, and his wife ran too, to welcome the strangers for the night and to offer them all the simple hospitality which they were able to give in straitened circumstances. Elijah and the Rabbi were entertained with plenty of the cow's milk, sustained by home-made bread and butter, and they were put to sleep in the best bed while their kindly hosts lay down before the kitchen fire. But in the morning the poor man's cow was dead. . . .

They walked all the next day, and came that evening to the house of a very wealthy merchant, whose hospitality they craved. The merchant was cold and proud and rich, and all that he would do for the prophet and his companion was to lodge them in a cowshed and feed them on bread and water. In the morning, however, Elijah thanked him very much for what he had done, and sent for

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this commencement address was given on 21 April 2016.

a mason to repair one of his walls, which happened to be falling down, as a return for his kindness.

The Rabbi . . . , unable to keep silence any longer, begged the holy man to explain the meaning of his dealings with human beings.

"In regard to the poor man who received us so hospitably," replied the prophet, "it was decreed that his wife was to die that night, but in reward for his goodness God took the cow instead of the wife. I repaired the wall of the rich miser because a chest of gold was concealed near the place, and if the miser had repaired the wall himself he would have discovered the treasure. Say not therefore to the Lord: What doest thou? But say in thy heart: Must not the Lord of all the earth do right?"¹

The point of the story is twofold: First, we can best judge things that have happened in our lives if we view them from God's perspective, from an eternal viewpoint. When we have soul-stretching experiences, we should consider them in light of God's plan for us, with the assurance that even though we don't fully understand things when they happen, God can make "all things work together for [our] good" if we love Him.² That should reassure us about both our past and our present. The more we understand His perspective and His plan for us, the more we realize that He is more mindful of us than we may be aware.

Second, understanding the bigger picture can help us make better choices for our future. Looking beyond the immediate impact of our choices to the eternal perspective will help us have greater joy and satisfaction in life.

Let me give you an example that may be particularly relevant to you graduates at this point in your life. There are a variety of paths you may pursue in the immediate future, ranging from graduate school to full-time parenting. But most of you will, at one point in your life, spend many of your waking hours at work. There are a wide variety of occupations

that will be available to you for that phase of your life. You may be tempted to make a decision about which job you take based mainly on the income and prestige it will generate. This has some allure, but I urge you to consider a more eternal perspective in choosing what kind of work you do, and, even more important, I urge you to consider an eternal perspective in choosing *how* you do whatever work you choose.

Professor Martin E. P. Seligman has noted that some scholars have identified "three kinds of 'work orientation,'" or three ways of looking at your work: as "a job, a career, and a calling."³ He explained that the differences among the three depend both on how well your work matches up with your skills and, more important, how you view the endeavor. A job, he observed, is something

you do . . . for the paycheck at the end of the week. You do not seek other rewards from it. It is just a means to another end (like leisure, or supporting your family), and when the wage stops, you quit.⁴

A career, however,

entails a deeper personal involvement in work. You mark your achievements through money, but also through advancement. Each promotion brings you higher prestige and more power.⁵

Thus you will have more success and more enjoyment if you view your work as a career instead of just as a job. But even that orientation has its limits. Seligman suggested:

When the promotions stop—when you "top out"—alienation starts, and you begin to look elsewhere for . . . meaning.⁶

The highest level of orientation, according to scholars, is what Seligman referred to as a calling or a vocation, which

*is a passionate commitment to work for its own sake. Individuals with a calling see their work as contributing to the greater good, to something larger than they are. . . . The work is fulfilling in its own right, without regard for money or for advancement. When the money stops and the promotions end, the work goes on.*⁷

The work orientation you have depends more on how you view what you are doing than on *what* you are doing. As Amy Wrzesniewski put it:

*A physician who views the work as a job and is simply interested in making a good income does not have a calling, whereas a garbage collector who sees the work as making the world a cleaner, healthier place could have a calling.*⁸

Make your work, whatever it may be, a calling or a vocation—not just a job.

Finally, remember that as important as it is to view your work from an eternal perspective, it is even more important to understand that in the long run, your most important work is as a family member—as a wife and mother, husband and father, daughter and sister, son and brother.

I recently heard a remarkably accomplished man tell about how decades after it had occurred, his children remembered very distinctly that he had missed an event important to them because he had to attend to some business matter. He noted that while his children could remember very well exactly what event he had missed, he had long since forgotten what seemingly more important business matter he had chosen to attend instead.

President Harold B. Lee repeatedly taught:

“The most important . . . work you will ever do will be within the walls of your own homes.”
We must never forget that.⁹

As we celebrate your past accomplishments and look forward to your future, I urge you to view things from an eternal perspective—in the light of God’s great plan of salvation. As you do so, your past, present, and future will be more meaningful, more fruitful, and more joyful. May it be so is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. T. H. White, in chapter 9 of *The Once and Future King* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1958), 85.

2. Romans 8:28.

3. Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 168.

4. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 168.

5. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 168.

6. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 168.

7. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 168.

8. Amy Wrzesniewski, Paul Rozin, and Gwen Bennett, “Working, Playing and Eating: Making the Most of Most Moments,” in Corey L. M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt, *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well Lived* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), 189; quoted in Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 168.

9. Harold B. Lee, “Be Loyal to the Royal Within You,” BYU devotional address, 11 September 1973, quoting his own words; emphasis in original.