

The Snow-White Birds

BOYD K. PACKER

I greet you tonight with the blessings and good wishes of the First Presidency of the Church, who serve as the officers of the board of trustees, and represent them in this assignment. With the faculty, staff, and administration present, only the students are missing. It is in their interest that I have entitled my message “The Snow-White Birds.”

A few days ago, President Lee asked me to substitute for Elder M. Russell Ballard, who is recovering from heart surgery and is doing very well. President Lee urged me to reminisce about my years of association with Brigham Young University.

My preparation, of necessity, has been limited to small blocks of time pried open in an already solid schedule—mostly when you were asleep. I have been shaken by the thought that my presentation this evening might bring you to that same condition!

President Harold B. Lee told me once that inspiration comes easier when you can set foot on the site related to the need for it. With a very

sincere desire to be guided in preparing what I should say to you, early Sunday morning, before you were about, I stood in the Maeser Building, and I found that President Lee was right!

In one sense, this is a graduation. President Rex E. Lee has reported periodically to the public on the condition of his health, most often with Janet at his side. I do not know of anyone else who has shown the wisdom and the courage to do that. The Lees have served faithfully and well. I do not know another first lady of BYU who has shown more devotion. She has sparkled in public and has been an unfailing support to our president in the greater role known only to them. Together they deserve the highest marks. President Lee, never satisfied with less than his best, has earned them now. They both have our commendation and affection.

In one sense, I too am graduating tonight. After thirty-four years on the board of trustees for BYU, most of it on the executive committee, I have been released.

Members of the Quorum of the Twelve will now be rotated on the board. That is as it should

Boyd K. Packer was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this BYU Annual University Conference address was given on 29 August 1995.

be, for the Twelve, under the direction of the First Presidency, are responsible to watch over and “set in order”¹ the Church in all the world.

Since the future of the Church rests with our youth and since the budget for their education is the second largest of all Church appropriations (the budget for BYU alone is in the hundreds of millions of dollars), you deserve the responsible attention of all of the Twelve. And I am sure you will have that.

It has been said that *young* men speak of the future because they have no past, and *old* men speak of the past because they have no future. Responding to President Lee’s request, I will act my age and reminisce.

Our first visit to this campus was forty-eight years ago this month. Donna and I were returning from our honeymoon. Seven years later I walked into the Maeser Building, then the administration building, to an office I was to occupy as chairman of a summer school for all seminary and institute personnel. There were problems, and so we had been called in for some reinforcement, some shaping up.

Our instructor was Elder Harold B. Lee of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He invited guest lecturers. President J. Reuben Clark Jr. came more than once; President Joseph Fielding Smith, Elders Spencer W. Kimball, Mark E. Petersen, Marion G. Romney, LeGrand Richards, Delbert L. Stapley, and Richard L. Evans, President Belle S. Spafford of the Relief Society (one of the greatest women of our time), and others came. For two hours a day, five days a week, for five weeks we were taught at the feet of the apostles. The influence of those days is still evident in our lives and in Church education.

The following year, as a supervisor of seminaries and institutes, I returned to the Maeser Building. I occupied an office there until the administration moved to the newly completed Smoot Building.

In 1958, A. Theodore Tuttle, the other supervisor of seminaries, was called as a member of the First Council of the Seventy.

In October 1961, I was called as an assistant to the Twelve. One of my first assignments was to the Church Board of Education, the BYU Board of Trustees, and the executive committee.

I can remember Presidents Franklin S. Harris, Howard S. McDonald, and Acting President Christen Jensen. I have had a close association with Presidents Wilkinson, Oaks, Holland, and Lee.

I remember as well Sunday, January 8, 1956. To understand why that is memorable to me, we must go back to 1910.

George H. Brimhall, having already served nineteen years as president of BYU, determined to establish a recognized teachers college. He had hired three professors: one with a master’s degree from Harvard, one with a doctorate from Cornell, and the other with a doctorate from Chicago. They hoped to transform the college into a full-fledged university. They determined that practicality and religion, which had characterized the school, must now give way to more intellectual and scientific philosophies.

The professors held that “the fundamentals of religion could and must be investigated by extending the [empirical] method into the spiritual realm,” and they “considered evolution to be a basic, spiritual principle through which the divinity in nature expressed itself.”² The faculty sided with the new professors and the students rallied to them.

Horace H. Cummings, superintendent of Church schools, became concerned because they were “applying the evolutionary theory and other philosophical hypotheses to principles of the gospel and to the teachings of the Church in such a way as to disturb, if not destroy the faith of the pupils,” and he wrote, “Many stake presidents, some of our leading principals and teachers, and leading men who are friends of our schools have expressed deep anxiety to me about this matter.”³

Superintendent Cummings reported to the board that

1. *The teachers were following the “higher criticism” . . . , treating the Bible as “a collection of myths, folk-lore, dramas, literary productions, history and some inspiration.”*

2. *They rejected the flood, the confusion of tongues, the miracle of the Red Sea, and the temptation of Christ as real phenomena.*

3. *They said John the Revelator was not translated but died in the year A.D. 96.*

4. *"The theory of evolution is treated as a demonstrated law and their applications of it to gospel truths give rise to many curious and conflicting explanations of scripture."*

5. *The teachers carried philosophical ideas too far: (1) "They believed sinners should be pitied and enlightened rather than blamed or punished," (2) and they believed that "we should never agree. God never made two things alike. Only by taking different views of a thing can its real truth be seen."*

6. . . .

7. *The professors taught that "all truths change as we change. Nothing is fixed or reliable."*

8. *They also taught that "visions and revelations are mental suggestions. The objective reality of the presence of the Father and the Son, in Joseph Smith's first vision, is questioned."⁴*

Superintendent Cummings concluded his report by saying that the professors "seem to feel that they have a mission to protect the young from the errors of their parents."⁵

President Brimhall himself defended the professors—that is, until some students "frankly told him they had quit praying because they learned in school there was no real God to hear them."⁶

Shortly thereafter President Brimhall had a dream.

He saw several of the BYU professors standing around a peculiar machine on the campus. When one of them touched a spring a baited fish hook attached to a long thin wire rose rapidly into the air. . . .

Casting his eyes around the sky he [President Brimhall] discovered a flock of snow-white birds circling among the clouds and disporting themselves in the sky, seemingly very happy. Presently one of them, seeing the bait on the hook, darted toward it and grabbed it. Instantly one of the professors on the ground touched a spring in the machine, and the bird was rapidly hauled down to the earth.

On reaching the ground the bird proved to be a BYU student, clad in an ancient Greek costume, and was directed to join a group of other students who had been brought down in a similar manner. Brother Brimhall walked over to them, and noticing that all of them looked very sad, discouraged and downcast, he asked them:

"Why, students, what on earth makes you so sad and downhearted?"

"Alas, we can never fly again!" they replied with a sigh and a sad shake of the head.

Their Greek philosophy had tied them to the earth. They could believe only what they could demonstrate in the laboratory. Their prayers could go no higher than the ceiling. They could see no heaven—no hereafter.⁷

Now deeply embarrassed by the controversy and caught between opposing factions, President Brimhall at first attempted to be conciliatory. He said, "I have been hoping for a year or two past that harmony could be secured by waiting, but the delays have been fraught with increased danger."⁸ When an exercise in *administrative diplomacy* suddenly became an *issue of faith*, President Brimhall acted.

And now to Sunday, January 8, 1956. President David O. McKay came to Brigham City to dedicate a chapel built for students of the Intermountain Indian School. I stood next to him to introduce those who came forward to shake his hand.

A very old man, a stranger to me, came forward on the arm of his daughter. He had come some distance to speak to President McKay. It was impossible for me not to hear their conversation. He gave President McKay his name and said that many years ago he had taught at BYU. President McKay said, "Yes, I know who you are." Tears came as the old man spoke sorrowfully about the burden he had carried for years. President McKay was very tender in consoling him. "I know your heart," he said. That old man was one of the three professors who had been hired by President Brimhall in 1910.

Let me share with you another experience or two from which I learned valuable lessons.

During our BYU years we lived in Lindon. Early one Christmas Eve I received a telephone call. I told Donna that I must run in to Provo to the office. By doing so, one of our teachers could have a much happier Christmas.

I thought I was alone in the Maeser Building. Not so. President Ernest L. Wilkinson, whose office was at the other end of the hall, walked into President Berrett's office, then into Brother Tuttle's office, looked in the storeroom, and then stepped into my office. Without saying a word to

me, he looked around my office and walked out. Although I knew him to be absorbed in whatever he did, I shook my head and muttered to myself, "Well, cuss you!"

Shortly thereafter, Vice President Harvey L. Taylor came into the office and made the same tour. Startled to find me at my desk, he asked, "What on earth are you doing here on Christmas Eve?" I explained why I was there. He then told me how much I was appreciated and how grateful he was for one who would go the extra mile. He wished me a merry Christmas and left.

After he was gone, I had generous thoughts about President Wilkinson. If he was smart enough to have a man like Harvey Taylor follow him around, I could put up with his exasperating ways.

Some time later I was summoned to a meeting of the Administrative Council in President Wilkinson's office. They were discussing the appointment of someone in St. George to recruit the graduates of Dixie Junior College to BYU. I recommended the director of the institute there and said, "To appoint someone else would be misunderstood."

The others there agreed. But after discussion, President Wilkinson said someone else would be better. I responded, "That's all right, President, but you are still wrong."

Suddenly there was dead silence. When President Wilkinson was greatly amused or angry, he had a way of running his tongue around the inside of his cheeks. He stood up and walked around his desk two or three times. I suppose he was trying to get control of himself. Finally he sat down, and Joseph T. Bentley said quietly, "President, Brother Packer is right."

At that point I was excused from the meeting. That night I told Donna that we would be leaving BYU, and I hoped we could return to Brigham City to teach seminary. Two days later I received a memo from President Wilkinson appointing me to the Administrative Council of Brigham Young University.

During the years I served on that council, I came to appreciate President Wilkinson. He had a profound influence on the university, and the naming of a building, this building, for him is little enough by way of tribute to him.

In 1966, BYU underwent an accrediting evaluation. The evaluation of the College of Religion by two clergymen from differing faiths was thought to offer a fresh insight into the role of religion at BYU.

These two "outsiders" expressed concern over the intellectual climate and the "revelational and authoritarian approach to knowledge." They recommended that, for the purpose of intellectual ferment and free inquiry at BYU, the university should have one or two atheists on the faculty.

President Wilkinson wrote a response to the accreditation report and asked for corrections. He pointed out that "there were no limitations on teaching about these philosophies, but there were cautions about advocating them!"

Although the chairman of the commission invited a response to President Wilkinson's letter, none was ever received.

Perhaps the answer came from the 1976 Accreditation Committee. They explained in the introduction of their report:

Institutional evaluation, as practiced by the Commission on Colleges, begins with an institution's definition of its own nature and purposes; and a declaration of its goals and objectives pursuant upon that definition. The institution is then evaluated, essentially in its own terms, from the point of view of how well it appears to be living up to its own self-definition; and how well its goals and objectives fit that definition, as well as the extent to which they appear to be carried out and achieved in practice.⁹

That 1976 accreditation report was highly favorable. They found BYU "to be a vibrant and vital institution of genuine university calibre."¹⁰

Perhaps this is enough reminiscing. Yesterday President Lee spoke with keen insight about the future of Brigham Young University, and he did it very well.

Perhaps young men do speak of the future because they have no past, and old men of the past because they have no future. However, there are fifteen old men whose very lives are focused on the future. They are called, sustained, and ordained as prophets, seers, and revelators. It is their right to see as seers see; it is their obligation to counsel and to warn.

Immediately ahead is the appointment of a new president of BYU. A search committee has been appointed. Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve has been named chairman of that committee. Members of the committee are Elders M. Russell Ballard and Henry B. Eyring of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Presiding Bishop Merrill J. Bateman, and President Elaine L. Jack of the Relief Society.

They are now at work. The appointment of the next president of Brigham Young University is a crucial one. During the next ten years, 59 percent of the faculty will retire. That comes about because of the enormous growth during the Wilkinson years. Imagine a 60 percent turnover in faculty!

The board has long since charged the administration to refine the hiring process to ensure that those who will come to replace you will be of the same quality of worthiness, spirit, and professional competency as you were at the beginning of your careers.

It is not always possible to give the watch care that you deserve. When things come to us a piece at a time, without an explanation of how they fit together, we may fail to see overall changes that are taking place.

Several years ago, the then president of the Relief Society asked why the name of one of the colleges at BYU was changed. It concerned her. She had watched the establishment of the College of Family Living, a decision that was far ahead of its time. The Joseph F. Smith Family Living Center, one of the largest buildings on campus at the time, was built to house the college. BYU stood unique in all the world in organizing such a college.

Why, she asked, did they change the name to the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences? Her concern was that family would be lost to *social* and to *science*. The names of the courses were changed, things were shifted about, and their objectives shifted toward the professional and theoretical.

I thought that the Relief Society president asked a very insightful question, and I shared her concern. She was told that, since there was no counterpart in other universities to a college that concentrated on the family, there were academic reasons for the changes.

When researchers are too focused on what *is*, they may lose sight of what *ought* to be. A kitchen then may be regarded as a research lab, and a family as any group of unrelated people who spend the night under the same roof—defined that way because experts in the world convince the government that it is supposed to be that way.

Has something like that happened in the other colleges as well? Is the teaching of religion given a preeminent place, and are those who teach religion full-time recognized for the vital contribution they make to every other discipline? Has there been a drift in the College of Education? Has the responsibility to prepare teachers been divided up and parceled out and lost? Have words such as *training*, *instruction*, and *values* been brushed aside in favor of loftier theoretical and intellectual considerations? Consider these lines:

*Today a professor, in garden relaxing
Like Plato of old in the Academe shade,
Spoke out in a manner I never had heard him,
And this is one of the things that he said:*

*Suppose that we state as a tenet of wisdom
That knowledge is not for delight of the mind,
Nor an end in itself, but a packet of treasure
To hold and employ for the good of mankind.*

*A torch or a candle is barren of meaning
Except it give light to men as they climb,
And theses and tomes are but impotent jumble
Unless they are tools in the building of time.*

*We scholars toil on with the zeal of a miner
For nuggets and nuggets and one nugget more,
But scholars are needed to study the uses
Of all the great mass of data and lore.*

*And truly our tireless and endless researches
Need yoking with man's daily problems and strife,
For truth and beauty and virtue have value
Confirmed by their uses in practical life.¹¹*

If students are going to partake of the fruit that is “desirable to make one happy,” yea, “desirable above all other fruit,”¹² which Lehi saw in his vision, they had better have their ladder leaning against the right tree. And they had better hold

onto the iron rod while they are working their way toward it.

Now, in an absolutely remarkable consensus, leaders in politics, government, law enforcement, medicine, social agencies, and the courts recognize that the breakdown of the family is the most dangerous and frightening development of our time, perhaps in all human history. They are casting around for answers.

There is a desperate need for stable families and teachers who know how to teach values. Were we not better equipped a generation ago to produce them? Have some among us measured themselves against the world and its sophisticated intellectual standard? Have they “cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed”¹³ and let go of the iron rod of Lehi’s vision?

The prophet Jacob spoke of wasting one’s time by following those who, “when they are learned they think they are wise.” “To be learned is good,” he further said, “if they hearken unto the counsels of God.”¹⁴

Your faculty committees are now at work on the self-evaluation of the university. We have heard good reports of their progress. Those committees might well look thoughtfully and long and prayerfully at these issues.

Surely you will remember that the board of trustees has directed that in order to contribute to the central mission of the Church, “BYU is a Church-related [and, I might say parenthetically, totally owned], very large, national, academically selective, teaching-oriented, undergraduate university offering both liberal arts and occupational degrees, with sufficiently strong graduate programs and research work to be a major university, but insufficient sponsored research and academic doctoral programs to be a graduate *research* institution.”¹⁵

Let them honor this direction from the minutes of the board of trustees: “Boards make policy and administrators implement policy. Boards must be informed of *all* proposed changes in basic *programs* and *key personnel* in order to achieve better understanding with the administrators.”¹⁶

Your committee, indeed all of you, would do well to read carefully Jacob’s parable of the olive vineyard in the Book of Mormon. You might stand, as the Lord of the vineyard did, and weep

when he saw that some branches “grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves.”¹⁷ You might ask with him, as we have asked, “What could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished it?”¹⁸ And yet some branches bring forth bitter fruit. And you might do as the lord of the vineyard did and as Brother Brimhall did. They pruned out those branches that brought forth bitter fruit and grafted in cuttings from the nethermost part of the vineyard.

And by so doing, “the Lord of the vineyard had preserved unto himself the natural fruit, which was most precious unto him from the beginning.”¹⁹

Now I must speak of the snow-white birds that Brother Brimhall saw in his dream or vision. I say *vision* because another old man, Lehi, told his son Nephi, “Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision.”²⁰

We have now enrolled in our institutes of religion 198,000 students. We spend approximately \$300 a year on each of them. We spend more than \$7,500 a year on each student at BYU and over \$12,000 per student on the Hawaii campus, all of it from tithing funds.

That inequity worries the Brethren. We are trying to reach out to those in public colleges, as well as to the college-age members who are not, for various reasons, in school. We have invited them to attend classes in the institutes.

General Authorities often speak at firesides in the Marriott Center. Lately we have been broadcasting these messages to the institute students by satellite. The last time I was assigned, I spoke from Seattle. I wanted to show an equal interest in and an equal desire to be close to those who do not attend Church schools.

They need our help, these snow-white birds who now must fly in an atmosphere that grows ever darker with pollution. It is harder now for them to keep their wings from being soiled or their flight feathers from being pulled out.

The troubles that beset President Brimhall were hardly new. Paul told Timothy that, even in that day, they were of ancient origin:

“As Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses,” he told Timothy, “so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith.”²¹

Paul prophesied plainly that those challenges would face us in the last days. They seem to cycle back each generation. They emerged in the early thirties. The Brethren called all of the teachers of religion together for a summer school at Aspen Grove. President J. Reuben Clark Jr., speaking for the First Presidency, delivered the landmark address “The Charted Course of the Church in Education” (1938). That address should be read by every one of you every year. It is insightful; it is profound; it is prophetic; it is scripture.

That opposition emerged again in the institutes of religion in the early fifties, and the Brethren called the summer session of which I spoke earlier, with Elder Harold B. Lee of the Twelve as our teacher.

We need to be alert today. Although there are too many now in our schools for us to call all of you together, here at BYU much is being done to reaffirm standards. You yourselves have helped refine the credentials for one who will influence these snow-white birds of ours. That standard is temple worthiness, with a recommend in hand for members and a respect for our standards by those who are not.

But that is not all. There must be a feeling and a dedication and a recognition and acceptance of the mission of our Church schools. Those standards will and must be upheld. The largest block of the tithing funds spent at BYU goes for teaching salaries. We cannot justify spending the widow’s mite on one who will not observe either the letter or the spirit of the contract he or she has signed. Every department chair, every director, every dean and administrator has a sacred obligation to assure that no one under their care will pull the snow-white birds from the sky or cause even one to say, “Alas, we can never fly again!” or to “believe only what they [can] demonstrate in the laboratory” or to think that “their prayers could go no higher than the ceiling” or to “see no heaven—no hereafter.”

We expect no more of anyone than that you live up to the contract you have signed. We will accept no less of you. The standards of the accreditation agencies expect no less of us. It is a matter of trust, for we are trustees.

I have said much about teachers. Many of you look after housing and food services or maintain the libraries, the museums, or the sports fields or keep the records, protect law and order and safety, service equipment, keep up the campus, publish materials, manage the finances, and a hundred other things. Without you this institution would come apart in a day. You are absolutely vital to the mission of Brigham Young University.

Your obligation to maintain standards is no less, nor will your spiritual rewards fall one bit below those who are more visible in teaching and in administration.

All of you, together with the priesthood and auxiliary leaders from the community who devote themselves to these snow-white birds of ours, are an example, an ensign to the whole Church and to the world. The quality of your scholarship is unsurpassed, your service and dedication a miracle in itself. There is not now, nor has there ever been, anything that can compare with you. Much in the future of the restored Church depends on you. Your greater mission lies ahead.

The prophet Isaiah said:

He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall:

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.²²

President Brigham Young told Karl G. Maeser: “I want you to remember that you ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God. That is all. God bless you. Good-bye.”²³

Now I would, as one standing among those who hold the keys, do as President Young did, and that is invoke a blessing. I invoke the blessings of the Lord upon you, as teachers, as administrators, as members of the staff, as husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents. May you be blessed in all that you do, that the Spirit of the Lord will be in your hearts, and that

you will have the inspiration combined with knowledge to make you equal to the challenge of teaching the snow-white birds who come to you to learn how to fly. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 107:58.
2. Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 1:415.
3. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:419.
4. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:423.
5. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:423.
6. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:421.
7. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:421–22.
8. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:430.
9. Wilkinson, *Years*, 4:112; emphasis added.
10. Wilkinson, *Years*, 4:113.
11. Anonymous, in “Science for Service,” *Improving College and University Teaching* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1957): 54.
12. 1 Nephi 8:10, 12.
13. 1 Nephi 8:25.
14. 2 Nephi 9:28–29; emphasis added.
15. Adopted by Board of Trustees, June 1990; emphasis added.
16. Executive Meeting Minutes, 27 April 1982; emphasis added.
17. Jacob 5:48.
18. Jacob 5:47.
19. Jacob 5:74.
20. 1 Nephi 8:2.
21. 2 Timothy 3:8.
22. Isaiah 40:29–31.
23. Brigham Young, quoted in Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography by His Son* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928), 79.