

# *The Aims of a BYU Education*

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I have been impressed by the simple, one-sentence statement of the Aims of a BYU Education. As you are aware, it reads, “A BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service.”<sup>1</sup> I don’t know who gets credit for this brief, powerful statement, but I would give them a solid A. I am also grateful for how effectively President Kevin J Worthen has elevated our collective focus on these aims, both in the culture and in the way we measure the work of the university.

I look back at my own undergraduate experience at BYU in the 1960s and feel like those aims have had their impact in my life—if not to perfection, at least in good measure.

My time here was undoubtedly *spiritually strengthening*. While I had grown up as a boy in Utah County, most of my teenage years were spent

in New Jersey. It was there that I came to appreciate what the gospel of Jesus Christ meant and could mean for me. I developed something of a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and I found here food I had hungered for and pure water to slake my thirst.

My BYU experience was also *intellectually enlarging*. I wish I had had the maturity to take full advantage of my opportunities, but at least being here awakened the joy of learning in me. My great regret was that in three and a half years it was not possible to take more than a fraction of the courses that interested me. But I did carry away a commitment to *lifelong learning*.

As to *character building*, I give credit to many of the people I came to know here—faculty and students, administrators and staff—whose examples inspired in me a higher reach and a deeper commitment to a Christlike character. The most

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important influencer I was introduced to at BYU is still with me fifty-four years later and continues to do her unique work in molding my character. I will be forever grateful that I met and married Kathy Jacob here—and that she is still with me.

I believe we would agree that at BYU we are a privileged lot; privileged in the sense of enjoying the environment I have just been describing, rich with spiritual, intellectual, and character-building opportunities and associations. My hope, however, is that each student and each of us will have the humility to recognize that “it is not all just for me” or that “it is not all about me.” Rather, it is about what I can be empowered to do for the good of others.

As a student, my focus was on self-development and preparation for a future family and career. It was, if not all about me, then primarily about me. I did not have the degree of humility then that I am asking you to help cultivate in today’s student body. I now see the elements of the Aims of a BYU Education not as discrete objectives but as a comprehensive whole, a single overarching aim. And I now see this aim more as a means than an end. I see more clearly a BYU education not as *privilege* enhancement but as *service* enhancement.

### **“Service Is the Fiber of an Exalted Life”**

Years ago, President Marion G. Romney, then a member of the First Presidency, gave a landmark talk titled “The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance.” He quoted the Savior’s statement “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it”<sup>2</sup> and then explained:

*We lose our life by serving and lifting others. By so doing, we experience the only true and lasting happiness. Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.*

*Knowing that service is what gives our Father in Heaven fulfillment, and knowing that we want to be where He is and as He is, why must we be commanded to serve one another? Oh, for the glorious day when these things all come naturally because of the purity of our hearts. In that day there will be no need for a*

*commandment because we will have experienced for ourselves that we are truly happy only when we are engaged in unselfish service. Let us use the freedom which comes from self-reliance in giving and serving.*

*Can we see how critical self-reliance becomes when looked upon as the prerequisite to service, when we also know service is what Godhood is all about? Without self-reliance one cannot exercise these innate desires to serve. How can we give if there is nothing there? Food for the hungry cannot come from empty shelves. Money to assist the needy cannot come from an empty purse. Support and understanding cannot come from the emotionally starved. Teaching cannot come from the unlearned. And most important of all, spiritual guidance cannot come from the spiritually weak.<sup>3</sup>*

President Romney was opening our eyes to a new understanding—that self-reliance is not an end in itself but rather a means to facilitate our service to one another. In the same manner, our efforts with respect to spiritual strengthening, intellectual enlargement, character development, and lifelong learning, while worthy ends, are more importantly means and resources enabling us to lose our lives in the service of God and our fellow men and women.

President Russell M. Nelson has taught: “In the Church, obtaining an education and getting knowledge are a religious responsibility. We educate our minds so that one day we can render service of worth to somebody else.”<sup>4</sup> Again, learning is not an end unto itself but a means to bless God’s children. This is well and simply expressed in the university motto: “Enter to learn; go forth to serve.”

Our time at BYU should enhance our capacity to advance the kingdom of God on the earth, to “lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees,”<sup>5</sup> and to extend charity, the pure love of Christ, throughout civil society as well as the Church. It is a season to figuratively fill our purses and stock our shelves with resources we can draw upon to help meet future needs—our own and others’—and to store up emotional and spiritual strength and resilience that will sustain us and others in time to come.

## A BYU Education Serves as a Means to the Higher End of Life

For a BYU education to serve as the means to the higher end of life in the service of God and His children, I submit that three things are needed. There are other requisites I'm sure, but I want to talk about three that I hope you will find ways to impress upon students.

### 1. Cultivate a Love of God and of Fellow Men and Women

The first is the most basic: to cultivate a love of God and of fellow men and women. In a devotional address given here earlier this year, I talked about the two great commandments, noting:

*Beginning from our primal state as intelligences, our Heavenly Father has centered Himself and His work in us—in our immortality and eternal life. He sees it as His work and glory to do so [see Moses 1:39]. I don't believe He had to do any of it, so why has He done this for us? What is His motivation? Can it be anything but love? Clear evidence of this is the gift of His Son: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" [John 3:16].*

*Is it too much to ask that in return we center our lives in God and love Him as He has loved us, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? How can we resist His love for us and withhold our own love from Him knowing that our love of God is the key to our own happiness? . . .*

*The bottom line is that God commands us to love Him because of what He knows it will do for us. He commands us to love one another for the same reason. Love of God transforms us. Love of God transforms our love for each other. This love is requisite for our coming to know Him, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent [see John 17:3]. It is the key to our becoming like Him.<sup>6</sup>*

In loving God and our fellow men and women, I also noted that the sequence matters. In other words, we should keep the first commandment first:

*Putting the first commandment first does not diminish or limit our ability to keep the second*

*commandment. To the contrary, it amplifies and strengthens it. It means that we enhance our love by anchoring it in divine purpose and power. It means that we have the Holy Ghost to inspire us in ways to reach out that we would never have seen on our own. Our love of God elevates our ability to love others more fully and perfectly because we in essence partner with God in the care of His children.<sup>7</sup>*

We grow to love what and who we serve. As we serve and sacrifice for God, our love for Him grows; as we serve and sacrifice for others, our love for them grows. This is the pure love of Christ—charity—and it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift we can ask for. Mormon counsels, "Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup>

We often focus our love of fellow men and women within the Church—what the scriptures call "the household of faith."<sup>9</sup> I urge that we consider an added focus on civic charity—that is, cultivating a greater measure of this Christlike love for those outside the household of faith. I believe we can be more intentional in making this the primary motivation for all we do in the community and in the world as well as in the Church.

### 2. Stay Focused on Our Priority Identities

The second requisite in realizing the higher end for which a BYU education provides the crucial means is to stay focused on our priority identities. I am referring to the statements of President Nelson in his May devotional for young adults. These are prophetic utterances. President Nelson asked, "Who are you?" and then taught:

*First and foremost, you are a child of God.*

*Second, as a member of the Church, you are a child of the covenant.*

*And third, you are a disciple of Jesus Christ.*

*Tonight, I plead with you not to **replace** these three paramount and unchanging identifiers with any others, because doing so could stymie your progress or pigeon-hole you in a stereotype that could potentially thwart your eternal progression.<sup>10</sup>*

President Nelson added:

*Labels can be fun and indicate your support for any number of positive things. Many labels will change for you with the passage of time. And not all labels are of equal value. But if any label replaces your most important identifiers, the results can be spiritually suffocating. . . .*

*Labels can lead to judging and animosity. Any **abuse** or **prejudice** toward another because of nationality, race, sexual orientation, gender, educational degrees, culture, or other significant identifiers is offensive to our Maker! Such mistreatment causes us to live beneath our stature as His covenant sons and daughters!*

*There are various labels that may be very important to you, of course. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that other designations and identifiers are not significant. I am simply saying that no identifier should **displace, replace, or take priority over** these three enduring designations: “child of God,” “child of the covenant,” and “disciple of Jesus Christ.”*

*Any identifier that is not compatible with these three basic designations will ultimately let you down.<sup>11</sup>*

Enthroning the paramount identities expressed by President Nelson above all lesser ones allows us to maintain a true perspective regarding ourselves and others. We see more clearly what helps and what does not help as we strive to make positive contributions. It helps us cultivate the motivating love I mentioned a moment ago.

In society today, we often share a common vision or understanding of needs and objectives. Not always but quite often we see eye to eye on desirable societal outcomes. It is not uncommon, however, for there to be sharp disagreement on the means and methods to achieve these goals. On cable and online, we may demonize people, opinions, and approaches we see as making the problem worse rather than better or as creating more problems. The temptation to apply hateful labels is almost overwhelming. If our eye is fixed on our paramount identities, however, we can resist that temptation. We can even learn to love our enemies (who all share the first and highest of these identities—child of God) even as we oppose them. When and if we must contend, it will be without anger.

Our service for the betterment of individuals and societies can obtain truly significant results only as we remember first and foremost who and what we are.

### 3. Possess and Promote the Virtue of Forgiveness

Third and finally, to apply successfully the means represented by the Aims of a BYU Education to the greater end, we need to possess and promote the virtue of forgiveness. Let me explain.

We must acknowledge that in this mortal sphere there is injustice, there is oppression. It is deep and widespread. Some offenses are minor, even unintended, while others are monumental. Some are incomprehensible to most and understood fully only by those who suffer them. The Holocaust of World War II is one of an unfortunately long series we find throughout history. Racism is another that has been widely experienced in countless ways and places. These must be resisted and overcome, sometimes repeatedly.

On the other hand, we are seeing today in academia and in society a growing practice of perpetual grievance, victimization, and division. It is characterized by a philosophy that no wrong can ever be fully redeemed and no aggression, indignity, or injury can ever be totally forgiven. Once victimized, a person, a group, or a people never cease to be victims. It is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, future discrimination for past discrimination. It breeds what has come to be known as the cancel culture.

If God operated like today’s cancel culture, we could expect no mercy and only the harshest form of justice. Even with the most groveling apologies and mea culpas, there would be no forgiveness. Redemption would be impossible. There would be no Savior and no Atonement.

If we are to be able to serve—and to join with others in service—there must at least be the possibility of progress, the possibility of moving beyond the past, the possibility of collaboration, and the possibility of forgiving one another and moving on. I am not suggesting that wrongs be ignored, but I am suggesting that as they are addressed, they should not be allowed to separate and stymie us in perpetuity. Somehow we must be liberated from this prison.

Some years ago, I participated in a stake conference in Soweto, South Africa. I found the people of that township justly proud of being the only community in the world where not one but two Nobel laureates resided, and on the same street: Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. These two were crucial leaders in the fight against apartheid and in guiding the transition to a new government and a new day in South Africa. You are familiar with the greatness of soul displayed by Mandela after nearly thirty years of persecution and imprisonment to institute an almost unbelievable degree of reconciliation and unity in South Africa.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up at the end of apartheid. This commission was established on the proposition that for the nation to extricate itself from its oppressive past, it was necessary first to document fully the sins and suffering of apartheid. But once the record was completed, it was vital for both individuals and the society at large to be reconciled, to accept the confessions and repentance, to forgive, and to move forward.

Archbishop Tutu described this remarkable undertaking in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*.<sup>12</sup> He later published a second book with his daughter Mpho: *Made for Goodness*.<sup>13</sup> In this book, Tutu and his daughter (also an Anglican minister) declare that murder and greed are not the norm for human behavior; the norm is goodness. This may seem a surprising thesis for one who presided over a commission that revealed in depth the iniquity of apartheid and one who had himself experienced the consequences. But Tutu's deeper perception and the success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission teach us that, at some point, having done what we can to address the injustices of the past, we may accept the basic goodness present in imperfect man, leave ultimate justice in the hands of God, forgive what we cannot fix, and go forward, collaborating to make a better present and future.

Most of you, if not all, will be familiar with Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Someone years ago neglected to renew the copyright on this movie, which, in my opinion, was a very fortunate oversight, because without copyright, the movie is much more widely

available and viewed than would otherwise be the case.

The Jimmy Stewart character, George Bailey, is a common man whose life and deeds, it is revealed, have been a significant force for good in his hometown of Bedford Falls. Toward the end of the story, George's future is put in jeopardy by the disappearance of \$8,000 in funds belonging to his building and loan company. Although George is unaware, we know that the funds accidentally fell into the hands of the villainous Mr. Potter, played by Lionel Barrymore. Mr. Potter unjustly keeps the funds, and his crime never comes to light. George, however, is rescued financially by gifts of money from the multitude of people he has helped in many different ways throughout his life—a wonderful life.

I find this movie endearing for several reasons, and one of them is the fact that George Bailey's success and happiness do not depend on retribution for Henry Potter. In contrast to the dominant theme of vengeance in much of today's movie fare, Mr. Potter is never made to account for the harm and distress he creates. The storyline leaves the ultimate accounting to God, and Mr. Potter is left for now a bit richer but still unhappy and friendless in his pinched and less than wonderful life. George Bailey and his wonderful wife and family can still be happy, enjoying their life of love and service.

The Savior said:

*I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.*

*And ye ought to say in your hearts—let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds.*<sup>14</sup>

I confess that when I was a younger man reading this verse, it struck me as unfair: the Lord can choose who deserves forgiveness, but I have to forgive everybody. Now, with a bit more experience and maturity, I can see that the Lord is in reality offering us a marvelous blessing. He will assume the fearsome responsibility of judgment, and we can go happily along without that burden. Our forgiveness takes us out of the picture—sometimes a very sordid picture—and leaves us free to pursue our own happiness and the happiness of others.

### Service Is a Sanctifying Experience

Returning to President Marion G. Romney's lesson that losing our lives in serving and lifting others for the sake of Christ "is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made," I say again that the ultimate aim of a BYU education is to enable that service. President Romney went on to say:

*There is an interdependence between those who have and those who have not. The process of giving exalts the poor and humbles the rich. In the process, both . . . are enabled as free men [and women] to rise to their full potential, both temporally and spiritually. The rich, by imparting of their surplus, participate in the eternal principle of giving. Once a person has been made whole or self-reliant, he reaches out to aid others, and the cycle repeats itself.*

*We are all self-reliant in some areas and dependent in others. Therefore, each of us should strive to help others in areas where we have strengths. At the same time, pride should not prevent us from graciously accepting the helping hand of another when we have a real need. To do so denies another person the opportunity to participate in a sanctifying experience.<sup>15</sup>*

We do depend on one another and the virtuous cycle that President Romney describes—whether it be in matters temporal or spiritual. Service is a sanctifying experience. We need to serve and to be served. Please help students understand that the Aims of a BYU Education are really the means that qualify and prepare them to achieve the end of shared service in the cause of Christ, the redemption of mankind.

Fundamental to that achievement will be (1) cultivating the love of God and of fellow men and women; (2) giving steady priority to their identities as child of God, child of the covenant, and disciple of Christ so that their perspective is accurate and sure; and (3) seeking the ways and means to couple justice and forgiveness.

On behalf of the BYU Board of Trustees and its officers, may I thank you for your sacrifices and service in support of this unique institution, your love for the students it serves, and your commitment to the Aims of a BYU Education.

Ultimately, the good we can do relies upon the grace of Jesus Christ. I bear testimony of Him and pray for His blessing upon you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
2. Matthew 10:39; quoted in Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982.
3. Romney, "Celestial Nature."
4. Russell M. Nelson, "The Message: Focus on Values," *New Era*, February 2013.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 81:5.
6. D. Todd Christofferson, "The First Commandment First," BYU devotional address, 22 March 2022.
7. Christofferson, "The First Commandment."
8. Moroni 7:48.
9. Galatians 6:10; Doctrine and Covenants 121:45.
10. Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson); emphasis in original.
11. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; emphasis in original.
12. See Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
13. See Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).
14. Doctrine and Covenants 64:10–11.
15. Romney, "Celestial Nature."