

Persevere in Unity

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Welcome to the start of a new semester, one full of promise but also one in which we face two major challenges: (1) a global pandemic that threatens our physical health and (2) increasing divisiveness and anger that threaten the moral and spiritual fiber of our society. Basically, COVID and chaos. The good news is that there are things within our individual and collective control that we can do to address both of these challenges.

The Seventh-Inning Stretch

Let me start with the first. Even though many of the traditional educational routines continue to be altered because of the coronavirus, there is increasing light on the horizon. With the rapidly expanding availability of a vaccine, we can envision a future in which we will be able to gather more often and in larger numbers and in which in-person meetings and classes will become the norm rather than the exception.

But—and this is important—that day has not come yet, and the speed with which it comes, as

well as the adverse impact the virus will have in the interim, will depend in no small part on the degree to which we continue to adhere to safety and health guidelines over these next few months. So while there is increased optimism because the end is in sight, there is a commensurate need to be more diligent than ever in wearing masks, washing our hands, maintaining social distancing, and complying with testing protocols.

As I have considered our situation in this regard, my mind has gone to a tradition that began in earnest with William Howard Taft, the twenty-seventh president of the United States and later chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court—the only person in U.S. history to serve as the head of both the executive and judicial branches.

President Taft was a large man, standing more than six feet in height and weighing well more than 300 pounds. He was also an avid fan of major-league baseball. On April 14, 1910, President Taft attended the opening game of the major-league season between the Washington Senators and the Philadelphia Athletics. According to one report:

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on January 12, 2021.

As the face-off between the Senators and the Athletics wore on, the rotund, six-foot-two president . . . grew more and more uncomfortable in his small wooden chair. By the middle of the seventh inning he could bear it no longer and stood up to stretch his aching legs—whereupon everyone else in the stadium, thinking the president was about to leave, rose to show their respect. A few minutes later Taft returned to his seat, the crowd followed suit, and the “seventh-inning stretch” was born.¹

While most historians agree that something akin to a late-inning stretch took place sporadically at some baseball games prior to 1910,² its enduring popularity as one of baseball’s most deeply embedded rituals can be traced in large part to Taft’s aches and pains at that Senators-Athletics game.

Now what does President Taft’s experience at a baseball game more than a century ago have to do with us? Let me suggest that with respect to the pandemic, we are just finishing the seventh-inning stretch. Just as President Taft needed a break after sitting in an undersized seat for six and a half innings, many of us were ready for a change by the end of last fall semester. If seven innings of being confined to an uncomfortable seat can seem like a long time, nine months of social distancing, Zoom classes, and mask wearing can seem like a lifetime. Yet we persevered. We made it to the end of the fall semester, and we welcomed the chance to change positions—to stretch, so to speak. The pandemic seventh-inning stretch came just in time for many of us.

But the game was not over when President Taft took that rejuvenating break. He was reenergized, but he returned to his wooden chair, and its shape and size were no more accommodating than they were before he stood. There was more baseball to be played, and the outcome was still uncertain.³ A lot can happen in the last two innings of a baseball game.

Similarly, the pandemic experience is not over for us. The need to adhere to the guidelines is more important than ever. Because of your good work last semester, we are ahead. And if we stay ahead—if we finish strong—we can, like the home baseball team, end the game one-half inning early. If, on the other hand, we lose focus and let down

our guard, the virus may overtake us, requiring us to go extra innings—or worse, to cancel the game.

The seventh-inning stretch can, therefore, not only rejuvenate us but also remind us of the need to continue on—the need to persevere. The word *persevere* has a deeper meaning than we may realize. President Russell M. Nelson recently shared with us that one of the Hebrew meanings of the theologically significant name *Israel* is “let God prevail.”⁴ Another Hebrew meaning of that name—given to Jacob after his bout of wrestling—is “persevere”: “he perseveres (with) God.”⁵ This linguistic connection between *persevere* and *Israel* reminds us that difficult tasks, like persevering through a pandemic, are easier when we involve God in the process. So I urge you to persevere—to “be not weary in well-doing,”⁶ as modern scripture puts it. We have made it to the seventh-inning stretch. We just need to finish strong.

One key to persevering comes from another aspect of the traditional seventh-inning stretch. Years after President Taft’s precedent-setting stretch in 1910, some teams began to add music to the tradition. In 1934, the song “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” was played for the first time in a World Series game.⁷ Over the ensuing decades, that song has become standard seventh-inning fare at most major-league parks.⁸ Because of its association with the seventh-inning stretch, it is now unquestionably the best-known baseball song in America—one that *unifies* the entire crowd at a baseball game, regardless of their team preference.

To those unfamiliar with baseball, this surely must be odd. As one reporter put it:

The seventh-inning stretch is a bit bizarre—fans suddenly standing up and singing a song about attending the very event they’re at—but it’s . . . a ritual that makes baseball baseball, with its history and shared experiences.⁹

And it is that unifying element of the ritual that makes the moment so powerful and reenergizing. It doesn’t matter how well you sing or which team you are cheering for: during the seventh-inning stretch, you are united with others around you—brought together in the moment. As one Colorado Rockies fan explained:

At the ballpark it doesn't matter if you sing alto or awful. . . .

“ . . . [Baseball is] best enjoyed if you embrace . . . the chance to stand up and join in a tradition where, for one minute, we can all get along—even with the Cards fans or Dodgers fans.”¹⁰

There is, as Joseph Smith explained, power in unity.¹¹ And we are in more need of that unifying power than perhaps at any time in our lifetimes, not only to weather the pandemic storm but also to address pressing issues like social justice, poverty, racism, and angry divisiveness and intolerance in political and other matters.

That We May Be as One

Unity is a concept that extends well beyond baseball, and even beyond any of the more important issues we currently face. It is an eternal gospel principle whose presence or absence determines not only the stability and prosperity of a community but also our own eternal destiny.¹² Simply put, we cannot be exalted without achieving a high level of unity.

The Lord made this clear in section 38 of the Doctrine and Covenants. He commanded the early Saints, “Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.”¹³ Given the centrality of unity to our eternal destiny, it is not surprising that on the last evening of His mortal ministry, the Savior prayed to His Heavenly Father on behalf of His beloved disciples, asking “that they may be one, even as we are one . . . , that they may be made perfect in one.”¹⁴

The positive impact of unity on individuals and society is demonstrated by scriptural examples of societies that had achieved an extraordinary level of unity. These include the descendants of Lehi in the American continent after the visitation of the Savior,¹⁵ the members of the early Church in the Middle East shortly after the Savior’s mortal ministry there,¹⁶ and the ancient people of Enoch.¹⁷ In each of these situations, the members of the society had “their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another”¹⁸ to such an extent that they could be described as being “of one heart.”¹⁹ Speaking of those who had reached this level of unity, Mormon observed, “Surely there could not

be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God.”²⁰

Unity is essential to our happiness. Some may find a call for unity strange at a time when we are working to promote more diversity on campus. But, as Elder Quentin L. Cook noted in the most recent general conference, “unity and diversity are not opposites. We can achieve greater unity as we foster an atmosphere of inclusion and respect for diversity.”²¹

Some confusion on this issue comes from the ambiguity of the term *unity*. True unity does not require us to give up our individuality. As the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. observed, “Unity has never meant uniformity.”²² While all human beings share a common bond as beloved spirit children of Heavenly Parents,²³ each of us is a unique individual with individual personalities, experiences, and gifts. And each of these individual characteristics can contribute to greater unity.

The apostle Paul explained how this works in his first epistle to the Saints at Corinth. After noting the different gifts that different individuals had been blessed with, Paul taught that even though the gifts were different, each contributed to the whole, just as individual parts of the body contribute to the wellness of the whole body. And each individual part is equally important. Paul said:

For the body is not one member, but many.

If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? . . .

If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? . . .

But now are they many members, yet but one body.

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.”²⁴

President Howard W. Hunter summarized the point and applied it to the modern-day Church when he stated:

We are truly dependent on each other, “and the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.” (1 Cor. 12:21.) Nor can the North Americans say to the Asians,

nor the Europeans to the islanders of the sea, “I have no need of thee.” No, in this church we have need of every member, and we pray, as did Paul when he wrote to the church in Corinth, “that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.

“And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.” (1 Cor. 12:25–26.)²⁵

That same principle applies with full force to the university community. When we welcome and value the gifts, talents, experiences, and perspectives of all of God’s children who are engaged in our common enterprise, we will not only more fully reach our individual potential but will also be more united.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen offered a simple analogy to explain how bringing together those with diverse gifts, personalities, and experiences can produce an enhanced and enriched form of unity:

For me, the ideal metaphor is a musical one: with our many voices, we could all sing in unison, in harmony, or in dissonance. Of these three, I prefer harmony, because it enables a variety of voices to blend into a fuller, richer sound than mere unison.²⁶

And, as demonstrated by Marcus Roberts and the Modern Jazz Generation at a forum here last February, the analogy applies regardless of the type of music. Even in a jazz ensemble in which individual improvisation often takes center stage, there is still a need for unity, and the results of this combination of individuality and unity are sweet, as demonstrated in the following clip. [A video clip was shown.²⁷]

So if we want to achieve our full potential as individuals and as a campus community, we need to emphasize both unity and diversity—both our commonality and our individuality. Without unity, diversity becomes divisive. Without diversity, unity becomes stagnant. As Pastor Skip Heitzig put it, “If you have unity without variety, you have uniformity and that’s boring. If you have variety without unity, you have anarchy.”²⁸

A powerful example of what can happen when unity and diversity combine was provided by our

football team this past fall. As the team gathered for summer workouts, the sporting world—and most of society—was focused on racial inequalities and inequities that were brought to the fore by a number of events. Co-captain Troy Warner explained, “We just wanted to get together . . . and just kind of talk about how we were feeling, let players express their feelings, their emotions.”²⁹

As described by one reporter:

Black players, Polynesian players and white players took turns. They had seen NBA players wearing social justice messages on their uniforms. . . .

The BYU players decided they wanted to send a message, too, one they hoped would be visible to the millions expected to watch broadcasts of their games. . . .

“We had an open forum about what we thought should be the message,” junior wide receiver Dax Milne said. “We really tried hard to make it a message that was not controversial . . . , and someone mentioned ‘love one another,’” a teaching of Jesus Christ that resonates deeply with members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³⁰

The team designed a T-shirt with “We Are One” on the front and “Love One Another” on the back, reflecting both the power of unity and the means by which that happens. As co-captain Isaiah Kaufusi stated, “We’ve chosen to love, and that unites us.”³¹

The message was seen by millions, and sales of the T-shirts generated more than \$200,000 in profits—all of which the players decided to contribute to scholarships for first-generation college students and others with extenuating circumstances at BYU.³²

If we strive for true unity by following the Savior’s example to love others, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, political leanings, or other distinguishing characteristics, we can truly transform both our university community and the larger world with which we interact.

Two Things We Can Do to Persevere and Be More Unified

Let me suggest two things we can do to enhance unity and diversity in ways that will help us both persevere though the pandemic and lay

the foundation for a stronger, more diverse, and more unified campus.

1. We Must Avoid Contention

First, we must avoid contention. While diversity is not the opposite of unity, contention is. As the Savior Himself made clear when He was laying the foundation for a Zion society in the ancient Americas:

He that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

*Behold, this is not my doctrine . . . ; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.*³³

This does not mean that we will not disagree with each other, but it does mean we will do so in a way that both focuses on issues and not on ad hominem attacks and reflects the truth that each of us, including those with whom we disagree, is a beloved spirit child of Heavenly Parents. Former academic vice president James R. Rasband explained at our annual university conference in 2017:

*For us it is not unity or diversity but both unity and diversity. . . . Diverse perspectives and experiences will be a boon to our effort to discern how best to accomplish our Mission and Aims. We won't always agree, but we can disagree charitably. By charitable disagreement I mean more than basic civility. Instead of mere civility, which is a baseline obligation, I hope we will listen—really listen—to each other and work to understand one another's views and statements in a charitable light. What an oasis of learning we would be if pursuing light and truth were the goal and if inevitable disagreements were handled with true charity.*³⁴

Oh, how we need that kind of oasis in the world today. And BYU can be that oasis.

As Dr. King put it, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”³⁵ As the football T-shirts remind us, if we want to be one, we must love one another, even those—especially those—with whom we disagree.

2. Perfect Unity Is Achieved Only Through God and Christ

Second, we need to recognize that perfect unity can be achieved only through God and Christ. Our efforts to become united will be fully successful only if we focus first on our relationship with Them. The Guide to the Scriptures defines *unity* as “to become one in thought, desire, and purpose first with our Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ, and then with other Saints.”³⁶

If we align ourselves more with God and Christ, we will become more loving, we will see others more for who they really are, and we will draw closer to both God and our fellow human beings. Elder David A. Bednar once explained this truth in a more visual way with respect to married couples. Using a triangle with Christ at the apex and a wife at the base of one corner and a husband at the base of the other, both separated from each other and from the Savior, Elder Bednar explained that as both of those in the couple focus their attention on the Savior, they are drawn upward to Him, and they naturally move closer toward one another at the same time. As Elder Bednar explained, “Because of and through the Redeemer, . . . [people] come closer together.”³⁷

When speaking of the Zion societies described in 4 Nephi and the New Testament book of Acts, Sister Reyna I. Aburto explained:

*We can suppose that the reason why they were so united is because they knew the Lord personally. They had been close to Him, and they had been witnesses of His divine mission, of the miracles that He performed, and of His Resurrection. . . . They knew that “He is the source of all healing, peace, and eternal progress.”*³⁸

God is the author of diversity and the source of unity. As we come closer to Him and to His Son, Jesus Christ, we will advance both powerful principles in a synergistic way. As we embrace our true primary identity as children of God and act as disciples of Christ, they will magnify our individual gifts while also making us more united.

So my message to you is simple: persevere in unity by coming closer to Heavenly Father and Christ, who never tire and who are perfectly united.³⁹ If we do so, we will be able to

successfully meet whatever challenges we may face individually or collectively in the coming semester and year. May we do so is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. David Emery, “The History of the Seventh-Inning Stretch,” Humor, Urban Legends, LiveAbout, 25 March 2019, liveabout.com/who-invented-the-seventh-inning-stretch-3298241. See also Wikipedia, s.v. “seventh-inning stretch.”

2. See Elizabeth Nix, “How Did Baseball’s Seventh-Inning Stretch Originate?” History Stories, History, 22 August 2018, history.com/news/how-did-baseballs-seventh-inning-stretch-originate. See also Benjamin Hochman, “Seventh Inning: The Stretch,” Extras, *Denver Post*, 2015, extras.denverpost.com/nine-innings/inning7.html.

3. The Senators won the game 3-0 on a one-hitter by Walter Johnson. See Stephen V. Rice, “April 14, 1910: Walter Johnson Impresses President Taft on Opening Day,” Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), sabr.org/gamesproj/game/april-14-1910-walter-johnson-impresses-president-taft-on-opening-day.

4. Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign*, November 2020; quoting Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Israel.”

5. Genesis 32:28, note b. See primitive root word for *Israel*, s.v. “sarah” at word number 8280 on page 121 of the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1890): “to prevail:—have power (as a prince)”; see also word number 8280 on page 975 of *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, ed. Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906; reprint, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996): “persist, exert oneself, persevere.” Also see primitive root word for *Israel*, s.v. “sarah” at word number 8323 on page 121 of the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary in *Strong’s Concordance*: “to have . . . dominion:—altogether, make self a prince, (bear) rule.”

6. D&C 64:33.

7. See Wikipedia, s.v. “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” The original 1908 lyrics were:

*Katie Casey was baseball mad,
Had the fever and had it bad.
Just to root for the home town crew,
Ev’ry sou
Katie blew.
On a Saturday her young beau
Called to see if she’d like to go
To see a show, but Miss Kate said, “No,
I’ll tell you what you can do:”*

Chorus

*Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd;
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,
I don’t care if I never get back.
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don’t win, it’s a shame.
For it’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out,
At the old ball game.*

*Katie Casey saw all the games,
Knew the players by their first names.
Told the umpire he was wrong,
All along,
Good and strong.
When the score was just two to two,
Katie Casey knew what to do,
Just to cheer up the boys she knew,
She made the gang sing this song:*

Chorus

8. Lyricist Jack Norworth

claimed that he scribbled the words on an envelope after seeing a sign on the subway that read: “Baseball Today—Polo Grounds.” . . . Norworth also maintained that he had never attended a professional baseball game before penning those sixteen lines, which were set to music by songwriter and publisher Albert von Tilzer (1878–1956), who also had never seen a baseball game. [“Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” article, Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/ihas.200153239]

9. Hochman, “Seventh Inning: The Stretch”; emphasis added.

10. Hochman, “Seventh Inning: The Stretch”; quoting Lauren Cronin.

11. “Unity is power” (Joseph Smith, “To the Saints,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 24 [1 November 1843]: 377; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007], 275).

12. Joseph Smith taught:

*Unity is strength. “How pleasing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” [see Psalm 133:1]. Let the Saints of the Most High ever cultivate this principle, and the most glorious blessings must result, not only to them individually, but to the whole church. [“Extract from an Epistle to the Elders in England,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 5 (1 January 1841): 258; text modernized; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 276]*

13. D&C 38:27.

14. John 17:22–23.

15. See 4 Nephi 1.

16. See Acts 4:32.

17. See Moses 7:16–20, 69.

18. Mosiah 18:21.

19. Acts 4:32; Moses 7:18. See also 4 Nephi 1:15, 17.

20. 4 Nephi 1:16.

21. Quentin L. Cook, “Hearts Knit in Righteousness and Unity,” *Ensign*, November 2020.

22. Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 157.

23. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).

24. 1 Corinthians 12:14–15, 17, 20–21.

25. Howard W. Hunter, “That We May Be One,” *Ensign*, May 1976.

26. Bruce C. Hafen, “All Those Books, and the Spirit, Too!” BYU annual university conference address, 26 August 1991.

27. See Marcus Roberts, “Democracy Through Jazz,” BYU forum event with the Modern Jazz Generation, 25 February 2020.

28. Skip Heitzig, “Hang Together,” Connection devotional, LightSource, 2 July 2010, lightsource.com/devotionals/the-connection-devotional-with-skip-heitzig/the-connection-devotional-week-of-july-2-11634157.html.

29. Troy Warner, in Tad Walch, “BYU: The Top 10 Football Team Spreading a Message of Healing in 2020,” Faith, Sports, *Deseret News*, 6 November 2020.

30. Walch, “Spreading a Message.”

31. Isaiah Kaufusi, in Walch, “Spreading a Message.”

32. See Walch, “Spreading a Message.” Note that the BYU Store also has chosen to contribute all its share of the profits to the same cause.

33. 3 Nephi 11:29–30. It is noteworthy that when describing the Zion society that flourished after the Savior’s visit to the Americas, Mormon, who had witnessed the complete disintegration of that society, repeatedly highlighted the absence of contention as a hallmark of the Zion society (see 4 Nephi 1:2, 13, 15, 18).

34. James R. Rasband, “Paired Aspirations,” BYU university conference faculty session address, 28 August 2017; emphasis in original.

35. Martin Luther King Jr., “Loving Your Enemies” (sermon preached in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 17 November 1957), in King, *Strength to Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 47.

36. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. “unity”; emphasis added.

37. David A. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” *Ensign*, June 2006.

38. Reyna I. Aburto, “With One Accord,” *Ensign*, May 2018; quoting Jean B. Bingham, “That Your Joy Might Be Full,” *Ensign*, November 2017.

39. The Prophet Joseph Smith often encouraged the Saints to persevere in unity, admonishing them to engage in what he called “a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together,” a common saying at the time (quoted by Joseph Smith, in *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 3 [1 February 1844]: 427; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 273).