

Let Your Education Change You

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A few years ago I invited several colleagues from various universities to come to BYU for a multiday workshop in Scandinavian studies, my specialty. The work was going to be intense, so I suggested they pack good shoes so that one evening we could take a break and go for a quick hike up our unparalleled Rock Canyon.

A professor who taught at a large public university on the West Coast took advantage of this downtime to ask me questions about BYU, about the Church, and even about my personal faith and convictions. She did so somewhat sheepishly and excused herself for asking questions that to a native Scandinavian are deeply personal and rarely discussed except with close friends or family in a sauna. I assured her that I really didn't mind; in fact, as a returned missionary from Sweden, I found it refreshing for a Scandinavian to ask *me* questions about religion. My colleague expressed how impressed she was with the beautiful buildings on campus, the capable students, the generous support for our research project,

and the clear commitment the university and the Church had to education. She confided in me that she had grown up in a devout religious home and that she recognized many things in our BYU community that reminded her of her own upbringing.

"But," she said, "there is one significant difference that I just cannot wrap my head around. When I finished *gymnasium* [the Danish equivalent of high school], I had a burning desire to continue my formal education at a university—something my parents and faith community strictly forbade."

She continued: "I was forced to make a choice between my faith community and my education. But here at BYU, faith and learning seem to coexist. They do not just tolerate each other but seem to embrace each other."

Since that time I have thought a lot about her comments. There are two important interrelated lessons that I have taken away from this conversation: (1) how distinctive a BYU education is and (2) how education and learning fit into God's plans for all of us.

Christopher Oscarson, BYU associate dean of undergraduate education, delivered this devotional address on June 27, 2023.

A Unique University in All the World

In her short time on campus, my colleague discerned one of the most distinctive qualities of this remarkable institution. Indeed, at BYU, faith and education do not merely tolerate each other. They embrace each other. They catalyze and strengthen each other. The sacred and the secular feed into one another. The Lord plainly states in the Doctrine and Covenants that “all things unto me are spiritual.”¹ I am thankful to have benefited from this as a student and thankful now to teach at a university that allows me to explore how the sacred and the secular are interdependent. Understanding and believing in these truths helps us to more fully love and appreciate God, His great mercy, and His creations and to recognize how we are connected and how we can love and serve others more truly.

This fusion of the sacred and the secular in the pursuit of truth is exactly what President Spencer W. Kimball articulated in his address at the centennial celebration of BYU in 1975. His words are equally applicable to students and faculty at this remarkable and unique institution. President Kimball said:

*Your double heritage and dual concerns with the secular and the spiritual require you to be “bilingual.” As scholars you must speak with authority and excellence to your professional colleagues in the language of scholarship, and you must also be literate in the language of spiritual things. We must be more bilingual, in that sense, to fulfill our promise in the second century of BYU.*²

I was born in the United States but spent several years in Sweden when I was young and again as a missionary. I am now, among other things, a teacher of languages, and because my wife is a native of France, we speak a fair amount of French at home. Languages are important to me, and this metaphor of bilingualism resonates. Moving between languages for me is not flipping through a dictionary or using Google Translate. I understand things about Swedish and French culture and people that I could never have grasped in translation alone. Those of you who speak a second language understand how concepts and

ideas can many times be untranslatable or how powerful combinations are impoverished when taken out of context. Grasping these differences opens new possibilities and realities to us. My life is qualitatively richer and my capacity to see the world with gratitude and charity increases with each language that I learn. Languages direct our attention in new ways. Communicating with the Spirit is a language, too, and—as with learning a foreign language—requires effort to become fluent. The Spirit directs and enlightens our minds³ or causes our hearts to burn,⁴ filling us with the light of eternal truth.

I have had the opportunity to teach at other universities, and while I benefited from their strengths as institutions, I am grateful for the freedom afforded me by BYU’s mission to be fluent in the language of the Spirit in what and how I teach and in how I live.

BYU’s Double Heritage

My colleague’s observation about BYU’s unique pursuit of truth has also pointed me to another insight. At BYU we are not just open to revealed truth that is found, for instance, in scripture but also to the capacity of all of God’s children to receive revelation, wisdom, and understanding through study and learning. Remember, the scripture says to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”⁵ BYU, with its double heritage, is not just a university among others, nor is it just a seminary or theological school. Learning at this university may well start, and even end, with the scriptures and the prophets, but it takes seriously its bilingual obligation to engage in “secular” scholarship on its own terms, patiently but unabashedly and without fear—and not just because it might help us professionally but because education and what it takes to become educated have spiritual value in their own right.

There is good reason, historically speaking, to consider a formal education as part of a moral education. In antiquity, although few had access to it, education was intended to produce the improvement of the whole person and not marketable skills. The Middle Ages saw the rise of the formal university, which organized its curriculum around seven traditional disciplines. The *trivium*

included grammar/literature, rhetoric, and logic, and the *quadrivium* encompassed mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy. These subjects were collectively called the “liberal arts,” not in reference to a political ideology but because this was an education that would *liberate* the individual from ignorance. It was the proper education of a free person. The American evolution of the university added several important dimensions—including the idea of general education in the liberal arts—because education was meant to refine individuals and prepare them for participation in the democratic experiment. Strong democracies depend on a robust civic commitment and citizens devoted to personal virtue who can build community and discern truth from error.

It was this long tradition of the cultivation of the whole person—truth that makes women and men free and prepares informed, loyal citizens—that President Kimball perhaps had in mind when he stated that BYU must “resist false fashions in education, staying with those basic principles that have proved right and have guided good men and women and good universities over the centuries.”⁶ Don’t take for granted how BYU has historically adhered to this heritage even while many other universities have strayed.

Our commitment at BYU is to what the BYU mission statement refers to as “a broad university education” grounded in “the arts, letters, and sciences” that “will help students think clearly, communicate effectively, understand important ideas in their own cultural tradition as well as that of others, and establish clear standards of intellectual integrity.”⁷ Although we sometimes talk about getting general education requirements “out of the way,” these are not mere hoops to jump through. At its most basic, this broad general education gives you transferable skills that you can use in various contexts throughout your life, but it can do far more than that. Engaging different ways of knowing the world stretches us, opens us to inspiration, teaches us humility and patience, and fosters gratitude and charity. A broad education has the power to bind us closer to each other and to God’s marvelous creations—but only if we let it.

It has always impressed me that as the first members of Christ’s Church in this dispensation

gathered on the frontier—confronted with poverty and persecution and, in some cases, having had barely any formal schooling—they were nonetheless commanded to learn not only about overtly spiritual things but also

*of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms.*⁸

The Lord was outlining general education requirements—or opportunities—for the School of the Prophets!

And while grasping truth has obvious merit by itself, the *process* of seeking that truth is as important as obtaining it. The process—learning as Christ did in His mortal sojourn, “grace for grace”⁹—changes and refines us. Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants explicitly links learning with sanctification. At the same time that the Lord was admonishing these pioneering brethren to learn from the best of books, He was also commanding them to “sanctify yourselves; yea, purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, that I may make you clean.”¹⁰ The very act of learning, with all the discipline, sacrifice, and focus it requires, can have a sanctifying effect on us when—and this is crucial—we do it with an eye to the glory of God and to the service of others. This is precisely what you should expect from a BYU education.

The Lord established a pattern from the beginning of the Restoration: as soon as the Saints gathered, they built schools and temples. The Lord said, “I, the Lord, am well pleased that there should be a school in Zion.”¹¹ And while there were undoubtedly positive practical outcomes that came from these schools, neither graduation nor successful career placement was or is today the ultimate goal. The aim of a BYU education is something far more ambitious, even audacious: “The mission of Brigham Young University . . . is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”¹²

This mission statement might, out of context, seem more like something one would expect of a church rather than a university. How does a university education fit into this ambition? Put another way, what justifies the significant expenditure of effort and resources—including the sacred widow’s mite and the tithing paid by faithful Ute fans—on Brigham Young University and on your education? How can a university education at BYU help you in *your* quest for perfection and eternal life?

Before venturing an answer, I need to make clear that I am most definitely not saying that a university education generally—or a BYU education specifically—is in any way *necessary* in this quest. Good women and men who have not had access to formal education have indeed learned and experienced what the Lord required of them and will be counted among the Saints who will enjoy the eternal inheritance promised to the faithful. An education does not make anyone better than anyone else, and education is certainly not the only or even the primary resource that might help us, but it is a valuable one. It is a blessing—a “talent,” in the words of the parable¹³—that can profit us when we are wise stewards. Even if we don’t have the opportunity for formal education, the Lord expects us nonetheless to become lifelong learners because of how learning changes us.

When talking about our BYU education, we tend to focus on what we need to do: complete applications, finish assignments, take classes, earn grades, fulfill requirements, secure internships, receive a degree, and find a job. While all of these things have their place, none of them are ends unto themselves—either from an educational point of view or from an eternal perspective. The value of the experience is in how it shapes us and how it changes us. If we take another look at the BYU mission statement, notice how often it focuses not on what we are but on the process of becoming—the “quest” for perfection and eternal life, not its realization. Further down, the mission statement says BYU is intended to be “a stimulating setting where . . . the full realization of human potential is *pursued*.”¹⁴ The “instruction, programs, and services” should contribute to “the balanced

development of the total person.”¹⁵ To quote President Dallin H. Oaks when he was installed as president of BYU:

*Our reason for being is to be a university. But our reason for being a university is to encourage and prepare young men and women to rise to their full spiritual potential as sons and daughters of God.*¹⁶

The point here is that if you leave BYU as essentially the same person you were when you entered—maybe with just a few extra facts in your head or skills at your disposal—the university will have failed, and you will have missed the great blessings of transformation and sanctification that the Lord had in store for you.

A Transformative Education

In recent years there has been a rise in skepticism about the value of university education generally. The reasons for this skepticism are complex, and the problem is linked, in part, to skyrocketing costs of higher education—something we at BYU are, to a degree, shielded from because of the generosity of Church support. The wicked economics of higher education have forced many to see a university education as a commodity that is purchased with a sole focus on the return on investment to the individual. Of course one should expect something to come from pursuing a degree, but that return is too often measured only in terms of prestige and temporal gains for the individual and not in improvement in character, moral refinement, or service in the community. This unfortunate focus is not on how the experience might help the individual learn, grow, worship, and serve better but on the ability for the student as a consumer to move through the experience fundamentally unchanged except for the increased capacity to accumulate material wealth and to gain social status for themselves. This trend has produced two forms of extremism: elitism on the one hand and anti-intellectualism on the other.

This trend and its extremes also fly in the face of BYU’s mission to help individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life. In a recent forum address to the BYU community, Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, president of Yeshiva University, drove

home the distinction between a consumerist approach to education and what he referred to as a covenantal approach to education. The word *covenantal* is unique in its focus on reciprocity and relationship. In Dr. Berman's words:

*The consumer model is about acquiring possessions. It values detailed knowledge, metrics, research, and analytics and prioritizes the known and certain. But the model of the covenant is different—it prizes faith, empathy, loyalty, curiosity, and discovery. To be clear, there is a comfort in being a consumer. One knows the product, reads the warranty, and has the instruction manual. There is very little risk. In the covenantal, however, there is exposure, vulnerability, uncertainty, and great risk. But the upside is different as well. The consumer is only transactional; the covenantal is transformational.*¹⁷

When you approach your education as a consumer, you keep your relationship to it at arm's length. You pick and choose what suits your personal tastes, and you do not let yourself be changed. The covenantal education requires an entirely different kind of investment on your part. If you are to be changed by an experience, you must make yourself vulnerable and come willing to sacrifice. It also implies that the experience is not for personal satisfaction but has an eye to larger commitments to community and God. What you get from your education at BYU and how it will change you into a more dedicated disciple depends on you.

1. A Transformative Education Requires Earnest and Honest Seeking

In the scriptures we are given instruction on how to be transformed by our education. First we are admonished repeatedly to seek earnestly and honestly for truth. A transformative education requires earnest and honest seeking:

- “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”¹⁸
- “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find.”¹⁹

- “Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich.”²⁰

Seeking is key because it moves us from being reactive—waiting to be “compelled in all things”²¹—to laying hold of our agency and learning how to use it. Curiosity is core to becoming a seeker. Cultivate that need and desire to know more.

2. A Transformative Education Requires Humility and Sacrifice

A transformative education also requires humility and sacrifice. Idle curiosity that is not accompanied by a willingness to sacrifice and change is not motivated by faith. Humility and meekness signal that we desire to be impacted by an encounter with truth. But it is important in this process to stay focused on those things that are worth sacrificing for: God and His work. Could you imagine that Joseph Smith would have received an answer to his prayer for wisdom had he not sought wisdom and then been prepared to act on the answer he received?²² King Lamoni's father in the Book of Mormon was willing to give Ammon half his kingdom to spare his life²³ but was willing to give all of his kingdom to Aaron for truth: “I will give up *all* that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy.”²⁴

Opening ourselves up to transformation because of truth places us in a vulnerable position. This is why Paul said that we work out our “salvation with fear and trembling” before God.²⁵ An open mindset—a repentant mindset—is acknowledging that our understanding is almost always incomplete and needs expansion and correction. The Lord told Nephi:

Because that I have spoken one word ye need not suppose that I cannot speak another; for my work is not yet finished; neither shall it be until the end of man, neither from that time henceforth and forever.

*. . . For out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world.*²⁶

The Restoration is ongoing. Truth is to be found in many places, and we are responsible for learning it.

3. *A Transformative Education Requires Patience and the Ability to Withhold Rash Judgment*

A third attribute of someone who can be transformed by education is patience and the ability to withhold rash judgment. When we are learning, it is not uncommon to come across new ideas that challenge what we think we already know. Sometimes it is because the new information is simply not true, but we run a great risk when we dismiss true concepts too quickly. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf cited an old story about six blind men who each tried to describe an elephant. One touched the leg and described it as being like a tree. Another felt the tusk and described it as a spear. A third, feeling the tail, said it was like a rope, and the man who touched the trunk thought it was like a large snake. They were all, of course, both right and wrong. Elder Uchtdorf concluded:

We believe we know the truth of what an elephant is. That someone could make a judgment based on one aspect of truth and apply it to the whole seems absurd or even unbelievable. On the other hand, can't we recognize ourselves in these six blind men? . . .

. . . The Apostle Paul said that in this world the light is dim and we see only part of the truth as though we are looking "through a glass, darkly." And yet it seems to be part of our nature as human beings to make assumptions about people, politics, and piety based on our incomplete and often misleading experience.²⁷

Not only can we be blinded by the assumptions we make about others, but there is also a danger in simplistic binary thinking in which, when confronted by two competing ideas, one automatically assumes that one idea is completely right and the other completely false. This is a trap that can cause us to make serious missteps, to demonize others, and to even turn away from truth itself. Christ taught that we need to "judge not according to the appearance [that is, superficially], but judge righteous judgment."²⁸ The teachings of the prophets, the scriptures, and the values inspired by our faith in Christ are crucial components of

this education and of what you have to offer to the world.

4. *A Transformative Education Requires the Influence of the Holy Ghost*

And the Lord has given us an additional gift to guide us and help us distinguish between truth and error: the Holy Ghost. The fourth important requirement of a transformative education is to make the Holy Ghost a constant companion in learning. This requires virtue in our lives and the careful cultivation of spiritual sensitivity.

The companionship of the Spirit is as important in our study of secular and scholarly pursuits as it is in our study of overtly spiritual topics. Moroni stated boldly that "by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of *all* things."²⁹ All things—not just the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon or the veracity of God's love for you, but all things. I have felt the power of the Spirit guiding me both when I have prepared to teach a lesson for my ward's priest quorum and when I have prepared for my courses in Scandinavian literature and film. I have been guided with strokes of inspiration in my research in the environmental humanities and have heard colleagues remark how the Spirit has led them, sometimes in dramatic ways, to new insights, techniques, and knowledge that have, in some cases, shaped the course of research in their fields.

Furthermore, the Spirit has a sanctifying effect on us. It refines us, it cleanses us, it leads us back to where we started, and it helps us to focus on God and on serving His children. To return to Elder Uchtdorf:

My young friends, as you accept the responsibility to seek after truth with an open mind and a humble heart, you will become more tolerant of others, more open to listen, more prepared to understand, more inclined to build up instead of tearing down, and more willing to go where the Lord wants you to go.³⁰

Not only will a strong, broad BYU education strengthen your ability to discern truth, but it will also bless you with resilience for a rapidly changing world, with skills to work in careers that do not now even exist, and, crucially, with the ability

to serve in the kingdom. After admonishing the School of the Prophets about the broad curriculum, the Lord plainly declared that through this transformative education they would “be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you.”³¹

Where will the Lord lead you? With the unique light you bear, what work does the Lord have for you to do? You have only the faintest glimpses of what the Lord has in store for you and for the great work you will do for your sisters and brothers in the world.

Preparation Through Education

In conclusion, I would like to give you a concrete example of the way education transforms us and prepares us to be better disciples of Christ and to be of service to others. My parents are remarkable people. My father, a BYU graduate, is not only an accomplished professional known for his leadership and compassion but also a passionate student of history and Swedish culture. His curiosity and enthusiasm evoked in me a passion for history and family history and for Sweden and its people. Wherever we lived as I was growing up—in Missouri, Sweden, New Jersey, and Boston—he helped us seek out what made those places unique, and he served the people with all his heart and mind.

My mother took a less conventional route to a university degree but never delayed her education. She is a voracious reader with an envious intellectual curiosity. She started at BYU studying graphic design but put her plans on hold when, after marrying my father, a job offer took them to St. Louis. My older sister’s arrival and the demands of my father’s burgeoning career delayed my mother’s ability to return to school, but she did not forget the admonition in her patriarchal blessing that she should finish a college degree. I came along two years later, and then two years after that came another sister. Then, when my mother was twenty-six years old, with three children under the age of five and a fourth on the way, she and my father were called as mission leaders for a newly created mission in Göteborg,

Sweden. (You didn’t know they called kids on missions, did you? And these kids had kids!)

While my father, just twenty-nine, had not had time to forget Swedish after serving a proselyting mission to Sweden a few years before, my mother spoke no Swedish at all. During the following three years, however, she not only had a fifth child but also learned the language so that she could understand and communicate with the people she loved whom she had been called to serve. While she ministered to others, she and my father had outsized responsibilities to minister to a young family in the home. Their willingness to serve and sacrifice left an unmistakable impression on me and my siblings. Indeed, I can say, like the sons of Helaman, that I learned from the service and example of my parents—and in the things of the Spirit, I cannot doubt that my mother (and father) “knew it”³² because of how they lived.

They returned from Sweden, had two more children (that is seven in total for anyone keeping score), and continued a full and rich life of service in the Church and in our home. Still, my mother’s patriarchal blessing haunted her. While she was the paragon of a lifelong learner—among other things, teaching early-morning seminary for years in St. Louis and Houston—why was it so important for her to finish her degree? As my younger siblings grew older and more independent, she made the bold decision to return to her studies and finish what she had started at BYU several decades, seven children, and at least eight interstate and international moves before.

But there were obstacles. The classes she had taken for her graphic design degree in the 1960s—hand lettering and drafting—had long since been replaced by new technologies. Instead, the degree in English literature stood out to her as something that might play to her superpower: boundless reading. She took the plunge, and class by class she clawed her way toward a degree.

But there were more obstacles. One of them was the Languages of Learning GE requirement. Calculus was not an obvious option, and she did not have the requisite number of French classes. Here the Lord intervened. Because of an initiative in the College of Humanities, I was approached to teach a summer Swedish literature class for

returned missionaries that would fulfill the requirement and be open to returning students like my mother. I have only ever been asked to do this once, but it came at just the moment she happened to need it. That is right, my mother took a class from me (entirely in Swedish) more than twenty-five years after returning home from Sweden. (Just for the record, no, I did not call her “Mom” in class.) While federal law prohibits me from telling you the grade she received, let’s just say that she was impressive.

She finally finished her degree and graduated in 2009, more than forty years after having started at BYU. That in and of itself is an inspiring story, but what happened afterward serves to illustrate the important point we learned from section 88 in the Doctrine and Covenants. We rarely know how and where the Lord will use the character, habits, experiences, and education with which He has blessed us.

Within just a couple of years after my mother had taken that class, she and my father were called to serve in Sweden again, this time as temple president and matron of the Stockholm Sweden Temple. An important part of their responsibilities was to instruct those entering the temple for the first time as well as speak in wards and branches throughout the temple district. Because of her education, my mother was ready to meet these challenges on day one of their mission. Writing papers in Swedish on Selma Lagerlöf and Ingmar Bergman paid off as she found herself writing sacrament meeting and fireside talks to give to the members in Sweden in their native language.

Shortly after returning home, she and my father were quite unexpectedly called into the office of the First Presidency, and my mother, Bonnie Lee Oscarson, was called as the fourteenth Young Women general president of the Church. There is little to prepare one for such a calling and responsibility, but my mother has said on numerous occasions that her experience reading, analyzing, and writing about American, British, and Scandinavian literature for classes was ideal training for the innumerable articles and talks she needed to write during her years in that calling. Her education prepared her to understand others; deal with change;

analyze messy, unorganized information; make clear decisions; and receive inspiration. While she is quick to point out the myriad ways that her own abilities were clearly enhanced and enriched by the Spirit working through her, she would not have felt confidence in asking for that divine help had she not done her part.

In sharing this example, I am certainly not suggesting that a degree from BYU is necessary or predictive of any particular kind of service, but I testify that the Lord will use both the process and product of your education to refine you, to change you, and to prepare you for work in your homes, in your communities, and in the Church in ways and places that you cannot now imagine. Let your education change you, refine you, and make you a better and more committed disciple of Christ. He desires to transform us all. Transformation and repentance are at the heart of His Atonement because He knows how to make you into more than you could ever possibly make of yourself. I testify of these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 29:34.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.
3. Doctrine and Covenants 6:15.
4. Luke 24:32.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.
6. Kimball, “Second Century.”
7. *The Mission of Brigham Young University* (4 November 1981).
8. Doctrine and Covenants 88:79.
9. John 1:16; Doctrine and Covenants 93:12, 20.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 88:74.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 97:3.
12. Mission of BYU.
13. See Matthew 25:14–30.
14. Mission of BYU; emphasis added.
15. Mission of BYU; emphasis added.
16. Dallin H. Oaks, “Response,” *Addresses Delivered at the Inauguration of Dallin Harris Oaks*, 12 November 1971 (Provo: BYU Press, 1971), 18; emphasis in original; quoted in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University*:

The First One Hundred Years, 4 vols. (Provo: BYU Press, 1975–76), 4:64.

17. Ari Berman, “Covenant Versus Consumer Education,” BYU forum address, 31 January 2023; audio, 17:59–18:52.

18. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

19. Matthew 7:7; see also verse 8.

20. Doctrine and Covenants 6:7.

21. Doctrine and Covenants 58:26.

22. See Joseph Smith—History 1:11–20.

23. See Alma 20:23.

24. Alma 22:15; emphasis added.

25. Philippians 2:12; Mormon 9:27.

26. 2 Nephi 29:9, 11.

27. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “What Is Truth?” BYU devotional address, 13 January 2013; quoting 1 Corinthians 13:12.

28. John 7:24.

29. Moroni 10:5; emphasis added.

30. Uchtdorf, “What Is Truth?”

31. Doctrine and Covenants 88:80.

32. Alma 56:48; see also verse 47.