Hearts Knit Together in Love

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I join Peggy in welcoming you to this new semester. You are a wonderful sight.

In my opening devotional two years ago, I spoke on the need for us to physically gather together in Provo. Citing the Prophet Joseph Smith's observation that "compact society is absolutely necessary"[1] to the educational enterprise, I boldly proclaimed, "There is something about physical proximity—about gathering in a compact society—that is essential to . . . the kind of education that is most important [to us]."[2]

Six months later, that message of gathering and proximity was suddenly replaced by a plea to scatter and socially distance. Talk about a statement that did not age well. Like so many other things, the desirability of physical proximity and compact society seemed to be radically altered by the coronavirus.

Given the apparent limited shelf life of my message about the importance of physically gathering and the continued, unwelcome presence of the pandemic, some might think this devotional would present me with a good opportunity to confess my error and admit that COVID has permanently changed everything, including the desirability of gathering in a compact society. Instead, even though we are wearing masks—and even though I am still strongly urging each of you to get vaccinated if you haven't done so already—I am unwilling to concede to the coronavirus.

Indeed, today I am going to double down on the concept of gathering and proximity, believing that these are eternal principles that will remain applicable well beyond COVID and likely well beyond this mortal existence. While we need to temporarily adjust some features of our educational endeavor until the pandemic abates, it is, in my view, more important than ever that we be with one another during this educational process—that we be part of a community.

"The Waning of Belonging"

Sociologists and philosophers have long noted the human need to join with one another. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle opined that man is by nature a social or "political

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on September 7, 2021.

animal"[3]—that we have a deep-seated, innate desire to live and associate with others and to form communities.

Well before that, the Lord observed that "it is not good that . . . man [or woman] should be alone,"[4] reflecting not just the importance of marriage but also the larger principle "that no one can flourish in isolation and that the quality of our relationships with others will ultimately determine our level of fulfillment and happiness in both this mortal existence and the life to come."[5] Thus, there is within each of us a natural desire to give up a part of ourselves to a larger collective, to be part of a community.

At the same time, there is also within each of us a desire—a deep-seated need—to be individually unique, free to act for ourselves, and independent from external constraints or commitments. This is reflected in the gospel concept of agency: our ability to choose our own destiny without interference from others, consistent with eternal law.[6]

There is, at one level, inevitable tension between these two concepts. As political scientist Robert D. Putnam has written, "The relationship between the individual and the community is one of the timeless dualisms of social thought."[7] Humans seem to vacillate between wanting to belong and wanting to be left alone. The tension and interplay between these two concepts are illustrated in classic western movies, some of which portray "a lone cowboy [hero] riding into the sunset"[8] as the iconic symbol of individualism, while others focus on settlers traveling in wagon trains, sustaining and protecting one another as members of interdependent communities.[9] Are we in America cowboys or pioneers? Or maybe both?

As Putnam observed, "The relative emphasis on the individual and the community in American culture has varied over . . . periods of time, a pendulum swinging irregularly from one pole to the other and back again."[10]

This swinging is, in part, a reflection of the fact that, depending on their definition and composition, communities can lead to ends that are either desirable or deplorable. Overly narrow and distorted definitions of community can have devasting effects, as evidenced by the pain and suffering of Native Americans often overlooked in classic western movies.

At the same time, inclusive communities can become powerful forces for improving the human condition. Martin Luther King Jr. used the concepts of a "beloved community"[11] and shared morality as influential tools in his battle for equality, reminding White clergy that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."[12]

Thus, how a community is defined and how it is situated are critical to both its success and its desirability. With that in mind, let me share with you my vision of the kind of community I hope we can create in this year and in coming years as we gather together in this compact society at BYU.

I begin, as I often do, by reference to the Mission of Brigham Young University. As I believe most of you know, our ultimate mission "is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life."[13] Our work is aligned with and is part of God's work to exalt all His children,[14] including all in this university community. We have a distinctive role to play in that process—an educational role. We are to "provide a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting where a commitment to excellence is expected and the full realization of human potential is pursued."[15] In the community we hope to build, students will be stretched and challenged intellectually in ways that may not always be comfortable—but should always be faith filled—to help them realize their full potential as children of God.

The mission of BYU notes that "to succeed in this mission the university must provide an environment enlightened by living prophets and sustained by those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God."[16] In this educational community, we are blessed to be led and guided by prophets, seers, and revelators, who in turn lead us to the Savior and His ultimate example, which we aspire to follow. We must take full advantage of that blessing if we are to create the kind of community we seek.

The rest of the BYU mission outlines the specific educational goals, which I commend to you, and then concludes with the stirring assertion that "the earnest pursuit of this institutional

mission . . . will greatly enlarge Brigham Young University's influence in a world we wish to improve."[17]

At my inauguration in 2014, President Henry B. Eyring described the kind of educational community that could fulfill the charges set forth in the mission of BYU. He called it "a vibrant and determined community of learners and lifters."[18] I later described it as "a community in which all members are truly engaged in an individual and collective effort to use all their minds and faith to learn as much as they can . . . as fast as they can, with the ultimate goal of sharing insights with others to improve their lives."[19] I hope we will all renew our efforts to create that kind of "vibrant and determined community of learners and lifters" that President Eyring described.

But there is a more specific challenge that we currently face. We live in a time when the pendulum that Putnam described has swung decidedly in the direction of individualism and away from any notions of community. It is an era in which we are experiencing what Elder Bruce C. Hafen called "the waning of belonging."[20] Our sense of community has lessened, and our sense of loneliness and isolation has increased. Despite an increase in the number of people with whom we have contact through social media, our innate need to be deeply connected with others is increasingly unfulfilled. Moreover, those same social media tools increasingly direct us away from any personal contact with those who disagree with or are different from us. So our society becomes increasingly polarized and increasingly angry, and more and more people feel marginalized—even on this campus. Thus, there is now a need to focus more specifically on creating and enhancing another kind of community—a community of belonging in which all members realize the full blessings that come from gathering together in "a vibrant and determined community of learners and lifters."

Creating a Community of Belonging

Many of you know that at the BYU annual university conference two weeks ago, we introduced the BYU Statement on Belonging to help us address this need. The original impetus for the statement was the outstanding work of the Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging, which was given the charge to help us root out racism on campus. However, as I stated at the annual university conference, the reach of the BYU Statement on Belonging and the accompanying BYU Office of Belonging extends beyond that important endeavor.[21]

I will not read each section of that statement, as I did at the annual university conference, but I would like to highlight and elaborate on a couple of key provisions. A copy of the full statement can be found on the BYU News website.[22]

The statement begins with two key principles that unite us. Any community must ultimately be defined most fundamentally by what its members have in common. If they don't share anything in common, there can be no community. And on *this* topic at *this* university, the two points that most *unite us* may *distinguish and differentiate us* from many other universities. The BYU Statement on Belonging begins: "We are united by our common primary identity as children of God . . . and our commitment to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ."[23] In other words, we share a common understanding of who we really are and why we are really here on earth.

That common understanding is more powerful than many may appreciate. On one occasion, President Russell M. Nelson was asked how to help those struggling with a particular prevalent sin. His response was, "Teach them their identity and their purpose."[24] Elder Tad R. Callister later observed that this is "an appropriate response to most of the challenges we face in life."[25] Our understanding of our relationship with God and of His plan for us enhances not only our confidence and self-worth but, more important, our ability and desire to love all with whom we come in contact as we recognize their infinite worth and potential.

United by our understanding of those and other truths of the restored gospel, "we strive to create a community of belonging composed of students, faculty, and staff whose hearts are knit together in love."[26]

Our goal is to create a community of belonging involving all members of our community. As I have

already noted, a sense of belonging is important to all human beings. Quoting from a report from the Mayo Clinic, President M. Russell Ballard noted at the most recent general conference:

"Having a sense of belonging is so important. . . . Nearly every aspect of our lives is organized around belonging to something." This report adds, "We cannot separate the importance of a sense of belonging from our physical and mental health"—and, I would add, our spiritual health.[27]

The Mayo Clinic report that President Ballard cited went on to add:

The social ties that accompany a sense of belonging are a protective factor helping manage stress. When we feel we have support and are not alone, we often cope more effectively with difficult times in our lives.[28]

The strength and support that exist in a community of belonging are characterized in a scripture cited in the Statement on Belonging: Mosiah 18:21. In that scripture, a community of belonging is one in which the members' "hearts [are] knit together . . . in love." The phrase "hearts knit together in love" is interesting and significant. The heart is used in scripture as "a symbol of [our] mind and will . . . and the figurative source of all emotions and feelings."[29] The heart represents the core of who we really are. In a community of belonging, a portion of this central existential self must be willingly sacrificed to the group in ways that enlarge both our individual and community abilities.

Knitting is a process whereby fabric—usually yarn—is used to create a product that

consists of a number of consecutive rows of connected loops that intermesh with the next and previous rows. As each row is formed, each newly created loop is pulled through one or more loops from the prior row and placed on the . . . needle so that the loops from the prior row can be pulled off the other needle without unraveling.[30]

Thus, knitting involves multiple, reinforcing connections as the different loops are brought together to create one single product.

Knitting is similar in some respects to weaving, which is also "a technique for producing a . . . fabric made from . . . yarn or thread."[31] But knitting is different from weaving in one significant way: "Because there is no single straight line of yarn anywhere in the pattern, a knitted piece of fabric can stretch in all directions."[32] That is not true for most woven products, which typically "only stretch along the bias."[33] "Depending on the yarn and knitting pattern, knitted garments can stretch as much as 500%. For this reason, knitting was initially developed for garments that must be elastic or stretch in response to the wearer's motions."[34]

We will need that kind of flexibility in our efforts to create a community of belonging, because knitting hearts will stretch us in ways that will challenge and test each of us. We often find ourselves exasperated when we realize we are working with less-than-perfect beings, but we too often forget that so are those who are working with us. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it, "We are each other's clinical material."[35] That is both a sacred trust and a challenging test that requires and develops patience and love.

But even as we are flexible and patient with others, we must remain anchored to the transcendent truths of God's eternal plan. As anyone who has knitted knows, "if they are not secured, the loops of a knitted course will come undone when their yarn is pulled."[36] Like any knitted product, if our hearts are not secured to God and His truths and commandments, the entire knitting project may quickly and completely unravel.

Let me suggest three things we can do to secure the knitting that has already occurred and also accelerate the pace of the knitting that remains to be done to create a community of belonging in which hearts are united in love.

First, let us strive to view others first as children of God. Our initial inclination as fallen individuals is to view those in front of us primarily by their gender, race, political affiliation, sexual orientation, economic class, or other distinguishing features. Those identities can be important from time to time, but all of them are secondary all the time. Our failure to constantly remember that is the cause of many unnecessary wounds and tears in the knitted product. We would do well to keep

in mind the profound observation of C. S. Lewis, who once stated:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no ***ordinary*** *people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.*[37]

If we were to view those with whom we disagree through this lens, it would not only elevate the tone of the discussion but would also improve the quality of decisions that are made. More important, it would change the overall environment and soften hearts in ways that would make them more suitable for knitting.

Second, we should think more in terms of the "we" and less in terms of the "I." Usage of these pronouns can be very telling. As Putnam explained:

Use of "we" is more common in strong marriages and close-knit teams. . . . Similarly, high-status, confident people, focused on the task at hand, not on themselves, use fewer "I" words.[38]

One of many factors that Putnam used as evidence that the pendulum has shifted away from communitarianism to individualism is the growing use of the first-person *singular* pronoun *I* relative to the use of the first-person *plural* pronoun *we.* Using Google's n-gram search engine, which measures the number of times a word has appeared in the historical Google Books archive over time, Putnam found that "from 1900 to 1965 the word 'I' appeared less and less often in American publications, but after 1965 . . . that trend reversed itself."[39] Usage "of the word 'I' in all American books actually doubled between 1965 and 2008."[40]

Because we are immersed in that kind of individualized cultural environment, it will take conscious effort to create a sense of community that focuses not just on ourselves but also on others. If we strive to think more in terms of "we" and less in terms of "I," we might more often take into account how our words and actions impact not only us but also those around us. We might profitably ask ourselves more often, "Does this action really contribute to the creation of a belonging community, or does it simply create more divisiveness?" The answers to that question will not always be easy. But consideration of that inquiry will help create a belonging environment in which all feel welcomed and loved.

The apostle Paul provided an example of how consideration of the impact on others might positively alter the decisions we make each day. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul addressed the question of whether the Saints could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. He noted that since "we know that an idol is nothing in the world,"[41] it really didn't matter whether one ate the meat or not. Because those to whom he was writing understood that eating the meat did not necessarily indicate support for idol worship, Paul concluded that they could eat the meat without causing any harm at all to themselves. He wrote, "Neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse."[42]

However, Paul indicated that, for him, there was another factor to consider. He worried that his actions might negatively affect those who did not have the same understanding about idols and that, seeing him eat the meat, they might think that idol worship was proper. And for Paul, the potential impact of his actions on others dictated his personal choice. Conceding that he could eat without harm to himself, Paul nevertheless refrained, stating, "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth."[43]

Our ability to create a true community of belonging with our hearts knit together would be greatly enhanced if we were to similarly consider the impact of our words and actions on the lives of others who we might unwittingly lead astray because they lack the same knowledge and context that we possess.

Third, and above all else, we must trust God. Because knitting hearts requires molding into one the individual wills and hearts of each member of a community, it requires abilities beyond those of the most skilled human surgeon. In the end, it

is a task that only God can perform. Knitting our hearts together requires that we trust Him completely with the one thing that is uniquely ours: our will.[44] That kind of supreme sacrifice requires supreme trust in Him. And because the process is individualized and involves other people, the immediate results may not be what we expected. Indeed, at times they may seem counter to the end we are seeking. In such situations, which seem increasingly frequent in the swirling circumstances in which we find ourselves, we must allow God to work in His way and on His timetable.

I heard a story this week that illustrates this well. It concerns a visiting pastor who attended a breakfast in the middle of a rural farming area. The group had asked an older farmer, decked out in bib overalls, to say grace for the morning breakfast.

"Lord," the farmer began the prayer, "I hate buttermilk."

The visiting pastor opened one eye to glance at the farmer and wondered where this was going.

The farmer then loudly proclaimed, "Lord, I hate lard."

Now the pastor was growing concerned.

Without missing a beat, the farmer continued, "And Lord, you know I don't much care for raw white flour."

The pastor once again opened an eye to glance around the room and saw that he wasn't the only one feeling uncomfortable.

Then the farmer added, "But Lord, when you mix them all together and bake them, I do love warm, fresh biscuits. So, Lord, when things come up that we don't like, when we don't understand what You're saying to us, help us to just relax and wait until You are done mixing. It will probably be even better than biscuits." He then said amen.

When we find ourselves frustrated by events, by actions of others, or even by our own actions, let us remember that if we trust God and His goodness, things will work out in the end—even if the individual ingredients are not initially very appealing to us.

The followers of Alma whose hearts were knit together in love came to that blessed state when they were gathered together in a compact, proximate society in a land called Mormon. Their experience there caused them to revere that place. As recorded in Mosiah, "The waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer."[45] I hope that because of our efforts to create a community of belonging, we may one day say, "The campus of BYU, the mountains of BYU, and the buildings of BYU, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer as their hearts were knit together in love." May this be our goal and destiny is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, First Presidency Message, in "To the Saints Abroad," *Elders' Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 53.

2. Kevin J Worthen, "Gathering: Education in a Compact Society," BYU devotional address, 10 September 2019.

3. "Man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle, *Politics,* book 1, chapter 2; also book 3, chapter 6); quoted in Wikipedia, s.v. "Aristotle," Politics section.

4. Genesis 2:18.

5. Kevin J Worthen, "It Is Not Good That . . . Man Should Be Alone," BYU devotional address, 5 January 2016.

6. See 2 Nephi 2:26–27.

7. Robert D. Putnam, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 163.

8. Putnam, *Upswing,* 163.

9. See Putnam, *Upswing,* 163.

10. Putnam, *Upswing,* 165.

11. Martin Luther King Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," 6 February 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/nonviolence-and-racial-justice. See also Gabrielle Dean, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Beloved Community," Sheridan Libraries and University Museums blog, Johns Hopkins University, 21 January 2019, blogs.library.jhu.edu/2019/01/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-s-beloved-community.

12. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 16 April 1963, chapter 5 in *Why*

We Can't Wait (New York: Signet Classics, 2000), 87; quoted in Putnam, *Upswing,* 178.

13. Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).

14. See Moses 1:39.

15. Mission of BYU.

16. Mission of BYU.

17. Mission of BYU.

18. Henry B. Eyring, "A Leader of Learners," BYU inauguration devotional address, 9 September 2014; quoted in Kevin J Worthen, "A Vibrant and Determined Community of Learners and Lifters," BYU annual university conference address, 24 August 2015.

19. Worthen, "A Vibrant."

20. See Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *The Belonging Heart: The Atonement and Relationships with God and Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); see also Bruce C. Hafen, "Speaking Today: The Waning of Belonging," *Ensign,* October 1989.

21. See Kevin J Worthen, "An Obligation to the World," BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021.

22. See BYU Statement on Belonging (23 August 2021); in "BYU Announces the Formation of a New Office of Belonging," Announcements, BYU News, 23 August 2021, news.byu.edu/announcements/byu-forms-new-office-of-belonging.

23. BYU Statement on Belonging; see Acts 17:29 and Psalm 82:6; see also Mission of BYU.

24. Russell M. Nelson, quoted in Tad R. Callister, "Our Identity and Our Destiny," BYU Campus Education Week address, 14 August 2012.

25. Callister, "Our Identity." A familiar Primary song sums it up well:

I belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
I know who I am.
I know God's plan.
I'll follow him in faith.
["The Church of Jesus Christ," *Songbook,* 77]

26. BYU Statement on Belonging; see Mosiah 18:21.

27. M. Russell Ballard, "Hope in Christ," *Liahona,* May 2021; quoting Jennifer Wickham, "Is Having a Sense of Belonging Important?" *Speaking of Health* (blog), Mayo Clinic Health System, 8 March 2019, mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/is-having-a-sense-of-belonging-important.

Jennifer Wickham also stated in the Mayo Clinic report:

Studies have shown that children who have not achieved a healthy attachment in their young life have lower self-esteem, a more negative worldview, are mistrustful and can have a perception of rejection. Depression, anxiety and suicide are common mental health conditions associated with lacking a sense of belonging. These conditions can lead to social behaviors that interfere with an individual's ability to connect to others, creating a cycle of events which further weakens a sense of belonging.

28. Wickham, "Is Having a Sense?"

29. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "heart," Church of Jesus Christ.

30. Wikipedia, s.v. "knitting."

31. Wikipedia, "Knitting."

32. Wikipedia, "Knitting."

33. Wikipedia, "Knitting."

34. Wikipedia, "Knitting."

35. Neal A. Maxwell, "Jesus, the Perfect Mentor," *Ensign,* February 2001.

36. Wikipedia, "Knitting."

37. C. S. Lewis, last paragraph of "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 14–15; emphasis in original.

38. Putnam, *Upswing,* 196–97; referring to James W. Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011).

39. Putnam, *Upswing,* 197.

40. Putnam, *Upswing,* 197.

41. 1 Corinthians 8:4.

42. 1 Corinthians 8:8.

43. 1 Corinthians 8:13.

44. "One's individual will thus remains uniquely his" (Neal A. Maxwell, "Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father," *Ensign,* November 1995).

45. Mosiah 18:30.