



“We Are Voyagers”: 2017 Faculty Conference Keynote Address

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In the film *Moana*—which, if you have young kids, you have probably watched ad nauseum this summer—the eponymous heroine is a young woman preparing to someday lead her people. *Moana* and her village are islanders, and the island provides everything they need to sustain and fulfil their lives: fish, coconuts, water, and culture. There is one rule on the island that *Moana*’s father underscores repeatedly: “No one goes beyond the reef,” or, in other words, don’t swim or fish too far from shore, because the waters are dangerous, unfamiliar, and risky beyond the reef.

However, a problem occurs as a consequence of the rule: because the islanders stay still and fish the same waters over and over, the fish supply dwindled. The coconut trees become diseased and the island’s soil is compromised.

As educators, I think we can see a metaphor here. When we are complacent with our teaching methods and tediously repeat course content semester after semester, our classes can begin to feel like overfished waters, offering ever diminishing returns. We can all remember the enthusiasm and anxiety of being a brand new professor, eagerly skimming through multiple textbooks before

carefully making your selections, talking with other teachers constantly about what they do in their classes and brainstorming how you can be inspired in your own lesson plans and assignments. But once you have taught a class, say, three times a semester, three semesters a year, for three years, complacency and routine can set in, our once-improvised jokes have grown stale, and our once-thoughtful and - current assessments have grown outdated. Your waters get overfished.

However, there is hope. *Moana*’s grandmother turns *Moana*’s heart toward her ancestors with information about her heritage she had never before accessed. Uncovering a secret cave on the island, *Moana* sees a hidden harbor filled with ships. She excitedly returns to her grandmother and says, “We were voyagers? We were voyagers! Why did we stop?”

Her question, why did we stop? refers to her father’s sternest directive: “Why did we stop sailing beyond the reef?”

If you are in this room today, it is because you are a voyager interested in sailing beyond the typical parameters of your classroom activities and methodology. It is the same when we attend professional conferences in our field

and participate in scholarly conversations by reading and publishing articles and books—we are sailing beyond the reef to bring back the best and most current content for our classrooms. At our fall faculty conference, we are sailing beyond the reef to be inspired to try new teaching methods and instructional tools to keep our classes from becoming merely mechanical, taught by reflex instead of by continued innovation and engagement.

Educators are Voyagers

But perhaps many of you are also like me, and have a proclivity for relying a bit too lazily on the routine and the already-tried. Perhaps some of you, like me, have grown overly confident in our instructional habits, assessments, and discussion techniques. Fortunately for us, our ancestors were voyagers, too, and, like Moana, we can look to our Mormon pioneer past to innovate our current classrooms.

For this presentation, I will draw on the experiences of Mormon pioneer Serena Torjusdatter Evensen Gardner, my great-great-great grandmother Margaret's sister wife, my great-great-great grandfather's 7th (of 11) plural wives. What I have learned about Serena is that she, like our religion's other pioneer forebears, exemplified what it means to be a voyager: she was curious, she was a risk-taker, and she was faithful.

1. Voyagers are Curious

Serena was a precocious and adventurous child who grew up in Risør, Norway, a wild land surrounded by lakes and hills, fjords and fens. She used to follow the traveling schoolteacher from house to house so long as he was within walking distance; she thirsted for education and intellectual challenges. When she wasn't devouring books or working out equations on her slate, Serena could be found at the very top of a tall pine tree near her home, watching ships depart for the North Sea from the harbor. "I wish I were in America," she would sing hopefully, until

chastised by her mother, who said, "Hush child, there is a witch in your words." She married Henrik Evensen when she was 18 years old, and they had five children together. Hungry for truth and modern revelation, Henrik and Serena were some of the first Norwegians to be baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A week before the family intended to leave Norway to join the Saints in America, Henrik was lost at sea.

Newly widowed and accused by her family of insanity for joining an unpopular and strange religious sect, Serena sold her possessions and prepared to leave for America with her surviving four children. In the dead of winter, 1854, Serena and her children trudged through deep snow to board the boat that would take the family to Copenhagen, their first stop on a long voyage to America. The last image Serena had of her beloved Norway was the silhouette of her mother against six feet of cold white snow, weeping, wringing her hands, and waving goodbye. Serena was about to sail "beyond the reef" because she hungered for further light and knowledge.

In Henry B. Eyring's 2005 BYU–Idaho devotional, he testified about his own strivings as an educator to journey "beyond the reef": "The faculty of this university face the daunting reality that here there will be perpetual education innovation. What we have gone through

was not only a transition from two to four years. It was a transformation into another kind of university, where education will be constantly getting better.

"I've taught in such a place. In my ten years on the faculty at Stanford, I was blessed never to teach the same course twice. I moved from field to field and changed every course I taught, every time. I remember the nights when I was still working when the dawn came. I remember the adrenaline pumping when I stood to face students with material as new to me as it was to them. I know that I got help from the Holy Ghost. If that help came to me there, it will surely come in greater power here. So, while I appreciate the challenge the faculty and staff face in this university, I await



Serena Torjusdatter Evensen Gardner

the future with happy anticipation” (“Raise the Bar” BYU–I Devotional, January 2005).

The late Neal A. Maxwell testified that our academic pursuits can make us better Disciples of Christ. He writes,

True voyagers, however, would never regret embarking on new waters.

“Academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence, one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously; and, likewise, gospel covenants. For the disciple-scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else could one worship God with all of one’s heart, mind, and strength (see Luke 10:27)?” (Neal A. Maxwell, *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, p. 87).

Though our scholarship may take different forms—like scholarly conference presentations, book and article publications, pedagogical research, lab experiments, performances—all of our classroom innovations must first draw from being conversant ourselves in current scholarship of our content areas. As voyagers, we must remain curious and teachable.

2. Voyagers are Risk-Takers

When Serena and her children were en route to England, their ship sprung a leak, filling the floors of the passengers’ quarters with seawater. Serena calmly pulled her children onto her bed to keep them dry and soothed them by singing hymns of Zion. Terrified passengers called her crazy and foolish for singing cheerfully in the middle of the roar of panic and terror around them. In reply Serena purportedly answered, “If there is anything to my religion, there is everything. I am not afraid; and anyway, what good do you people do running around getting in the way of each other?”

Sometimes our planned voyages don’t go according to plan. Sometimes innovative lesson plans or assignments flop, and it can feel like our classroom has become a sinking

ship. It is tempting to become cynical and despondent on a sinking ship, deriding students for their laziness and lack of preparation, their addictions to social media, their lack of enthusiasm and interest in the world around them. It can be tempting to look ahead to the next semester and give up on this one. It can be tempting to look backward and say, I never should have tried incorporating this new idea in the first place. (It’s easy for me to come up with that list, by the way, because these are all thoughts I have had since I started teaching freshman composition in 2003.)

True voyagers, however, would never regret embarking on new waters. What a difference it has made in my life to channel Serena in my classrooms, and, instead of lecturing my students for their perceived laziness, to calmly pull my students together in prayer for our classroom and to express that I would never lose faith in our shared voyage together. What a difference it has made to invite my students to provide mid-semester feedback for what I can do as well as themselves to improve our ship. It’s risky to try new ideas, and it’s risky to invite students to contribute to classroom policies and assignment details. But we voyagers are risk-takers.

3. Voyagers are Faithful

Serena walked most of the way from New Orleans to Salt Lake; her youngest child, Erastus, was only six months old, and Serena carried him nearly the entire journey. On an especially hot and tiring day, Serena placed baby Erastus into the wagon while he napped. Before the baby had woken, Serena’s wagon wheel slipped into a mud hole, tipping the wagon over onto the baby who had landed in the mud. In aching, terrible, heart-bursting patience, Serena clutched her hands and waited for the wagon to be moved by several men in the company. I can’t understand what thoughts must have sprung to Serena’s faithful soul when the wagon was removed and she saw her lifeless six-month-old baby boy buried in black mud. His mouth was filled with black mud. His eyes were plastered shut with thick black mud. His ears were clogged with mud. He was unconscious, not breathing, and his little body had already begun to turn blue.

Serena watched as members of the company surrounded her baby, trying desperately to extract the mud, pound breath back into the child, restore his life. Nothing worked.

Serena gathered up baby Erastus and nursed over him for hours (one account even says for 24 hours)—stroking him, cleaning him, holding him in different positions, massaging him, praying over him. To the surprise and heartbreaking relief of the entire company, the baby in Serena’s arms finally—miraculously—astoundingly—took in a deep rattling breath and awoke to life once more. Erastus Evenson returned to health; he lived to be 71 years old.

Perhaps most of us do not experience such death-defying experiences with our students. But in other ways, our engagement with our students can have eternal consequences. Like baby Erastus, many of our students have been considered “lost causes.” One of my best students here at BYU-Idaho came to this university having been told by a schoolteacher that he would never be “college material.” He had grown up in South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia, and did not experience formal schooling until

had never touched anything like it. I was always shy and very reserved because I noticed how the other children were more informed about the class content... Once my family and I moved to the U.K. I was immediately enrolled in my local area’s school. I was, at that point, still fragile in my quest to learning how to read and write and I had no guide to help me. I had given up and lost interest... I distinctly remember taking an exam. As I looked around in the room, all of the students were engaged and focused with conquering their essays. I had no idea what I was to do. I simply sat in my seat, embarrassed and becoming extremely bitter towards the English subject.” Today Chris works in my composition classrooms as a capable and intelligent writing tutor, testifying to struggling composition students that their bitterness toward writing can be unlearned with optimism and practice—after all, he is living proof.

While other people may have wrongly assumed that some of our students’ eyes and ears and mouths are metaphorically full of mud and unteachable, here at BYU-Idaho, we can be like Serena, faithful that these students who perhaps come to us with lower GPAs and lower ACT / SAT scores are still just as capable of intellectual voyaging as we are, but they might need a little more attention and one-on-one engagement than others. It is remarkable how curious, faithful, and brave our students become when they have teachers who regard them as fellow children of God who are crucial to our shared journey.

Students are Voyagers

The irony of my presentation today, is that before a year ago, I could not have told you anything about



Chris Sebastian, BYU-Idaho Student with his family.

he was 7 years old. He told me, “I remember sitting at the table in my classroom when the teacher approached me and handed me a pencil with a textbook to write on. I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do with it. I

Serena. I wrote countless school papers on my pioneer heritage as a kid, and I was very proud of my great-great-great grandfather Archibald and my great-great-great grandmother, Margaret, and I especially loved the image of

Margaret, eight months pregnant, driving her own team of horses “across the dreary plains, through rivers and deep canyons, and even over the Big Mountain,” only to give birth to her fifth child in their wagon bed, four nights after their arrival to the Salt Lake Valley in the autumn of 1847.

While I celebrated so much of my pioneer past, there were certain details that always frightened me growing up, and gave me much anxiety.

Because, as some of you may already know, having visited Archibald Gardner’s Mill in West Jordan, Utah, a historical landmark that has since been turned into a restaurant and truly the best craft boutique of the Wasatch Front if you ask me—my grandmother Margaret was the first of 11 wives that Archibald would marry throughout his life. I never

knew about these women, because one of my earliest anxieties I remember feeling as a child was about polygamy. I was afraid of it, and I didn’t understand it, and it hurt my testimony to think about it. So I was given the same advice that is probably familiar to many others in this room: I was advised to put polygamy on my shelf of questions to ask God when I die, a shelf of questions that don’t directly affect my ability to endure to the end (supposedly), a shelf of questions that just don’t have easy answers. It was a question, in other words, that was “beyond the reef,” in waters I should avoid at risk of my spiritual health.

Except, when I shelved polygamy, I also shelved these 10 women who played an integral role in my family history, including Serena, whom my grandfather courted first by leaving her sacks of flour and piles of logs in her yard, leaving her to wonder about the giant boot prints he left in the snow. I can’t believe I shelved Serena, who married Archibald as his 7th wife when she was 34 years old, just a year younger than I am today. I can’t believe I had never heard of this woman who craved knowledge so much that she sat among the schoolchildren every day to learn to read and write in English from her sister-wife, Archie’s 5th wife, Laura Althea, who was the schoolteacher in Mill Creek. There are many in this room who are probably thinking, well, Emily, I know all about my own polygamous heritage—what took you so long? And to that I say, I

have no idea, and I wish you and I would have had this conversation years ago, because you might have inspired me to learn about Serena earlier!

But I mention this because many of our students are coming to BYU-Idaho with hearts already heavy with difficult questions, and they are acknowledging that the places they are used to fishing for answers are no longer

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sufficient, and they worry that their island is not as secure or as clear as they had once thought. But for those of us traveling on the Good Ship Zion, we know that we have never been an island people—we have always been voyagers. And as we invite our students to be voyagers with us, we can testify to them that while the waters can be admittedly ambiguous and unknown, they are—more importantly—adventurous and fruitful. As Latter-day Saints and as scholars, we are voyagers with questions as our sails, and we know that the Restoration of the Gospel has never stopped, and that we are all of us sailing across the reef together for further light and meaning, and that we need not fear what is real and what is true. We are here today because we know that complacency in our teaching can lead to overfished waters and stale lesson plans, we are here today because we are voyagers; we are curious and lifelong learners, we are trailblazers, we are risk-takers, we are faithful and optimistic, and we travel in good company. I’m grateful to be a part of your company, and to share my voyage with all of yours. I testify that our Heavenly Parents will bless us in our travels and guide us in leading our students, who look to us for examples of Christ-like discipleship. ❖