

Nailing Our Colors to the Mast

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

Man-Made Magic

We live in a most remarkable age. The scope and magnificence of the daily events that swirl around us are now so commonplace that we scarcely note their presence or their passing. Consider for example two events of this past week. One week ago this morning, on Tuesday, September 3, the space shuttle *Discovery* came riding out of a desert sky barely tinted with the light of sunrise and landed smoothly, silently on the sands of Edwards Air Force Base, concluding a weeklong experience that now seems almost routine in space travel.

Does it impress anyone (besides me) that this ninety-nine-ton spaceship has orbited the earth before, that it repeatedly comes back to land safely, picks up yet another payload, and will again be launched beyond the earth's gravity in the days that lie just ahead? Ho hum.

Does it matter to anyone that this piece of man-made magic—after traveling three million miles in space—can touch down on a postage

stamp sketched in the dry lake bed of a California desert, a landing strip totally invisible from the Santa Monica freeway *and* the Carson City, Nevada, frozen yogurt station? May I remind you that there are 197 million square miles of surface on the face of this planet onto which you can mistakenly land—or sink, as the case may be. What kind of a world is it—or should I say what kind of worlds are we about to find—in which that kind of technology, that kind of human genius, that kind of masterful, modern miracle can send up such a piece of equipment, fly it around, and bring it home with more accuracy than you and I find our automobile with after a BYU football game?

Is anyone impressed that on this particular flight James van Hoften and William F. Fisher spent a casual weekend dangling in space and repairing with their screwdrivers, pliers, baling wire, and rubber bands an \$85 million Syncom IV-3 satellite that had moved lifelessly in orbit since its abortive launch four months ago?

Jeffrey R. Holland was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 10 September 1985.

“Never mind that there is an errant satellite up there, Chief. E.T. and I will just Buck Rogers it up into orbit, find that twenty-foot canister somewhere in all the grand immensity of space, sidle up alongside with the old jet pack, and have her beeping and flashing again in no time.” Easier than a trip to the corner gas station. Columbus I know and Balboa I know, but who are James van Hoften and William F. Fisher?

Perhaps the amazement in all of this is greater for me than it is for you—and maybe is for most—because I am so mystified and unhandy at technical things. The only project I ever fully completed in my high school shop class was a one-quart tin cup, which, by the time I was through making it, unfortunately had a large slash running down the full length of it. It’s very awkward to hold a quart of anything in a tin cup if it is running out onto your pant leg more rapidly than you are able to pour the new contents in. I did not get a good grade on that cup, and I did not get a good grade in the class. Very early on I left all technically related matters to other folks.

So I invite your sense of awe and wonder and appreciation for such a time in which we live, and, as we start a new school year at Brigham Young University, I also invite you to give thanks for the God-given blessings and benefits we enjoy routinely, day after day, week after week, in a way that has never been known by anyone, anywhere, in any other era of the history of all mankind.

Who Would Have Dreamed?

It is in that spirit and with that sense of privilege and advantage that I comment on the rather remarkable circumstances we presently enjoy right here in good old Provo, Utah—Happy Valley, U.S.A. Who would have dreamed in a thousand years of dreaming—that takes us back squarely into the shadow of the Dark Ages—that Brigham Young University would ever have a national championship football team and an overall athletic program ranked every year among the top ten in the nation? Where else does a university routinely enter its undergraduate coeds—year after year—in the Miss America contest and, this past year, claim the reigning queen? Where else—and the answer is, of course, nowhere else—has

the Egyptian government chosen to work with an American university to exhibit the legendary Ramses II materials? What will it mean for you to be the students to see what your parents never saw and your grandparents never dreamed of seeing—artifacts from one of the richest and most regal political and cultural dynasties in all of ancient history, a dynasty linked with the wrenching exodus of the children of Israel from the grasp of just such a pharaoh as this? What does it mean for you to have the world’s attention focused on your university as we strive to build world peace and enhance international understanding in Jerusalem—perhaps the most war-torn and brutalized piece of geography per square inch on the face of the globe? And, of course, all of this says nothing of the less publicized but often far more important progress being made by the university in every aspect and area of our academic life here. Who would have dreamed this? Not I as a student even twenty years ago, to say nothing of our academic forefathers who struggled just to keep the university alive one hundred years ago.

But *some* dreamed the dreams, and a few saw the visions.

“I Have Seen It All”

On Founders Day, five weeks from now, we will have a commemorative reopening of the Karl G. Maeser Building on this campus. If you have not had a chance to walk to that lovely corner of our hilltop acreage and see the spectacular job our own physical plant and the construction companies have done with this grand old building, please do so. It was the first building built on what an earlier generation called Temple Hill, built when the dreams of a real university and all that it might become were *only* dreams and indeed seemed to some only fantasies those many, many years ago. Where once only that building alone stood on this hill, now think of nearly five hundred buildings and the absolute splendor of every one of them. Think of the beauty and capacity and availability and cleanliness of any one of the buildings in which we meet, including this one, and then remember this from our struggling first president.

With nothing but makeshift facilities and depleted supplies, President Karl G. Maeser wrote:

"I am worn out and sick in spirit, . . . and with all my love for this Academy, I feel that I owe it to my very life, which is needlessly wearing itself out here in an apparently hopeless task, to accept any change that will promise me opportunities for permanent usefulness." . . .

[With] that he told his wife and daughter that [because there seemed to be no real support for a school here and] because he couldn't earn enough . . . to provide food and raiment for them and pay his debts he was going to accept a position at the University of Deseret, where he could get a regular salary and adequately provide for his family. Accordingly his wife and daughter got things packed—and then sat on their trunks for [several] days, until his daughter finally mustered enough courage to ask her father when they were moving. His response . . . was, "I have changed my mind. [We are not moving.] I have had a dream—I have seen Temple Hill filled with buildings—great temples of learning, and I have decided to remain and do my part."¹

Through the generosity of friends such as Abraham O. Smoot, work eventually began for a building on University Avenue and Fifth North. Of this period Karl G. Maeser's son wrote:

While the foundation of the new building had been in course of construction, it had been a custom of [my father], when at home on a Sabbath morning, to walk up to the grounds and stand and gaze upon the work so far done. . . .

. . . Once when he took [my sister] Eva with him they stood upon the unfinished foundation, and the child noticing some portions of the wall crumbling, remarked, "Papa, do you think they will ever finish this building?"

"My child," answered the father, "not only this building but others will stand upon this ground, and not only here but also upon that hill yonder," pointing to Temple Hill. "Yes, my child, I have seen it all."²

The new academy building was dedicated on the day on which Dr. Maeser was to sever his . . . connection with the school [to become the commissioner of education in Salt Lake City]. *There was*

probably never a more impressive sight in the history of the school than the triumphal march of students from [the temporary quarters of] the old ZCMI warehouse [downtown] to the new building. Before leaving the warehouse, Professor Maeser called the students around him, prayed with them, and told them that if they would carry the spirit of their alma mater [not only into their new school but] into all the walks of life, the Lord would greatly multiply their joys.³

Following the dedicatory prayer that day, Brother Maeser gave a short farewell address that included this simple statement of the educational philosophy at Brigham Young Academy:

When to the students at the beginning of the experimental term, April 24, 1876, the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith—that he taught his people correct principles and they governed themselves accordingly—were given as the leading principle of discipline, and the words of President Brigham Young—that neither the alphabet nor the multiplication table was to be taught without the Spirit of God—were given as the main-spring of all teaching, the orientation for the course of the educational system inaugurated by the foundation of this academy was made, and any deviation from it would lead inevitably to disastrous results, and, therefore, the Brigham Young Academy has nailed her colors to the mast.⁴

In a month when we pay tribute to Karl G. Maeser, and in a year when we take on even greater visibility as a university, I say again that we have "nailed [our] colors to the mast." We have stated our principles of education based on the gospel of Jesus Christ, "and any deviation from it would lead . . . to disastrous results." As we take our increasingly significant and important place in the world, it is absolutely imperative that we not be of it. We have begun a space-age conversation with a national and international audience that earlier generations of students and faculty would not have believed possible. In telling that story we must not and will not forget those principles and traditions and truths that have made Brigham Young University what it is and that have brought us to this moment.

Be Your Very Best

In my occasional locker-room contact with Coach Edwards, I have heard him say something time and time again to his players. He said it last Saturday, and he will say it this Saturday. What he says in effect is this: “Do not forget what got you here. Don’t abandon the fundamentals we’ve practiced for so long. Don’t let success *or* adversity overwhelm you. Remain steady, play it our way. That’s how we got where we are.” In that same spirit we have to be Brigham Young University and not any other. “Any deviation from [that] would lead . . . to disastrous results.” Our majesty and our mission is in our unique and special heritage. Please stand with me, as I stand with you, in again nailing those colors to the mast—for another magnificent year.

Work hard. With the background of our religious convictions there is no encouragement I could give you at the start of a school year that would matter more than for you to take your academic work seriously and to study hard. It is a more competitive time at BYU than it was twenty years ago and certainly more than it was a century ago. There is so much to learn and so much to be done. There are worlds out there waiting to be explored. You must not come here to play. Too much tithing is spent, too much sacrifice has been given, and too many people are watching. “Eat the bread [and] wear the garments of the laborer.”⁵

Please learn to write well and to speak the language with some precision. If it is not too startling to you, may I announce, for example, that at BYU the verb “go” is not synonymous with the verb “say,” as in the conversation “I go, ‘Watcha doin’?’ and she goes, ‘Nothin’,’ and I go, ‘Let’s do somethin’,’ and she goes, ‘Sure.’” That’s too much goin’ and not enough saying. And the writing from some of us is too often worse than the speaking. If I have one overwhelming disappointment in my professional life as an educator, it is the general inability I find in college-educated people to write well. Edward R. Murrow once said that Winston Churchill won the Second World War by “mobiliz[ing] the English language and send[ing] it into battle.”⁶ Perhaps it will help you win your battles, or get a job, or change a nation. The prophets of God have known that the impact

of the inspired, compelling word, spoken or written, is among the most powerful forces on earth. You should discover that too. It has moved their mountains. It will move some of yours. It will illuminate your path. “In the beginning was the Word,” and “God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”⁷

Be well groomed and dress appropriately. Our dress and grooming standards are legendary at BYU. In the six years I have been giving this speech, I have tried not to harp on that or to make it seem this was the only thing that mattered here. It is, after all, only a small part of our very important Code of Honor that you have all signed. But your appearance is for us as some explain baptism: “it is an outward sign of an inward grace.”⁸ I always notice carefully the comings and goings on campus during these first few days of each year, and I think almost all of you look absolutely beautiful. But a very few need an early reminder. Now all of you know that shorts, or skimpy skirts, or grubby jeans, or extreme hair-styles, or sweat suits, or tank tops, or whatever are simply not acceptable apparel on this campus. Be modest, be dignified, and be your very best. More and more, what it means to be at BYU is to be your very best.

And now may I say that far more important than looking clean is being clean. Perhaps no challenge is greater for your generation. As someone recently wrote, “It is as if America is down on all fours sniffing, and what she smells is a glandular stench.” There is too much sexual transgression in our society. There are too many exploitive movies seen and prurient videos watched and smutty magazines read. There is too much obscene language used, by men and women. It should not surprise you that a university that sweeps its walks and scrubs its floors and paints its buildings and shines its glass expects its students to be clean—inside as well as out. I want to think we are better in these matters than any other university in the world, but sometimes we are not; we frequently fall too short. Any compromise tears a piece of our flag from that mast. Any blemish on one student’s behavior is a stain on us all. For your sake and for Karl G. Maeser’s and for BYU’s, I ask you to be clean.

The World's Safest Ship

Now as I began, I spoke of *two* events during the past week, and I mentioned one—the *Discovery's* successful flight. May I close with the second reference, to another journey not so successful. A week ago last Sunday, on September 1, 1985, Robert Ballard, chief scientist for a joint U.S./French venture, became the first person in seventy-three years to view the grave site of more than fifteen hundred people whose final resting place lay on the cavernous floor two and a half miles below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. The *Titanic* was the biggest, most luxurious, and supposedly the safest ocean liner of all time—unsinkable, they advertised, because of its double steel hull and waterproof compartments.

The first-class register on that maiden voyage read like a Who's Who of American and European society. The net worth of those passengers was estimated (in 1912) to be \$250 million. And on the night of April 14, 1912, nearly three-fourths of the trip from Southampton was completed. New York was, figuratively speaking, just a hop, skip, and a jump away. It had been a great party on the high seas.

Now an iceberg is relatively small and occupies so little space in comparison with the broad ocean on which it floats. The chances of another small object like a ship colliding with it and being sunk are minute. Chances are, as a matter of fact, one in a million. That's not just a figure of speech. That was the actual risk for total loss by collision with an iceberg as accepted by insurance companies in 1912. That one-in-a-million accident was what sunk the *Titanic*. On the night of the collision she was undoubtedly the safest ship afloat on any of the world's oceans. But her captain and her crew were careless, perhaps simply too confident. And so were her designers and her owners. The result was that when the unbelievable had to be believed, only seven hundred were saved. One thousand five hundred thirteen of the others rode the world's safest ship two and a half miles straight down—and then waited seventy-three years to have Robert Ballard finally identify their burial site for posterity.

Institutionally—and I suppose individually—we have at our disposal the superb skills that in their day fashioned the *Titanic* and in our own day

have fashioned the space shuttle *Discovery*. We have before us a year in which each of us gets to captain not only our own individual craft but we also get to help steer the *Good Ship BYU*. I don't know about you, but in light of these two reminders from the week's news, I vote clearly for the option of navigating all the dimensions of our dreams and all the outer reaches of our capability with the care and caution and loyalty to basic principles that will, when our exploration is complete, land us dead center, right on time, exactly where we ought to be. I prefer that greatly to the equal magnificence, splendor, and technical ability of that other vessel now resting thirteen thousand feet below the surface of the sea five hundred miles south of Newfoundland, filled with people who were led to believe it couldn't happen to them.

This year and every year we intend to have the best of all possible worlds at BYU. We intend to exercise every privilege and pursue every opportunity, but we will do it with discipline and with care, with attention to detail, with everyone helping, with no one compromising. We will nail our "colors to the mast" and make gospel-centered education work because it has to work; any deviation from our prophetic heritage "would lead . . . to disastrous results." We will, in this and every year ahead, reach out and reach up, explore all we can of the truth, and still safely land filled with greater learning and faith on this narrow strip of BYU soil under Y Mountain in Provo, Utah. We will do our work successfully—and some of it we will have to do with the whole world watching. Know that I love you with all of my heart, and God bless you to have a superb school year, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), pp. 84–85; quoting Maeser in letter to L. John Nuttall (secretary to the First Presidency), 4 May 1887, L. John Nuttall Papers; emphasis in original.

2. Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography by His Son* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928), p. 117; quoted in Wilkinson and Skousen, p. 118.

3. Alma P. Burton, *Karl G. Maeser: Mormon Educator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 53.

4. Karl G. Maeser, “Final Address” (4 January 1892), *The Normal* 1, no. 10 (15 January 1892): 82; emphasis added; referring to John Taylor, “The Organization of the Church,” *Millennial Star* 13, no. 22 (15 November 1851): 339; John Taylor reported that Joseph Smith said, “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.”

See also Karl G. Maeser, quoted in Burton, *Mormon Educator*, 54–55.

5. Doctrine and Covenants 42:42.

6. Edward R. Murrow, *I Can Hear It Now* (1933–1945), Columbia Records.

7. John 1:1; Genesis 1:3.

8. See John Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace” (1772).