

On Character, Identity, and Community

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All of you here today came to B.Y.U. for different reasons. Perhaps the intersection of some of those reasons with the reasons of those around you is a non-empty set, but you wouldn't need to do very much convincing to prove to me that they exist. Each of us has had a unique experience here at B.Y.U., and even if you and your friend have taken as many as 25 classes together, you still understand that, deep down, no two experiences are the same.

I'm probably supposed to give you some sage advice about moving on to live life in the quote-unquote "real world", but honestly, I'd rather listen to what you have to say. I learned at a very young age that, to use the words of Dale Carnegie, "People who talk only of themselves think only of themselves. And those people who think only of themselves are hopelessly uneducated" [1]. Unfortunately for me, my situation requires me to stand here and appear uneducated while I talk about something inspirational or funny, and if I'm lucky that intersection will also prove non-empty.

Obviously, this is not the end. Each of you is headed off to somewhere else, but without a doubt you're going to be meeting new people and engaging in new experiences. So, I pose this question to you: Who are you in the eyes of those you meet? When you meet someone new, exchanges are made and impressions are left. Do you hope that the way they see you is the way that you see yourself? Or will you try to create a particular impression in their mind, of an image representing the person whom you want to be?

Or what if I posed the question a little differently: Are we what others claim we are? Well, that depends. As Vi Hart put it, "You have no power over others that they don't give you, and others have no power over you that you don't give them" [2]. According to Dr. Micheal Wesch, we live in the Age of Whatever—a time where information is so prevalent that we are becoming desensitized to the extraordinary. A time when true curiosity, wonder, and love seem to be dismissed in the race to acquire information. Dr. Wesch claims that it's within this distracted world that we can lose our true selves [3].

I come from a smaller town in Canada, and I feel that my B.Y.U. experience has mostly been me trying to recreate my inner 'self'. Away from home and amongst strangers, I brought with me an internal character, but finding that although my personal view of my 'self' was high and good (an initially arrogant assumption, I know), coming to a campus and community of people who didn't know me caused me to feel differently and unsure about my own 'self'. I believed the character defining my 'self' existed exclusively inside me. I now understand that much of our character is found in how much we turn outwards and away from ourselves and help develop the community of people around us—to become connected

with them, in person, and in friendship through true, mutual understanding.

What about other people impresses you the most? Think about the people whom you most admire. I believe that if you look closely enough you will find the common quality amongst great individuals is how they sincerely build up those around them. The quality of their character is seen in their interactions with others. Elder Richard G. Scott said, “Righteous character is more valuable than any material object you own, any knowledge you have gained through study, or any goals you have attained no matter how well lauded by mankind. . . The bedrock of character is integrity. . . It is nobility of character, that fabric of inner strength and conviction woven from countless righteous decisions, that gives life its direction” [4].

Identity, a subset of character, is important to people, in that every way we identify ourselves, each of us holds to a sense of belonging. Groups of people with similar beliefs or qualities, individuals who feel connected to each other, or common goals that unite us across our differences, all of us claim as some part of our character, identity. Some people strive for uniqueness and seek to stand out against the masses, while others strive for conformity, acceptance, and blending in. Different individuals and cultures, throughout the world, value both sides of these behaviors differently, creating an exciting and diversified planet.

In my limited experience with people from countries around the world, I have noticed that because differences exist we often struggle to see ourselves from others’ perspectives. Perhaps because it is so difficult to remember to look differently at ourselves when our actions rub someone else the wrong way. Perhaps we stand so long in the same position that we forget how many different perspectives can be had. Do we notice others going out of their way to accommodate us during our moments of weakness or fault? Or are we so set on identifying with our group that we actually believe we have the whole picture? In our blindness, do we neglect to see the myriad of similarities that exist across interest, culture, nationality, and borders? When we judge others, does our judgement say more about those we judge or more about ourselves?

Our character and identity are not solely defined by how we view ourselves, but rather the way in which we interact with others. And the development of our character is not found in the acquisition of information, but rather in the pursuit of living a Christ-centered life. Growing to understand that wonder (and love) are not merely ‘experiences’, but skills or attributes that can be developed and improved upon has also helped me become more grateful for things and more inquisitive about why things are the way they are. Let curiosity be your motivation. If you ask life “How many points is this worth?” or “Will this be on the test?” you’re going to return empty handed. As I’m sure you’ve learned by now, it is better to choose the harder right over the easier wrong.

We’re made of our hardest days and our longest nights. We’re the sum of our experiences, yet we’re so much more than that. We are what we make ourselves to be, but even more, we are what we make our communities to be. Listen to others, be humble, and above all, be sincere.

References

- [1] D. Carnegie, *How to win friends & influence people*. Simon and Schuster, 1936.
- [2] V. Hart, “Vi hart’s guide to comments,” 01 2013. Available at <https://youtu.be/7IJyRAUxtAQ>.
- [3] M. Wesch, “The end of wonder in the age of whatever,” 01 2013. Available at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/michael-wesch/end-wonder-age-whatever/>.
- [4] R. G. Scott, “The transforming power of faith and character,” *Ensign*, 10 2010. Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/10/the-transforming-power-of-faith-and-character?lang=eng>.