

University of California Santa Barbara
Commencement Speech 2017:
“Think of Your Life as a Story”
by
T. A. Barron

If you folks like a good story, as I do – then try this: **Think of your life as a story.** (Mine is one with an especially bizarre plot: lots of drama, excitement, struggle, surprise, and also comedy.)

Growing up in Colorado, I always dreamed of becoming a writer. To live in a mountain cabin, writing books. My first novel had a terrific reception – rejected everywhere (32 times...but who’s counting?). Rejections hurt—but at least one was very personal: “Dear Sir/Madam”.

Plan B: I joined a business in New York City, and eventually became president. As the business grew more successful, I got more busy. Even so, I’d get up before dawn to write stories. Finally, I realized that life is just too short not to give this enduring passion another try. So I had the fun of shocking all my business partners and investors by quitting as president of the company. They thought I was **completely crazy**.

That was **26 years ago – and 31 books ago**. In that time, more good things have happened than I could have ever guessed: best sellers, international editions, and a movie in the works at Disney.

People often ask me – was it **scary** to change careers? Sure, all change is scary. But the thought of trying and failing again **wasn’t nearly as frightening** as the idea of growing old, coming to the end of my life, and knowing that I had a big dream – but I never really **tried** to make my dream come true. **That** would be far worse than any nightmare.

All we have – all we have – is **our time and our souls**. So why not make **the most** of them? **See your life as a story!**

As Buddha said: **“Make of your life a light.”** Not just for yourself – but also for the wider world.

How exactly do you do that? Ask yourself two questions: First, go inside and ask **What do I really love?** Then go outside and ask **What does the world really need?**

Put those two answers **together**...and you are on the way to **a beautiful, meaningful life.**

One reason I like to write fantasy fiction is **not** because it's an **escape** from this world. Rather, it's a powerful way to **examine** this world – to look at it more closely, through the bent mirror of imagination.

As I often say – Good fiction must be **true**. Not in a factual sense, but in an emotional and spiritual sense. That's why fantasy fiction, set in an imaginary world, can tell us so much about ourselves and our world.

That's why I love a good story that's a **hero's journey**. A character we care about must rise above huge obstacles to survive...and also save his or her world. There's real, honest struggle – conquering inner fears as well as outer foes. If done well, this kind of story is hopeful and uplifting. But that hope **must be earned**. Authentic. And thus truly heroic.

Here's an example: In my books set in Merlin's magical land of Fincayra, or in my new trilogy on the mythic isle of Atlantis – there is growing peril. Despite all the inspiring beauty, deep wisdom, and magical creatures of those worlds...there is great evil from people who are greedy, selfish, divisive, and mean-spirited. Fortunately, there is **also** great heroism from people who are courageous, loving, compassionate, and generous.

The stakes are high – **the very future** is at risk!

By the way...do those fantasy worlds sound at all familiar? Do they remind you, by chance, of **another world you know?**

You see, this kind of story is more than just a page-turner with high stakes. It's also a **metaphor** for the place we call **home**.

Whether it's our world **or** an imaginary one – **the point is the same:** If wisdom and love are going to prevail; if the wondrous beauty of nature and wilderness is going to survive; if humanity, diverse cultures, and the great array of creatures are going to live together in peace – then **it's up to the people** of

those worlds. People of courage, perseverance, tolerance, and high ideals.

And in **our world**...it's up to **YOU**. What you do **matters**. What you say **matters**. What you choose **matters**.

Despite our disagreements, we are all citizens here – citizens of our world. We all share common bonds – with each other, with this nation, and also with this planet. We all care about the future, and we must communicate better if we're going to create that future together. So let's **talk** to each other – and more importantly, let's **listen** to each other.

Also...**the environment** has been made (by some people who would profit from it) into a highly political issue. But clean air, clean water, healthy fisheries, wildlife, and parks benefit us all. These are **not** partisan issues! **They are very important** – to all of us now and to future generations.

Everything I've said today boils down to this: **Always remember** that you are writing **your own unique story** – with every day you live and every choice you make.

This is your story – and **YOU** are the author. You will write every chapter – all the way to the end. Just make sure your story – like any good book or movie – has plenty of **heart** and **humor**. And some **important, enduring ideas**.

Put all this together and you will have a truly **meaningful** life story!

Now go tell your story with **courage**. Tell it with **passion, love, and gratitude**.

Make it **the most AWESOME story you can!**