

AN ANTHEM AND THE LIGHT

David A. Bednar—President, Brigham Young University—Idaho

Today you graduates are participating in a most significant and historic event, the first ever April commencement at Brigham Young University-Idaho. We are especially honored to have President Gordon B. Hinckley presiding at this ceremony.

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As I have looked forward to and prepared for this day, I discovered some interesting and relevant facts about the first commencement conducted at Ricks Academy—held almost exactly one hundred years ago. The first formal commencement exercises at the academy took place on May 14 and 15, 1902, amid an atmosphere of optimism. Construction of the new academy building was well under way, and the 1901-1902 academic year had started with an enrollment of 165 students—65 of whom stayed in school for the entire year. Of those 65 students, one “graduated from the two years normal course, 21 from the eighth grade, while 40 others received certificates of promotion,” noted an article in the May 22, 1902, *Deseret Evening News* of Salt Lake City. At that time the academy offered, as described in that same *Deseret Evening News* article, “a preparatory course, seventh and eighth grades, a two-year high school, and a two-year normal, and a missionary course, besides a course for the lady students in plain and art needlework” (Crowder, David L., *The Spirit of Ricks*, 9). You will be interested to know the “entrance fees” or tuition for those respective programs of study were (as recorded in alumni records contained in the papers of Hyrum Manwaring):

preparatory	\$10
seventh grade	\$10
eighth grade	\$10
first year normal	\$12
second year normal	\$10
first year high school	\$12
second year high school	\$10
missionary	\$10
business	\$35

The information available in our archives suggests that the first graduate of the normal course in 1902 was Mary Hewlett of Alta, Wyoming.

I was also able to find and study a commencement address delivered by Nellie Edith Fogg. Sister Fogg was not a member of that first graduating class in 1902; rather, she received her degree in 1904. As I studied Sister Fogg’s longhand notes for her commencement speech, I noted that her

remarks on that occasion reach across the decades to us today and are both timely and timeless.

Dear parents, teachers, classmates, and friends; the long looked for day has come at last. With beating hearts we say the triumph is ours. The shore for which we have battled with the waves is at last reached.

But our work is not ended. One shore has been reached in safety, but now we must launch our barks [a bark is a small sailing vessel] out in different directions, out into the great unknown from which no traveler can retrace his steps or begin his life's course over. But our sails are fastened firmly and we have no fear when at the helm stands the counsils [sic] and the experience of those who have traveled before. Our adherence to the principles that have been taught promises a voyage safe from billows and tempests while disregard of the same will drift us to shoals and reefs where storms and breakers roar and dash to pieces. A successful voyage depends upon our choice, upon the ends we choose and towards which we work. Let us be guided by the light that has been reflected in our way and may that light shine forth through the countless ages of eternity.

I found Sister Fogg's imagery of the vessel and voyage particularly interesting given my own description of this institution and the transition in which we are engaged as a ship of curious workmanship traveling in uncharted waters.

Sister Fogg continued.

Not one of us may achieve what men call greatness; but in the sight of God, of angels, and of all good men, there is a greatness which we may win which will forever last. This greatness is greatness of soul, greatness of character. For that we will strive.

Sister Fogg articulated in 1904 themes that apply equally well to each of us in 2002. As graduates and representatives of Brigham Young University-Idaho, I pray that we will indeed be possessed of a greatness of soul and of character that will become the hallmarks of this institution.

Let me now recount a recent experience with our BYU-Idaho combined men's choir that I hope will communicate the expectation I have for you—as you strive to develop a greatness of soul and of character. Our combined men's choir was invited to sing in the Saturday evening priesthood session at the Church's recent general conference. Approximately 300 men participated in the choir. Our young men were all wearing dark suits, white shirts, and ties; and they looked very much like missionaries. As the choir members were waiting outside of the Conference Center for a guide to lead them into the building, three men (claiming to be with some other religious group) with large banners and megaphones approached them. The three men began to chide and harass the group. With megaphones

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in hand, they blasted out degrading comments. The harassment became increasingly loud and more caustic and cruel.

The response of the BYU-Idaho men was noteworthy. Rather than inappropriately react or respond in any way to the men's verbal assault, the members of the choir simply banded closely together and began to sing the hymns of the Restoration. They sang loudly and with firmness, yet with the voice of angels, until the three men could not be heard. Many of the visitors on the grounds of the Conference Center turned and smiled at these BYU-Idaho students with both relief and admiration. Our young men continued *to sing* and *to smile* as they were led by their guide directly past the three antagonists and into the Conference Center.

Brother and sisters, in this episode our students demonstrated greatness of soul and greatness of character. I believe, in that difficult situation a few weeks ago at the Conference Center, our young men displayed precisely what Sister Fogg was talking about in her commencement address almost 100 years ago. And as you graduates of Brigham Young University-Idaho now go forth into the world—to serve and to continue to learn and to make meaningful contributions—may your demeanor, may your behavior, and may the totality of your life become *an anthem* that will overpower the loud and taunting voices of an increasingly wicked world. May your smile produce a light that will chase away darkness and draw seekers of truth to inquire about the source of your faith and hope. May you march straight ahead and be true to the principles of the restored gospel of the Savior and the things of righteousness you have learned and experienced at BYU-Idaho. As I believe Sister Fogg would say to us this morning, *for that we must and will strive*.

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Now, I would like to conclude on a personal note. Sister Bednar and I love you. We have so much enjoyed visiting with you on campus and in your apartments, participating with you in home evenings and eating ice cream together, talking about your challenges and opportunities, answering your questions, and becoming better acquainted. We will miss you. And we would love to hear from you—please be sure to let us know about the things that are happening in your lives.

Today you graduates become the first official alumni of BYU-Idaho. You now have the responsibility to help the world better understand who we are and what we do at this remarkable institution. How you live, what you do, and what you become will ultimately define this university. May the Lord bless you as you always remember Him and serve Him with faith and diligence.

As our sons have left our home for college and on missions, Sister Bednar and I have shared with them the following counsel:

- Remember that you represent the Savior.
- Remember that you represent your family.

- Remember that you represent The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

And as you now are leaving Brigham Young University-Idaho, may I add one more item to the list?

- Remember that you represent Brigham Young University-Idaho.

I express my love. I declare my witness that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that the gospel has been restored to the earth in its fulness in these latter days. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ☪