

The Propinquity Effect

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Though somewhat similar to last year's graduating class, this year's class is unique. Like last year's graduates, the graduates in this year's class have experienced the radical disruption of the traditional collegiate experience caused by the COVID pandemic. But *unlike* the graduates in last year's class, you have seen the recent welcome signs of a return to normal—as witnessed by the packed Marriott Center in which we are assembled today. As we have gathered more frequently and in larger numbers these past few months, there seem to be renewed energy and a feeling of closeness that were lacking when the pandemic was raging. Those different feelings can largely be explained by one word—*propinquity*.

The dictionary defines *propinquity* as “the state of being close to someone or something,”¹ or, more simply, “nearness.”² While the term is not often heard in general conversations today, the propinquity effect has been studied and debated among psychologists and sociologists for more than seven decades.³ According to the online American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, the propinquity effect is

*the tendency of individuals to form close relationships with people they repeatedly encounter. That is, the more often one comes into contact with another person, the more likely it is that one will form a friendship or romantic relationship with that person.*⁴

This phenomenon—this propinquity effect—was first theorized by three professors who noted, among other things, that “residents of an apartment building living near a stairway . . . tend to have more friends from other floors than those living further from the stairway.”⁵ The theory was that this was because those living near the stairway had more contact with those from other floors who were using the stairs.

The propinquity effect has been observed in a number of different settings: in the workplace (what some call occupational propinquity), in neighborhoods (residential propinquity), in colleges (classroom propinquity), and even in love (romantic propinquity). Relationships seem to develop and prosper when people are physically with each other often—where there is propinquity.

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this commencement address on April 21, 2022.

My graduation advice to you consists of three things you can do to make propinquity more of a positive factor in your lives.

First, consciously seek in-person contact with others. I hope our use of technology that has allowed us to meet in the digital world during the pandemic does not alter our appreciation of truly being physically present with others. While social media can expand the number of people with whom we associate, and while studies suggest that some kind of “virtual propinquity” can exist,⁶ research also shows that “online friendships are . . . lower in quality than offline [in-person] friendships”⁷ and that “moving from online to offline communication channels such as face-to-face . . . is an important step towards increasing the closeness in relationships.”⁸ In a world in which relationships are increasingly ephemeral and digital, it is important to take the time and effort to visit face-to-face so the propinquity effect can have full positive impact. As former United States diplomat George Ball was fond of saying when explaining why face-to-face meetings were so important, “nothing propinks like propinquity.”⁹

Second, consciously seek positive in-person interactions with those with whom you disagree. We live in a time in which it is easy to associate only with those whose views correspond with our own. And algorithms drive us in that direction in the digital world. It is also a time in which people are increasingly polarized with respect to their views on almost every issue. Our prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, has recently pleaded with us to end conflicts in our personal lives.¹⁰ Propinquity can help us in that regard. As one source explained:

As we meet people [in person] . . . often, we get to know about them and their nature. . . . We understand [them] and . . . want to meet them more often. We . . . develop a close bond. . . .

*. . . Propinquity [makes] a huge difference in the trust and respect you have for each other.*¹¹

Let me suggest in this regard that serving *with* others can have a multiplier impact on the propinquity effect. If our in-person interactions with

those with whom we disagree include serving *with* them in some common endeavor, the relationship will deepen and be more enduring. As President M. Russell Ballard observed, “When we serve together, we realize that our similarities are stronger than our differences.”¹² Frequent close interaction while serving with others will not only bless those we serve but also create bonds of propinquity that will help us deal positively with our differences.

Third, and most important, the propinquity effect can have the largest impact on us if we apply it to our relationship with the Savior. While literal face-to-face contact with Christ may be rare during our mortal existence, Christ invites us to have regular and frequent close communication and contact with Him, with the promise that our relationship with Him will deepen and strengthen as a result. “Draw near unto me,” He promises, “and I will draw near unto you.”¹³

Recent studies have suggested that the causal direction of the propinquity effect goes both ways. While the classic theory postulates that being *close* to someone increases one’s desire to be with that person, more recent studies provide support for the idea that an increase in one’s *desire* to be with another decreases the perceived distance between the two.¹⁴ The Lord’s promise that as we draw closer to Him, He will draw closer to us seems to extend beyond mere perception of closeness to Him. It points to the day (either in this life or in the next) when we will see Him face-to-face—a form of eternal propinquity.¹⁵

The propinquity effect thus adds new meaning to President Nelson’s recent admonition to seek “daily experiences worshipping the Lord and studying His gospel” and “give Him a fair share of [our] time.”¹⁶ By following that prophetic counsel, we can experience true propinquity as we draw closer to and become more like the Savior.

So as you finish this stage of your BYU experience, I urge you to take full advantage of propinquity—spend more in-person time coming to know your family, your friends, your perceived antagonists, and especially the Savior. I promise that as you do, your lives will be richer and more joyful. I so promise in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Oxford Lexico online dictionary, s.v. “propinquity.”
2. Merriam-Webster online dictionary, s.v. “propinquity.”
3. See Ji-eun Shin, Eunkook M. Suh, Norman P. Li, Kangyong Eo, Sang Chul Chong, and Ming-Hong Tsai, “Darling, Get Closer to Me: Spatial Proximity Amplifies Interpersonal Liking,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45, no. 2 (February 2019): 300–9; see also Emma Young, “New Evidence for the ‘Propinquity Effect’—Mere Physical Closeness Increases Our Liking of Desirable People and Things,” *Social, British Psychological Society Research Digest*, 1 August 2018, digest.bps.org.uk/2018/08/01/new-evidence-for-the-propinquity-effect-mere-physical-closeness-increases-our-liking-of-desirable-people-and-things.
4. American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology online, s.v. “propinquity effect.”
5. Wikipedia, s.v. “propinquity”; see Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Kurt Back, “The Spatial Ecology of Group Formation,” in Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Kurt Back, *Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing* (New York: Harper, 1950), 33–59.
6. Martha W. Perry and Alexandra V. Ricca, “Instant Messaging: Virtual Propinquity for Health Promotion Networking,” *Promotion and Education, Global Health Promotion* 13, no. 3 (1 September 2006): 211–12.
7. Gustavo S. Mesch, “Online and Offline Relationships,” chapter 5 in Tracey Burns and Francesca Gottschalk, eds., *Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-Being in the Digital Age*, Educational Research and Innovation (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] Publishing, 2019), 97.
8. Mesch, “Online and Offline Relationships,” 98.
9. Although the phrase was first used by Ian Fleming as the title for chapter 21 in *Diamonds Are Forever* (1956), U.S. undersecretary of state George Ball “popularised the idea in politics where it came to be known as the Ball Rule of Power, which states that ‘the more direct access you have to the president, the greater your power, no matter what your title actually is’” (Mark Eltringham, “The Office Will Always Live On Because Nothing Propinks like Propinquity,” *Workplace Insight*, 16 August 2018, workplaceinsight.net/the-death-of-the-office-nothing-propinks-like-propinquity).
10. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Power of Spiritual Momentum,” *Liahona*, May 2022.
11. “What Is Propinquity Effect in Social Psychology,” Sociology Group, sociologygroup.com/propinquity-effect.
12. M. Russell Ballard, quoted in Jason Swensen, “The Church’s JustServe Initiative Offers a Unifying Remedy for the Divisive Ills of the Day,” *Newsroom, Church of Jesus Christ*, 8 January 2021, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/the-churchs-justserve-initiative-offers-a-unifying-remedy-for-divisive-ills.
13. Doctrine and Covenants 88:63; see also James 4:8.
14. See Shin and others, “Darling, Get Closer to Me.”
15. See Doctrine and Covenants 93:1; 67:10; 88:68.
16. Nelson, “Spiritual Momentum.”