

The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University

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Someone once told me that the young speak of the future because they have no past, while the elderly speak of the past because they have no future. Although it damages that little aphorism, I who have no future have come to you as the veritable Ancient of Days to speak of the future of BYU, but a future anchored in our distinctive past. If I have worded that just right, it means I can talk about anything I want.

I am grateful that the full university family is gathered today—faculty, staff, and administration. Regardless of your job description, I am going to speak to all of you as teachers, because at BYU that is what all of us are. Thank you for being faithful role models in that regard. We teach at BYU.

I can't be certain, but I think that it was in the summer of 1948 when I had my first BYU experience. I would have been seven years old. We were driving back to St. George in a 1941 Plymouth from one of our rare trips to Salt Lake City. As we

came down old highway 91, I saw high on the side of one of the hills a huge block Y—white and bold and beautiful.

I don't know how to explain that moment, but it was a true epiphany for a seven-year-old, if a seven-year-old can have an epiphany. If I had already seen that Y on the drive up or at any other time, I couldn't remember it. That day I probably was seeing it for the first time. I believe I was receiving a revelation from God. I somehow knew that bold letter meant something special—something special to me—and that it would one day play a significant role in my life. When I asked my mother what it meant, she said it was the emblem of a university. I thought about that for a moment, still watching that letter on the side of the hill, and then said quietly to her, "Well, it must be the greatest university in the world."

My chance to actually get on campus came in June 1952, four years after that first sighting. That summer I accompanied my parents to one of the

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early leadership weeks—a precursor to what is now the immensely popular BYU Education Week held on campus. That means I came here for my first BYU experience sixty-nine years ago, with a preview of that four years earlier. If anyone in this audience has been coming to this campus longer than that, please come forward and give this talk. Otherwise, sit still and be patient. As Elizabeth Taylor said to her eight husbands, “I won’t be keeping you long.”

My point, dear friends, is simply this: I have loved BYU for nearly three-fourths of a century. Only my service in and testimony of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—which includes and features foremost my marriage and the beautiful children it has given us—have affected me as profoundly as has my decision to attend Brigham Young University. No one in my family had. In so testifying, I represent literally hundreds of thousands of other students who made that decision and say that same thing.

So, for the legions of us over the years, I say: Thank you. Thank you for what you do. Thank you for classes taught and meals served and grounds so well kept. Thank you for office hours and lab experiments and testimonies shared—gifts given to little people like me so we could grow up to be big people like you. Thank you for choosing to be at BYU, because your choice affected our choice, and, like Mr. Frost’s poetic path, “that has made all the difference.”¹

“A Trowel in One Hand and a Musket in the Other”

I asked President Kevin J. Worthen for a sample of the good things that have been happening of late, and I was delighted at the sheaf of items he gave me—small type, single-spaced lines, reams, it looked like—everything from academic recognitions and scholarly rankings to athletic successes and the reach of BYUtv. Karl G. Maeser would be as proud as I was.

But President Worthen and I both know those aren’t the real success stories of BYU. These are rather, as some say of ordinances in the Church, “outward signs of an inward grace.”² The real successes at BYU are the personal experiences that thousands here have had—personal

experiences difficult to document or categorize or list. Nevertheless, these are so powerful in their impact on the heart and mind that they have changed us forever.

I run a risk in citing any examples beyond my own, but let me mention just one or two.

One of our colleagues seated here this morning wrote of his first-semester, pre-mission enrollment in my friend C. Wilfred Griggs’s History of Civilization class. But this was going to be civilization seen through a BYU lens. So, as preambles to the course, Wilf had the students read President Spencer W. Kimball’s talk “The Second Century of Brigham Young University”³ and the first chapter of Hugh Nibley’s book *Approaching Zion*.⁴

Taken together, our very literate friend said these two readings “forged an indestructible union in my mind and heart between two soaring ideals—that of a consecrated university with that of a holy city. Zion, I came to believe, would be a city with a school [and, I would add, a temple, creating] something of a celestial college town, or perhaps a college kingdom.”

After his mission, our faculty friend returned to Provo, where he fell under the soul-expanding spell of John S. Tanner, “the platonic ideal of a BYU professor—superbly qualified in every secular sense, totally committed to the kingdom, and absolutely effervescing with love for the Savior, his students, and his subject. He moved seamlessly from careful teacher analysis to powerful personal testimony. He knew scores of passages from Milton and other poets by heart, [yet] verses of scripture flowed, if anything, even more freely from the abundance of his consecrated heart: I was unfailingly edified by the passion of his teaching and the eloquence of his example.”⁵

Why would such a one come back to teach at BYU after a truly distinguished postgraduate experience that might well have taken him to virtually any university in America? Because, our colleague said, “in a coming day the citizens of Zion ‘shall come forth with songs of everlasting joy’ [Moses 7:53]. I hope,” he wrote, “to help my students hear that chorus in the distance and to lend their own voices, in time, to its swelling refrain.”⁶

Such are the experiences we hope to provide our students at BYU, though probably not always

so poetically expressed. But imagine then the pain that comes with a memo like this one I recently received. These are just a half-dozen lines from a two-page document:

“You should know,” the writer said, “that some people in the extended community are feeling abandoned and betrayed by BYU. It seems that some professors (at least the vocal ones in the media) are supporting ideas that many of us feel are contradictory to gospel principles, making it appear to be about like any other university our sons and daughters could have attended. Several parents have said they no longer want to send their children here or donate to the school.

“Please don’t think I’m opposed to people thinking differently about policies and ideas,” the writer continued. “I’m not. But I would hope that BYU professors would be bridging those gaps between faith and intellect and would be sending out students who are ready to do the same in loving, intelligent, and articulate ways. Yet I fear that some faculty are not supportive of the Church’s doctrines and policies and choose to criticize them publicly. There *are* consequences to this. After having served a full-time mission and marrying her husband in the temple, a friend of mine recently left the Church. In her graduation statement on a social media post, she credited [such and such a BYU program and its faculty] with the radicalizing of her attitudes and the destruction of her faith.”⁷

Fortunately we don’t get too many of those letters, but this one isn’t unique. Several of my colleagues get the same kind, with almost all of them ultimately being forwarded to poor President Worthen. Now, most of what happens on this campus is absolutely wonderful. That is why I began as I did, with my own undying love of this place. But every so often we need a reminder of the challenge we constantly face here. Maybe it is in this meeting. I certainly remember my own experiences in these wonderful beginning-of-the-school-year meetings and how much it meant to me to be with you then. Well, it means that again today.

Here is something I said on this subject forty-one years ago, almost to the day. I was young. I was unprepared. I had been president for all of three weeks.

I said then and I say now that if we are an extension of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taking a significant amount of sacred tithes and other precious human resources, all of which might well be expended in other worthy causes, surely our integrity demands that our lives “be absolutely consistent with and characteristic of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁸ At a university there will always be healthy debate regarding a whole syllabus full of issues. But until “we all come [to] the unity of the faith, and . . . [have grown to] the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,”⁹ our next best achievement will be to stay in harmony with the Lord’s anointed, those whom He has designated to declare Church doctrine and to guide Brigham Young University as its trustees.¹⁰

In 2014, seven years ago, then Elder Russell M. Nelson came to campus for a BYU leadership meeting. His remarks were relatively brief, but, tellingly, he said:

With the Church growing more rapidly in the less prosperous countries, we . . . must conserve sacred funds more carefully than ever before.

At BYU we must ally ourselves even more closely with the work of our Heavenly Father. . . .

*A college education for our people is a sacred responsibility, [but] it is not essential for eternal life.*¹¹

A statement like that gets my attention, particularly because just a short time later President Nelson started to chair our board of trustees, hold our purse strings, and have the final “yea” or “nay” on every proposal we might make—from a new research lab to more undergraduate study space to approving a new pickup truck for the physical facilities staff! Russell M. Nelson is very, very good at listening to us. We who sit with him every day have learned the value of listening carefully to him.

Three years later, in 2017, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, not then but soon to be in the First Presidency, where he would sit only one chair—one heartbeat—away from the same position President Nelson now has, quoted our colleague Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who had said:

In a way [Church of Jesus Christ] scholars at BYU and elsewhere are a little bit like the builders of the temple in Nauvoo, who worked with a trowel in one hand and a musket in the other. Today scholars building the temple of learning must also pause on occasion to defend the kingdom. I personally think this is one of the reasons the Lord established and maintains this university. The dual role of builder and defender is unique and ongoing. I am grateful we have scholars today who can handle, as it were, both trowels and muskets.¹²

To this, Elder Oaks then challengingly responded, “I would like to hear a little more musket fire from this temple of learning.”¹³ He said this in a way that could have applied to a host of topics in various departments, but the one he specifically mentioned was the doctrine of the family and defending marriage as the union of a man and a woman.¹⁴ Little did he know that while many would hear his appeal, especially the School of Family Life, which moved quickly and visibly to assist, some others fired their muskets all right, but unfortunately they didn’t always aim at those hostile to the Church. We thought a couple of stray rounds even went north of the Point of the Mountain!

My beloved brothers and sisters, “a house . . . divided against itself . . . cannot stand,”¹⁵ and I will go to my grave pleading that this institution not only stands but stands unquestionably committed to its unique academic mission and to the Church that sponsors it. We hope it isn’t a surprise to you that your trustees are *not* deaf or blind to the feelings that swirl around marriage and the whole same-sex topic on campus—and a lot of other topics. I and many of my Brethren have spent more time and shed more tears on this subject than we could ever adequately convey to you this morning or any morning. We have spent hours discussing what the doctrine of the Church can and cannot provide the individuals and families struggling over this difficult issue. So it is with a little scar tissue of our own that we are trying to avoid—and hope *all* will try to avoid—language, symbols, and situations that are more divisive than unifying at the very time we want to show love for *all* of God’s children.

If a student commandeers a graduation podium intended to represent *everyone* getting diplomas that day in order to announce his personal sexual orientation, what might another speaker feel free to announce the next year, until eventually anything goes? What might commencement come to mean—or *not* mean—if we push individual license over institutional dignity for very long? Do we simply end up with more divisiveness in our culture than we already have? And we already have far too much everywhere.

In that spirit, let me go no farther before declaring unequivocally my love and that of my Brethren for those who live with this same-sex challenge and so much complexity that goes with it. Too often the world has been unkind—in many instances crushingly cruel—to these, our brothers and sisters. Like many of you, *we* have spent hours with them, and we have wept and prayed and wept again in an effort to offer love and hope while keeping the gospel strong and the obedience to commandments evident in every individual life.

But it will assist all of us—it will assist everyone—trying to provide help in this matter if things can be kept in some proportion and balance in the process. For example, we have to be careful that love and empathy do not get interpreted as condoning and advocacy or that orthodoxy and loyalty to principle not be interpreted as unkindness or disloyalty to people. As near as I can tell, Christ never *once* withheld His love from anyone, but He also never once said to anyone, “Because I love you, you are exempt from keeping my commandments.” We are tasked with trying to strike that same sensitive, demanding balance in our lives.

Musket fire? Yes, we will always need defenders of the faith, but “friendly fire” is a tragedy—and from time to time the Church, its leaders, and some of our colleagues within the university community have taken such fire on this campus. And sometimes it isn’t friendly, wounding students and the parents of students—so many who are confused about what so much recent flag-waving and parade-holding on this issue means. My beloved friends, this kind of confusion and

conflict ought not to be. Not here. There are better ways to move toward crucially important goals in these very difficult matters—ways that show empathy and understanding for everyone while maintaining loyalty to prophetic leadership and devotion to revealed doctrine.

My Brethren have made the case for the metaphor of musket fire, which I have endorsed yet again today. There will continue to be those who oppose our teachings—and with that will continue the need to define, document, and defend the faith. But we all look forward to the day when we can “beat [our] swords into plowshares, and [our] spears into pruninghooks” and, at least on this subject, “learn war [no] more.”¹⁶ And while I have focused on this same-sex topic this morning more than I would have liked, I pray you will see it as emblematic of a lot of issues our students, our communities, and our Church face in this complex, contemporary world of ours.

The Unfolding Dream of BYU

But I digress! Back to the blessings of a school in Zion! Do you see the beautiful parallel between the unfolding of the Restoration and the prophetic development of BYU, notwithstanding that both will have their critics along the way? Just as has the Church itself, BYU has grown in spiritual strength, in the number of people it reaches and serves, and in its unique place among other institutions of higher education. It has grown in national and international reputation. More and more of its faculty are distinguishing themselves, and, even more important, so are more and more of its students.

Reinforcing the fact that so many do understand exactly what that unfolding dream of BYU is that President Worthen spoke about, not long ago one of your number wrote to me this marvelous description of what he thought was the “call” to those who serve at BYU: “The Lord’s call [to those of us who serve at BYU] is a . . . call to create learning experiences of unprecedented depth, quality, and impact. . . . As good as BYU is and has been, this is a call to do [better]. It is . . . a call to educate many more students, to more . . . effectively help them become true disciples of Jesus Christ, [and] to prepare them to . . . lead in their

families, in the Church, [and] in their [professions] in a world filled with commotion. . . . But [answering this call] . . . cannot be [done successfully] without His . . . help.” The writer, one of you, concluded, “I believe that help will come according to the faith and obedience of the tremendously good people of BYU.”¹⁷

I agree wholeheartedly and enthusiastically with such a sense of calling here and with that reference to and confidence in “the tremendously good people of BYU.” Let me underscore that idea of such a call by returning to President Kimball’s second-century address focused on by President Worthen.

Our bright, budding new commissioner of education, Elder Clark G. Gilbert, is one of my traveling companions today. You may be certain that Elder Gilbert loves this institution—his alma mater—deeply and brings to his assignment a reverence for its mission and its message. As part of his introduction to you, I am asking Elder Gilbert to come on campus on any calendar date he and President Worthen can work out, and whether those visits are formal or casual or both, I hope they can accomplish at least two things:

First of all, I hope you will come to see quickly the remarkable strengths Elder Gilbert brings to his calling, even as he learns more about the flagship of his fleet and why our effort at the Church Educational System would be a failure without the health, success, and participation of BYU.

Second, noting that we are just a few years short of halfway through those second hundred years of which President Kimball spoke, I think it would be fascinating to know if we are, in fact, making any headway on the challenges he laid before us and of which Elder David A. Bednar reminded the BYU leadership team just a few weeks ago.¹⁸

When you look at President Kimball’s talk again, may I ask you to pay particular attention to that sweet prophet’s effort to ask that we be unique? In his discourse, President Kimball used the word *unique* eight times and the word *special* eight times. It seems clear to me in my seventy-three years of loving it that *BYU will become an “educational Mt. Everest”¹⁹ only to the degree it embraces its uniqueness, its singularity.* We could

mimic every other university in the world until we got a bloody nose in the effort, and the world would still say, “BYU who?” No, we must have the will to be different and to stand alone, if necessary, being a university second to none in its role primarily as an undergraduate teaching institution that is unequivocally true to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. If at a future time that mission means foregoing some professional affiliations and certifications, then so be it. There may come a day when the price we are asked to pay for such association is simply too high and too inconsistent with who we are. No one wants it to come to that, least of all me, but if it does, we will pursue our own destiny, a “destiny [that] is not a matter of chance; [but largely] . . . a matter of choice; . . . not a thing to be waited for, [but] . . . a thing to be [envisioned and] achieved.”²⁰

“Mom, what is that big Y on that mountain?”

“Jeff, it stands for the university here in Provo: Brigham Young University.”

“Well, it must be the greatest university in the world.”

And so, for me, it is. To help you pursue that destiny in the only real way I know how to help, I leave an apostolic blessing on every one of you this morning as you start another school year. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and with gratitude for His holy priesthood and as if hands were on your head—had we time to do that, we surely would—I bless you personally, each one of you personally. I bless the students who will come under your influence, and I bless the university, including its marvelous president, in its campus-wide endeavor. I bless you that profound personal faith will be your watchword and that unending blessings of personal rectitude will be your eternal reward. I bless your professional work that it will be admired by your peers, and I bless your devotion to gospel truths that it will be the saving grace in some student’s life. I bless your families that those you hope will be faithful in keeping their covenants will be saved at least in part because you have been faithful in keeping yours. Light conquers darkness. Truth triumphs over error. Goodness is victorious over evil in the end, every time.

I bless each one of you with every righteous desire of your heart, and I thank you for giving your love and loyalty to BYU, to students like me and my beloved wife. Please, from one who owes so much to this school and who has loved her so deeply for so long, keep her not only standing but standing for what she uniquely and prophetically was meant to be. And may the rest of higher education “see your good works, and glorify [our] Father which is in heaven,”²¹ I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” *Mountain Interval* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916), 9.
2. See John Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace” (1772).
3. See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.
4. See Hugh W. Nibley, chapter 1, “Our Glory or Our Condemnation,” *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton, vol. 9, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989), 26–55.
5. Personal correspondence, 1 August 2021.
6. Personal correspondence, 1 August 2021.
7. Personal correspondence, 10 June 2021; emphasis in original.
8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Bond of Charity,” BYU annual university conference address, 26 August 1980, 7.
9. Ephesians 4:13.
10. See Holland, “Bond of Charity.”
11. Russell M. Nelson, “Controlled Growth,” BYU leadership meeting address, 25 August 2014.
12. Neal A. Maxwell, “Blending Research and Revelation,” remarks at the BYU President’s Leadership Council meetings, 19 March 2004; quoted in Dallin H. Oaks, “Challenges to the Mission of Brigham Young University,” BYU leadership meeting address, 21 April 2017; also quoted in Oaks, “It Hasn’t Been Easy and It Won’t Get Easier,” BYU leadership meeting address, 25 August 2014.

13. Oaks, "Challenges to the Mission."
14. See Oaks, "Challenges to the Mission."
15. Mark 3:25.
16. Isaiah 2:4.
17. Personal correspondence, 21 June 2021.
18. See David A. Bednar, "Look unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not," BYU leadership meeting address, 16 April 2021.
19. Spencer W. Kimball, "Installation of and Charge to the President," *Inaugural Addresses*, 14 November 1980, Brigham Young University, 9; see also Kimball, "Second Century."
20. William Jennings Bryan, "America's Mission" (22 February 1899), in *Speeches of William Jennings Bryan*, vol. 2 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1913), 11.
21. Matthew 5:16; see also 3 Nephi 12:16.