

Upon Your Heads

TRUMAN G. MADSEN

For most of you, this is your first and, perhaps for many, your last college commencement. It is a benchmark. Imagine how I feel, having been here for about sixty commencements. I still have not managed to get out of school! We—your teachers, aides, and administrators, who hope now to be your colleagues—now fling the torch.

What can we say to you on this day of celebration? At Annapolis and West Point, graduation rites end with the cadets flinging up their caps in relief and jubilation. Have you ever wondered where they come down and who picks them up? It has become clear to me in this mini-city called a university that I have worn several hats—or, in our Latter-day Saint idiom, mantles. And I foresee that, in a sense, all of them will come down on your heads as well. Let me explain with one subjective premise: A teacher is like a person who drops a feather over the Grand Canyon and then waits for the echo. It is all so intangible. The most satisfying echo signifies that somewhere students have found their niche

and now excel over their mentors. That is why we try to keep track of you and why we rejoice in your long strides.

Let me begin with a contrived story. A woman stern of face entered a Saint Petersburg museum. (Let the record show that I did not say Leningrad; recently the name has been changed back to the original because reality has changed.) She spent less than five minutes walking past masterworks that had been produced over centuries. Then, with a “Harrumph!” she headed for the exit. A guard said to her quietly, “Madam, the paintings are not on trial. You are.”

So here is the perennial question: Who is to say what is true and good and beautiful and what is not? One answer is the cumulative wisdom of the race. At this university we pay attention to other and higher sanctions. But to the degree that all of that is lost on us, it is as if no one ever learned or produced anything. This university aspires to be a reservoir of racial memory, a place of recovery and transmission as well as discovery.

Truman G. Madsen, a BYU philosophy professor, delivered this commencement address on August 12, 1993.

I have given up on two secular premises—if ever I took them very seriously. One is the dogma of automatic progress. The other is the dogma of jettisoned treasure. We have been around long enough to see some selling of intellectual and spiritual birthrights for a pot of message. You are going out into a world that may emerge in history as the one that trashed the most treasures and treasured the most trash. One value of the college-bred to society is that they can recognize a classic when they see it. A classic, by the way, is something that always repays reexamination.

Now for the hats.

1. The Researcher's Hat

I have worn the hat of a researcher, both in individual and cooperative research. So will you. Joseph Smith taught, "In knowledge there is power,"¹ adding that the very power of God Himself is related to intelligence and knowledge. In the same spirit, Brigham Young insisted, "All the knowledge, wisdom, power, and glory that have been bestowed upon the nations of the earth, from the days of Adam till now, must be *gathered home to Zion*."² That restoration process is underway, and you are at the cutting edge. If you do not lose the vision, you will keep getting in order to give.

I have monitored BYU and its extended campuses for more than three decades, carrying in the back of my mind a prediction that is also an admonition from President John Taylor. He said, "You will see the day that Zion will be . . . far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind."³

We have lived through the beginnings. This institution and those like you who have carried away degrees and others of the Latter-day Saints throughout the world are not always on the flagship of awards and grants. But solid contributions have been made by them to the educational world in any field you can name. I had thought of listing some, but after some solid reflection, I will simply say that my thirty years here have brought me to that conclusion.

Whether you go on to graduate programs or not, aspire to bring yourself up to the frontier of

some field or fields. Many of the best equipped among us are those who learned in college how to learn and then became mostly self-educated.

The statistics say that many of you will end up in vocations and avocations you did not train for—and in all kinds of combinations. This brings to mind an aphorism of that famous American philosopher Yogi Berra, who reportedly said, "When one door closes, another shuts." To mix the metaphor, you have now embarked. Therefore, you will have to improve and rebuild your ship at sea. There is no dry dock. If you do not have a sense of mission in your daily activities, you will know little satisfaction. I have often wondered how many thousands there may have been, say, in the seventeenth century, who were computer experts who could have turned out marvels of data access and problem solving. They lived and died wholly unaware of their latent skills. If there is little difference between one person and another, that little difference is important. Make the most of it. See that your difference makes a difference. Do not die with your own music still in you.

Let me pass on counsel given to me early on, which I took seriously: Go where divine light and inspiration lead you. Go where the challenge is. Trust that if you are good at some things, or can get good at them, that that is likely a clue to your mission and to your tasks. I can tell you, according to studies of psychologist Calvin W. Taylor, with what he called talent totem poles, that everyone is a genius at something, even the retarded and handicapped among us. In addition, we have it from on high that everyone has at least one spiritual gift.⁴ In a dedicated and focused life, intellectual and spiritual gifts merge.

I have given this much thought and prayer. The full magnification of your talents and mine—of knowing and knowing how—awaits in the hereafter. In the meantime, we are working out a slice of what may well be an infinite spectrum.

Whatever your strengths and limitations, leadership will be thrust upon you. You have chosen to be part of a Latter-day Saint world community and an educational network that now extends into 150 of the 190 countries in the world (190 countries according to *National Geographic*)—with forty

countries to go. I needn't spell out the linguistic and cultural and logistic consequences of that. They are mind-boggling.

Let me say that almost everything that has been done by your predecessors can be done over again better. Textbooks and manuals and teaching aids can be updated and improved. All the products of artistic impulse can be reevaluated and extended. Much remains to be done in drawing out the implications and applications of the scriptures, of the classics, of scientific breakthroughs, of technology, of administrative skills, and of getting the world's work done in a way that tempers and fulfills human lives instead of degrading and ciphering them.

Do not despair of the gap between your present stage and that of the heavyweights you have looked to who have given a lifetime to their fields. If you keep faithfully active each hour of the working day, you can count on waking up some morning as one of the able ones of your generation. Your society and your Church will reach out for you as you become more qualified. The trained and the experienced make fewer mistakes.

2. The Teacher's Hat

You will be teachers. All of you. Whether you intend to or not, you will teach. This university is at best a prep school for a world in which you will be asked to teach, starting about the day after tomorrow, from one-on-ones with family and friends to large groups. Your livelihood and, in any case, your way of life will in part hinge on assignments to speak, respond, report, and write. That means that, whatever else you do, you need to hone your communication skills. Some of you have been trained to deal with things, machines, or operations; others are trained more to deal with people. Whichever is dominant or recessive in your lives, remember that in every organization or enterprise, the problems that require the most finesse are people problems. And your greatest and perhaps smallest classroom will be your home.

Often over the years I have been asked to describe and characterize what makes a great teacher. And I have experienced many great

teachers. I can say that at minimum they are articulate, they are competent, and they are dedicated—both to their students and to their fields. But there are also crucial nuances beyond those that only come with the Spirit: contagiousness, clarity, zest, and a certain radiance. If you can in your own way pull these traits together, you will be worth your weight in gold. For all of us, the Church is becoming and in fact is one of the great on-the-job training labs in the world.

My most able and durable teacher has been my wife. An ever-deeper grasp of Middle Eastern history, archaeology, languages, and ancient scripture texts has come from her to me—more than I received at Harvard. At your age and stage, she did not impose on herself the faulty logic of either/or. She laid the cornerstone and the footings of formal education, and then she poured her whole soul into her budding family and kept her mind and heart open to other learning opportunities. As our nest emptied, she gave her spare energies to graduate study and then to professional teaching. Over the years our home and our lives, not to mention the lives of her students, have been enhanced. Our table readings and conversations with our own children—and now with theirs—have been the liveliest seminars I have ever been in.

3. The Hat of Bridge Builder

You will wear the hat, as I have, of bridge builder. The Richard L. Evans Chair was set up and endowed by both Latter-day Saint and other sources dedicated to the proposition that that great man embodied: In the religious world and in academia there is more that unites us than divides and face-to-face and, if possible, heart-to-heart communication is always better than rock throwing at a distance. This is a daring hypothesis in a shrinking and war-torn world. But the vision of the Restoration not only commends but commands the study of other faiths and philosophies and presses you to befriend their advocates, even when they insist, as you should not, on enmity. Joseph Smith taught that to revolutionize and civilize the world, we must “pour forth

love,” as “friendship is the grand fundamental principle.”⁵ Joseph said that we are to approach all, even the antagonistic, with “If ye will not embrace our religion, embrace our hospitalities.”⁶ He also said that it does not “prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine”⁷ and that, in contrast to the sectarian tendency toward isolation and insulation, “we should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true ‘Mormons.’”⁸ Notice that he did not say just in the religious world but in the world—in the whole world.

Thus the Evans Chair and its associates have gone interdisciplinary, interfaith, interuniversity, and intercontinental—most recently in Jerusalem. And you all know a little about the muddle that is the Middle East. There and everywhere, with many colleagues who have joined the outreach, we have found men and women who care and who have a fellowship of mind—a kind of intellectual chivalry to build goodwill and understanding. Over the years in dozens of symposia and colloquia and interfaith gatherings, three rules have emerged to diminish the heat and increase the light. Let me pass them on to you.

1. *When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.* [State another’s position as he would state it.]

2. *Don’t compare your best to their worst.* [That becomes rhetorical eyewash. Compare fairly.]

3. *Leave room for “holy envy.”* [Be able to say, “Hmm. We could learn from that.”]⁹

You have been given tools and disciplines that leave you without excuse for misrepresenting either your own heritage or that of others. You can only leaven a turbulent world by being civil “at home, at school, at play.”¹⁰

I and some of my associates have studied philosophy and philosophy of religion to get at the primal assumptions of world thought. Never underestimate the power of presuppositions. They permeate our lives in thought, in language, and

in action. Incidentally, I have been asked a few times in my career to name three philosophers who really agree with each other. My answer is, “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” When I am asked about foreign languages, I say that I have some reading knowledge of French, German, Latin, and Hebrew. But I add philosophy to the list of foreign languages. As a people, we are doing superior work in languages. We must become increasingly literate in cultural philosophies and frameworks worldwide.

Again Joseph Smith summed it up:

*If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way.*¹¹

That has become the manifesto of the Evans Chair. I commend it to you.

4. **The Many Hats of a Family Member**

You can wear all the hats of a family member. We inherit a distinguishing teaching that the Church is not the model for the family, but the family is the model for the Church, the university, and the community. Whatever your marital status, you are also a lively participant in these families.

Recently I have begun to understand a statement allegedly made by Joseph Smith that was recollected by Sister Lillie Freeze: “He said the time would come when none but the women of the Latter-day Saints would be willing to bear children.”¹² The word *bear* may, of course, mean to give birth or to deliver or to beget. But the word *bear* in its larger sense also means to bear with, to forebear, to abide with, to care for, and to practice long-suffering when the world can’t even stand short suffering or even make a lifetime commitment.

In this very room some years ago, President Spencer W. Kimball spoke of the difficulties and tough realities of family life. But there was one sentence in that fifty-minute talk that I will never forget: “Real, lasting happiness is possible, and

marriage can be more an exultant ecstasy than the human mind can conceive."¹³

Fair enough. The pearl of great price has a great price.

Here let me introduce a paraphrased Jewish legend:

*The children of the wicked who had to die in infancy on account of the sins of their fathers [those abandoned, abused, or even killed] will be found among the just [in the very presence of God], while their fathers will be ranged on the other side. The babes will implore their fathers to come to them, but God will not permit it. Then Elijah will go to the little ones and teach them how to plead in behalf of their fathers. They will stand before God and say: ". . . If, then, we died for the sins of our fathers, should they not now for our sakes be granted the good and be permitted to join us in Paradise?" God will give assent to their pleadings, and Elijah will have fulfilled the word of the prophet Malachi; he will have brought back the fathers to the children.*¹⁴

In this legend is the essence of the Atonement—more than I can explore fully today. But it gives edge to the questions Why should the innocent bear the burdens of the guilty? If one is bruised and battered, is he not justified in reviling? Why should victims be asked to redeem the victimizers? Why should the gifted be shackled with giving when they can get away with hoarding and exploiting?

The answer from on high is that only when consuming alienation is met with relentless love and forgiveness will it melt—or nothing will melt it. That is what Christ demonstrated for all time. And He requires it of those of us who claim to be His disciples.

At this very pulpit the United Nation's Charles H. Malik once stood and asked if there was a university on this planet where Christ would be comfortable.¹⁵ Perhaps here? One of the scores of visiting professors who have come here, Professor Abraham Kaplan said to me as he departed, "You prepared me for the university, but you did not prepare me for the children." He

meant your children—he meant the children of students, graduate students, and faculty found everywhere on this campus. He walked up to them, self-appointed, and said, "You are beginning your studies early." He said that this portended great goodness for the future.

Now controversy has never been more rife on whether having family involvements or avoiding family involvements is the superior way. Allow me just one response. Some years ago I encountered a brilliant neurosurgeon whose task at a world-famous hospital was to help patients with chronic pain. He put together a team: psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, pharmacologists, and physical therapists—you name it. Out of all their efforts and many failures, one insight emerged: if there was no significant other—one for whom the patient really cared and who cared in return for the patient—their efforts could do little or nothing to reduce the pain. This physician has since become a Latter-day Saint. He told me one day that the following statement is scientifically certain: For many sicknesses, love, and especially family love, is the only preventive medicine and the only lasting therapy. There is something in holy scripture about that.

We all have some control on how much we suffer—and more control still on what we do with it and on how much we help those near us to suffer less. We live in a generation that has an infinite capacity for taking offense and for scapegoating. In this view, somehow, whatever is wrong with the world, even with one's own private world, is the fault of someone or something outside oneself. Of course we should all throw our energies into causes of fairness and justice, but there is a certain madness in the method of scapegoating. The agenda is vengeance, and vengeance is self-destructive. And He who said, "Vengeance is mine,"¹⁶ meant to say thereby that it is not yours. One of the crucial demands of your discipleship and a proof of your maturity is to break that chain of blame and to continually perfect yourself. The only one who can limit your growth, your learning, and your unfolding of potential is yourself. I would that I could reach even one of you today

who has had a raw, difficult, and traumatic family life. I encourage you to demonstrate your love for the living God by forgiving once and for all who ever hurt you, beginning with your parents.

Filling All These Roles

To summarize, your opportunity now is to replicate and upgrade the work of the centuries. You will, if you choose, wear these mantles of which I have spoken. You will be a truth-seeking researcher, you will be a teacher, you will be a bridge builder, and you will be a family member. But, lastly, where will you ever find the motivating power to fill those roles and pull them all together with other demands in your real life?

I return to my initial theme of treasures. I have sat often in the president's office in the administration building, more recently with your present leaders. On one occasion I was there with President Dallin H. Oaks as he looked out his office window at the newly dedicated Provo Temple. We read each other's thoughts. The temple is on higher ground. Its shadow does not reach the campus, but day and night its light does.

Sacred treasures are within those walls. Modern scripture calls them "the power[s] of godliness."¹⁷ They are like diamonds. They withdraw at the hostile touch, and soot remains in the hands of those who come at them flippantly or superficially. We have been commanded, "Trifle not with sacred things."¹⁸ If I have a deep sorrow in my years here and abroad, it is for this trifling. The temple and the Christ who is the living temple are the heart of our spiritual life. They have not been fully fathomed by any of us. For me, the aspiring epithet "the Lord's university" applies most to the temple. Beside it, this institution and others are auxiliary workshops.

Are there then first-rate scholars, scientists, and artists here or elsewhere in the world who bring as consuming a spirit of inquiry to the temple in humility of heart as they bring to their studios, their laboratories, and their studies? Yes, an increasing number. You may be among them. The temple removes blindfolds to eternal perspective. There, most powerfully, intelligence is manifest

as light and truth that forsake darkness. On this campus you have engaged texts and teachers. In the temple you can engage and commune with the intimate and ultimate Creator.

I have no words in closing to thank my associates for what it has meant to me and to my family to labor here in this community set on a hill. I have a lively sense of the costs in dollars and in nerve endings that have built and maintained it. For more than a hundred other colleges and universities at which I have lectured, I have measured respect and admiration. Here I have felt something more, an undergirding reverence and awe, both for the all-encompassing enterprise that you are engaged in and for you. Here I have been most challenged as a whole man. Here I have been least lonely, most positively furthered, and most richly fed. I cannot repay the debt. And neither can you. I presume to speak for your parents and others and for your teachers in saying that it will be enough for us if you not only accept but magnify the mantles that now descend upon you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 288.
2. Brigham Young, *JD* 8:279 (3 June 1860); emphasis added.
3. John Taylor, *JD* 21:100 (13 April 1879).
4. See D&C 46:11; see also 1 Corinthians 7:7.
5. Joseph Smith, in Joseph Smith diary by Willard Richards (23 July 1843), in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 234.
6. Joseph Smith, diary by Willard Richards (29 January 1843), in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 162; punctuation modernized.
7. Joseph Smith, in William Clayton report (8 April 1843), in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 184; punctuation modernized.
8. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 316.
9. Krister Stendahl, three rules of religious understanding, given at a 1985 press conference, Stockholm, Sweden.

10. "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," *Songbook*, 60.
11. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 313.
12. Lillie Freeze recollection, in "Y.L.M.I. Conference of Box Elder Stake," *Young Woman's Journal* 2, no. 2 (November 1890): 81.
13. Spencer W. Kimball, "Marriage and Divorce," BYU devotional address, 7 September 1976.
14. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Old Saybrook, Connecticut: Konecky and Konecky, 1956), 601.
15. See Charles H. Malik, BYU forum address, 18 November 1975; Malik, "Forum Address," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1976): 541–51.
16. Romans 12:19.
17. D&C 84:20–21.
18. D&C 6:12.