

Gathering in Divine Communities

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Many years ago I was serving in the Young Men organization in my ward. I attended an Eagle Scout court of honor in my church building. I was there a few minutes early and sat down on the stage a few rows back. My bishop was sitting alone in his regular spot on the front row. He turned back, smiled, and invited me to sit in the seat next to him. His invitation wasn't so that he would not be sitting alone but was a specific request for me to sit in that particular seat.

I bantered with him that I would be happy to sit next to him, but not in that particular place because that was a seat for a bishopric counselor. I recall saying, "I am not saying that I won't sit in that seat. Eventually, maybe, but definitely not right now."

He chuckled, waved away my comment, and directed me again to sit. I did not know then but found out a couple of weeks later that he had already submitted my name to the stake for a new Church calling, and I would occupy that seat for many months.

That experience taught me a valuable lesson. We choose to provide our time, talents, and all that God has blessed us with to build up the Church and everything around us. The effect of that choice does not wait for when it is convenient or when we feel capable. President Russell M. Nelson once reflected, "Have you not learned that strength comes to an ordinary soul when given an extraordinary calling?"¹

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have each had and will continue to have regular opportunities throughout our lives to answer calls to serve in myriad ways that, myopically, we never thought were within our capacity to accomplish. And yet at the conclusion of those assignments, we have been strengthened and our capacity has increased.

Our prophet, President Nelson, said:

*There is **nothing** happening on this earth right now that is more important than [gathering Israel]. There is **nothing** of greater consequence. Absolutely **nothing**.*

Kevin W. Utt, director of the BYU Honor Code Office, delivered this devotional address on August 1, 2023.

*This gathering should mean **everything** to you. This is the mission for which you were sent to earth. . . .*

*Anytime [we] do **anything** that helps **anyone**—on either side of the veil—take a step toward making [and keeping] covenants with God . . . , [we] are helping to gather Israel.²*

These are such powerful and concise statements by our prophet. To *gather* implies a need to interact with others. We are not on a solo sojourn. Since our first day on this earth, God has organized us into communities in which we learn more about Him and become more like Him. We live and serve in the kingdom of God on earth, preparing us to further serve when we are no longer limited by the veil.

Today I would like to discuss three communities of which each of us is a part: a family, a religious community, and BYU. I intend to connect our roles in these communities to President Nelson’s explanation of how we participate in gathering Israel.

Our Family Community

The family proclamation teaches that “the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”³ Additionally:

The purpose of family is to create a safe, stable, and loving environment where a husband and wife can support and strengthen each other and where children can learn, grow, and develop. “God organizes us into families so we can experience happiness and learn patience and selflessness. These traits help us become more like God and prepare us to live happily as families throughout eternity.” Family life is perhaps most significant for children. It is in the home that children learn to love others, show compassion, build trust, and express loyalty.⁴

This list of skills and attributes serves as a foundation of living in a godly society: patience, selflessness, love, compassion, trust, and loyalty. We often learn that if we pray for more patience, for example, we aren’t blessed with a peaceful environment in which patience abounds; rather, we are given circumstances that are so intense that choosing patience is the only viable option

forward as we are pushed much further than we thought we had the capacity to handle. So we are given a family to put us in situations in which we will grow.

These are the traits that help us to become more like God and prepare us for our duties in the eternities. How I demonstrate these attributes with my family changes over time. Our relationships evolve over the course of our decades on this earth. My capacity for and the manner in which I demonstrated compassion to my siblings and parents when I was six years old was different than how I demonstrated it when I was twenty or forty. And it will be different in the decades that await me. As my family has expanded to include a spouse, children, and in-laws, I have continued to learn more about the nature of God, which gives me the opportunity to become more like Him.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught in his April 2023 conference address that the nourishing “daily bread is best . . . served at home.”⁵ Here we strive to provide an environment of love, patience, and belonging. Just as plants do not flourish if they are only given short, intense, sudden bursts of sunshine or water, healthy growth in family relationships relies on frequent, steady, and consistent care.

I have been given a stewardship on this earth to care specifically for four of God’s children. When I act with shortsightedness, I can try again. There is much joy and much struggle in this learning environment. As I strive to create a gospel-centered home, I find that more joy abounds and difficult circumstances feel like less of a struggle.

Our Religious Community

So much of our worship and ritual is tied to people. Gathering in our religious community is more than being physically present. We must *participate* regularly in Church services as an introductory point to becoming more fully immersed in our religious communities.

It is easy in our modern industrial societies to segment our lives into different parts, each with its own independent purpose. Researcher Azim Shariff, who studies morality and the development of societies, explained that for thousands of years people lived in small clans consisting mostly

of families. As communities developed beyond family clans and economies began to develop financial systems, strangers began to interact in new ways.

When people were not sure who to trust, religious communities provided structure and common belief foundations: “I may not know this person, but I know that we worship the same God. We read the same religious texts and use them to guide our decision making.” This became enough for people to trust each other in complex agreements. Over time, as societies installed governments, banking systems, and judicial systems, reliance on religious commonalities decreased.⁶

Dr. Shariff’s findings ring true to me. When I applied for a home mortgage loan, the bank did not look at my religious observance or my reputation in the community. They looked at my credit score and my documented historical record on paying bills.

Now, I do not believe we should return to these former practices entirely, as they may create unintentional instances of bias or exclusion. However, in the light of gathering Israel, I do believe we should be exemplary in demonstrating the influence of the gospel in each of our actions. We should be honest, be respectful, and be peacemakers in every interaction. We should share with others why we have chosen to form these habits, and we should incorporate the words of our prophet into our daily lives.

While I may not rely as heavily on my religious community as people did in days gone by, I still feel the same confidence and connection while interacting with those of my faith. When I have traveled to distant places and everything looks and feels unfamiliar, if I see a church, a BYU hat, or another symbol, I know these people in these places understand me. I know we have a common understanding of the world. We follow the same prophet. We have made the same covenants. We use the same teachings to guide our lives.

A few months ago I had an experience in which I became more aware of my reliance on my religious community. I went through a difficult moment with my family—the kind of moment that makes the grief and worry so palpable that it is hard to breathe. Each of my five senses focused

only on this one thing, and it encompassed my life. I felt isolated, alone, and guilty.

When the ground below your feet suddenly shifts, it is easy to hold still and close in because that feels secure. Oddly, that initial instinct also contradicts and undermines our nature to be in community. With my experience, when Sunday morning arrived, it had been only a few days, and things were far from settled. I had to decide if I was going to go to church. Emotions came in as the tide. I knew waves would roll in, but I could not anticipate their size or impact. I had never experienced these kinds of waves and couldn’t forecast the size of any swell. Would I be fine, would I tear up, or would I sob openly?

Then an email came through. My kind bishopric sent me a Zoom link. I could sit at home and attend sacrament meeting remotely. My first thought was, “Oh, that takes care of it. Issue resolved.” My second thought was, “Community. What is best for my soul is to gather. What my family needs is to gather.”

I arrived at church and thought, “Okay, get ready for the hymn. That might be the moment. Or maybe it will be during the prayer or the sacrament, or perhaps it will come with the testimonies. That is when this wave will roll in.”

I didn’t make it that far. Taking my seat, I looked around the chapel full of people who had chosen to gather in order to worship and who were looking forward to yoking themselves to the Savior through renewing a covenant. With the Spirit of God connecting each of us together, I relaxed.

The person conducting said, “Good morning.”

That was it for me. Here I was again, overwhelmed with emotion.

Within our religious community, as each member in my family began sharing with others, each of us received help. When I began to share, I quickly learned that many people had had similar personal experiences and could provide perspective and resources. Each person in my family talked about their experience with people they were close to, and the safety net in this community of Saints quickly opened. Intense feelings of grief and worry were replaced with comfort and peace. Isolation gave way to unity. Feelings

of meekness and patience took the place of guilt. The shifting ground was stabilized by temperance and faith. The reality of the situation was still very tangible and nowhere near resolution, but nevertheless, the Holy Spirit, through others, ministered to me.

We are meant to worship collectively. I invite anyone who has found going to church difficult—whether due to past experiences, other commitments, or other priorities—to commit themselves to participating in church services. Engage in the community of Saints. Worship, serve, and be social; each of these elements assists in ministering to our own needs and the needs of others.

The BYU Community

The third community I wish to discuss is the one that brings us together today: BYU. Unlike the previous two, in which we are part of those communities every day of our mortal lives and maybe even into eternity, our formal participation in the BYU community is meant to be for a period of time and for intensive learning in a stimulating setting. For many, this period will last only a few years; for others, it might be a professional career spanning decades.

An Enlightened Environment

In this educational community we study and teach in “an environment enlightened by living prophets and sustained by those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God.”⁷ We then take what we have learned and use it to build up the kingdom of God as we move forward in the world. There are many communities in this kingdom that need our influence.

For BYU to be successful in this unique purpose, we need to create a unique atmosphere. Many institutions will communicate their standards as behaviors that should be avoided. By avoiding the negative, individuals are then free to engage in their own education without undue interference. For example, one should not steal, one should not physically harm another, or one should not harass another. An environment free of harassment is thus sufficient for the student to engage in their educational pursuits.

BYU has a different approach. President Dallin H. Oaks, speaking at a devotional last year, quoted a statement from President Nelson:

*You are to be a light to the world. Therefore, the Lord needs you to look like, sound like, act like, and dress like a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Yes, you are living in the world, but you have very different standards from the world.*⁸

Our university leaders have described the atmosphere that is needed for us to achieve the high ideal of this institution. We not only avoid negative behaviors but *proactively strive* to be honest; act with virtue; be respectful in action and word; abstain from consumption of alcohol and drugs; immerse ourselves in our religious communities; maintain dress standards that are neat, clean, and modest; and encourage others as they move along this path.

It is on this last principle—encouragement—that I wish to focus the remainder of my time.

Researchers have been commenting on the current environment of higher education. Encouragement is now often overshadowed by competition. (For sources, see the section The Competitive Environment of Higher Education at the end of this speech.)

The narrative goes something like this: “The job markets have shifted, and the cost of living has dramatically increased. If I don’t get a good job, I won’t be able to take care of myself and provide for my family. I need to be a [insert a career here]. I must major in [insert a university program here]. I must attend this specific university, which only admits a small percentage of applicants. Therefore I must have a perfect application full of perfect scores and perfect activities. If I don’t make it, if I don’t beat out everyone else for this seat at this college and in this major, then I will not be successful.”

This approach to education, as well as to life generally, can fill us with anxiety and lead to a sense that perfection is the only way to win the lottery of life success.

God has taught us a different way.

In God’s kingdom there is sufficient for all. The Lord does not compare us.

The purpose of a BYU education is to help us learn how to gather Israel—to create a sense of belonging and build up and strengthen each of the communities of which we will be a part throughout our lives—not to have a certain career. I invite you to be cautious in creating a single path to success in this life or limiting yourself to a single career possibility, for there are many ways to fulfill God’s intents. Success in your life is not tied to your major or your career.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. . . .

. . . For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.⁹

In our Zion community we engage in this time of intensive learning in our study and in the development of our whole selves. We encourage others rather than compete with others. Educators, including all faculty and staff, must learn to foster this atmosphere in a reality of limited enrollment and limited opportunities within each program or activity.

Creating this atmosphere is a difficult proposition that has no specific blueprint. We do know, however, some of the elements that are needed to form this strong foundation. First is regular temple attendance. It is no coincidence that a temple is located adjacent to campus. In the dedicatory prayer for the Provo Utah Temple, President Joseph Fielding Smith connected the learning at BYU to the temple and then said:

Let thy enlightening power rest upon those who teach and those who are taught, that they may “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”

Bless us, O Lord, . . . that we may “be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God.”¹⁰

Your Place in God’s Kingdom

As we maintain an educational culture in this enlightened environment, we strive to create an atmosphere free of contention. We strive to create

an atmosphere in which each person can develop a personal relationship with God—understanding one’s value in His sight, understanding one’s role in mortality from His perspective, and having a focus on developing gifts with which to serve in His kingdom.

We do not need a specific career. In fact, I believe that we limit God when we say, “I must be *this* to be useful in this life.” There is space for each person in His kingdom. So develop the gifts that resonate with your inner inclinations. This is where you will feel purpose.

Looking back at the early years in my life, I remember that I would be asked, “What career do you want?” and “What interests you?” I had many answers that changed over time. I can tell you one job that did not come to mind was director of the BYU Honor Code Office.

I *have* found that I thoroughly enjoy working in the atmosphere and environment that exists on a college campus. During my undergraduate years, I really enjoyed my general education courses, learning a little bit across the breadth of all areas of study. I loved learning about life from the different perspectives of history, biology, psychology, physics, and literature. When I needed an English credit, a medieval literature class fit my schedule. I knew nothing about Chaucer or Beowulf. And honestly, the class did not uncover a deep love of the subject or a new path in life. But I spent time with a professor who loved this topic. His enthusiasm and understanding unlocked this area of study for me and enriched my life.

I recall that during my college years, my friends and I were often preoccupied with determining if an inclination was a whisper from the Spirit or a personal desire. In determining a major or deciding which jobs to apply for, we would often consider, “Is this decision more my decision or God’s specific direction?”

I have come to believe that as we learn to let God prevail in our lives, there becomes little separation between our choices and His will. We decide to follow the Spirit, which leads us “to do good.”¹¹ We choose the path that leads to deeper discipleship of Jesus Christ. When a choice between two good options arises, we pray to be instruments in God’s hands wherever that path

leads us. Then we act. We decide to walk down a path and enjoy the opportunities and perspectives that come with that decision, leaving behind the consideration of what might have been.

Did I become a psychology major because God wanted me to? Or did I find my way to an area of study that resonated inside me, and then God used the effects of that decision to meet the needs of His kingdom?

A job that introduced me into my current career was working as a resident assistant. Did God specifically direct me to that job at that time at that school? Or did I make a choice to do something that felt interesting to me (that might not have been of interest to another), and then God used me where I decided to stand?

A Role for Each

I love working on college campuses. I love the energy of watching first-year students in their first few days on campus, exhibiting confidence but also nervousness and excitement. I love seeing students during finals week when they are exhausted, knowing how much they have struggled and sacrificed. I also love the sense of relief and accomplishment I observe as they walk out of the last final exam.

I love attending poster presentations in which students share what they have learned about complex phenomena. They use sophisticated phrases and models to describe something they now comprehend that they did not know existed a month earlier. I equally love listening to a professor who has been studying that same phenomenon throughout their entire career and who now sees that concept in its beautiful simplicity. I absolutely enjoy participating in graduation ceremonies, in which the entire community celebrates the achievements of the students.

Observing learning and growth is joyful to me. I am grateful to have a career working on a college campus with all that comes with being a part of this type of community—especially at BYU, where the full realization of human potential is pursued.

In the BYU community, I think it is appropriate to apply the body of Christ metaphor that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12:7–11. Each person in this community has a role.

- To the students it is given to engage in educational endeavors that develop their faith, intellect, character, and desire to continue to learn and serve throughout their lives.¹²
- To the faculty it is given to teach “subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”¹³
- To another it is given to prepare the physical and virtual learning environments.
- To another it is given to provide the nourishment that the body needs to learn.
- To another it is given to oversee extracurricular activities that lead to “the balanced development of the total person.”¹⁴
- To another it is given to oversee the living spaces for students as they acclimate to this community.
- To another it is given to coordinate the people and the day-to-day tasks this university relies on to function.
- To another it is given to assist students in addressing their health, whether financial, mental, or physical.
- To another it is given to facilitate internships, study abroad programs, and other inspiring learning opportunities.

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. . . .

But now are they many members, yet but one body. . . .

. . . God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked:

That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.¹⁵

And to emphasize again the need to encourage others, no matter our role: “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.”¹⁶

I am grateful to be a member of this community in which each person strives to fulfill their role while also exhibiting patience and support for others. I feel every day that we work and study in a university “environment enlightened by living prophets and sustained by those moral virtues

which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God.”

We have each had wonderful opportunities to help gather Israel in the many communities of which we are a part. Let’s circle back to President Nelson’s question: “Have you not learned that strength comes to an ordinary soul when given an extraordinary calling?” While we cannot know all the ways God will use us to build up His kingdom, I am confident that as we anxiously seek to apply what we have learned at BYU to gather Israel, we will experience an overriding sense of peace that will abide with us through our quest toward eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “These . . . Were Our Examples,” *Ensign*, November 1991.
2. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” world-wide youth devotional, 3 June 2018; emphasis in original.
3. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).
4. Come unto Christ page, “The Importance of Family,” Church of Jesus Christ; quoting Gospel Topics and Questions page, “Family,” Church of Jesus Christ.
5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Jesus Christ Is the Strength of Parents,” *Liahona*, May 2023.
6. See Azim Shariff interviewed by Shankar Vedantam in podcast episode “Creating God,” *Hidden Brain*, National Public Radio (NPR), 16 July 2018; transcript and audio, 01:22–3:59 and 45:21–48:09, [npr.org/2018/07/16/628792048/creating-god](https://www.npr.org/2018/07/16/628792048/creating-god).
7. Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).
8. Nelson, “Hope of Israel”; quoted in Dallin H. Oaks, “Going Forward in the Second Century,” BYU devotional address, 13 September 2022.
9. Matthew 6:28, 32–33.
10. Joseph Fielding Smith, dedicatory prayer for the Provo Utah Temple, 9 February 1972, in “Provo Temple Dedicatory Prayer,” *Ensign*, April 1972; quoting Doctrine and Covenants 88:118 and 88:78. See also Smith, “Dedication Prayer of Provo Temple,” *Church News*, 12 February 1972, 5.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 11:12.
12. See Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
13. Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967; quoted in Aims of BYU.
14. Mission of BYU.
15. 1 Corinthians 12:18, 20, 24–25.
16. 1 Corinthians 12:26.

The Competitive Environment of Higher Education

Louise Bunce, Amy Baird, and Siân E. Jones, “The Student-as-Consumer Approach in Higher Education and Its Effects on Academic Performance,” *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 11 (November 2017): 1958–78, [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908).

Selected quote:

The analysis revealed that consumer orientation mediated traditional relationships between learner identity, grade goal and academic performance, and found that a higher consumer orientation was associated with lower academic performance. Furthermore, responsibility for paying tuition fees and studying a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subject were associated with a higher consumer orientation and subsequently lower academic performance. [Page 1958, in article abstract]

Elizabeth A. Canning, Jennifer LaCosse, Kathryn M. Kroeper, and Mary C. Murphy, “Feeling Like an Imposter: The Effect of Perceived Classroom Competition on the Daily Psychological Experiences of First-Generation College Students,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11, no. 5 (July 2020): 647–57, doi.org/10.1177/1948550619882032.

Selected quote:

Many college students intend to pursue science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers but quickly abandon these goals when confronted with notoriously competitive STEM courses that often pit students against each other. [Page 647, in article abstract]

Daniel Markovits, “How College Became a Ruthless Competition Divorced from Learning,” *Ideas*, *Atlantic*, 6 May 2021, theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/marriage-college-status-meritocracy/618795.

Selected quote:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that elite parents, in possession of excellent jobs, want to get their kids into college. . . .

. . . The more completely people embrace education’s competitive face, the further they retreat from its deeper place in human self-actualization; no matter how skilled they get at capturing status, they never acquire a deep self-knowledge. And in this sense they remain forever uneducated.

Steven Mintz, “The Tyranny of the Market,” *Opinion*, *Higher Ed Gamma* (blog), *Inside Higher Ed*, 30 January 2020, insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/tyranny-market.

Selected quote:

Market pressures certainly contribute to an us-versus-others mentality and a fixed-pie mind-set, where one institution’s gain comes at another’s loss. Even when institutions nominally collaborate—for example, by joining athletic conferences—these partnerships are as much about exclusion as inclusion. Just ask the campuses clamoring to join.

Julie R. Posselt and Sarah Ketchen Lipson, “Competition, Anxiety, and Depression in the

College Classroom: Variations by Student Identity and Field of Study,” *Journal of College Student Development* 57, no. 8 (November 2016): 973–89, doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0094.

Selected quote:

Multivariate logistic regressions reveal that high levels of perceived competition in one’s classes are associated with increased risks of depression and anxiety, especially among queer, first-generation, Black, and Latino/a students. [Page 973, in abstract]

Nicole M. Stephens, Stephanie A. Fryberg, Hazel Rose Markus, Camille S. Johnson, and Rebecca Covarrubias, “Unseen Disadvantage: How American Universities’ Focus on Independence Undermines the Academic Performance of First-Generation College Students,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102, no. 6 (June 2012): 1178–97, doi.org/10.1037/a0027143.

Selected quote:

Together these studies revealed that representing the university culture in terms of independence (i.e., paving one’s own paths) rendered academic tasks difficult and, thereby, undermined first-generation students’ performance. Conversely, representing the university culture in terms of interdependence (i.e., being part of a community) reduced this sense of difficulty and eliminated the performance gap without adverse consequences for continuing-generation students. [Page 1178, in abstract]