

# No Coincidences

C. SHANE REESE

Welcome to BYU! For some of you that is welcome *back* to BYU. For more than ten thousand of you, today is the first time you have heard that amazing greeting, with all of its anticipation, excitement, and wonder. Today marks the beginning of my twenty-second year of hearing that welcome phrase. I heard it from President Rex E. Lee, who had just taken the reins from President Jeffrey R. Holland. I heard it from President Merrill J. Bateman, who was the president when I was hired at BYU. I heard those warm and inviting words from President Cecil O. Samuelson, who was the president when I received my first promotion. And I heard it last year and many years before that from President Kevin J. Worthen, who was and remains one of my personal heroes. It is a humbling thing for me to stand before you today with the opportunity and honor to share my version of a warm welcome to BYU.

Before I share my prepared remarks, I want to take a moment to express my profound gratitude for President Worthen. He is a remarkable man.

I sat at his feet and worked by his side and learned from his example. He is invariably the smartest man in the room—and everyone knows it—but he never betrays the slightest desire or need to demonstrate that brilliance. His humility, Christlike attributes, and unyielding loyalty to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ are all hallmarks of his amazing tenure as president of BYU. We all have awed reverence toward, profound gratitude for, and happy memories of his leadership, friendship, and commitment to the mission of BYU.

President Worthen's life and mine have had several "intertwinings."<sup>1</sup> The first connection we had was when I was a struggling freshman and needed advice. To make a long story short, young law professor Kevin Worthen took time to reassure me that I would find my way at BYU if I gave it a chance. Later, when I was a faculty member, then Vice President Worthen invited me to serve on the University Athletic Advisory Committee. Then, a few years ago, Elder Worthen, who was presiding at our stake conference, gave a powerful and

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*C. Shane Reese, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on September 12, 2023.*

inspiring talk that prompted me to increase my humble seeking of the Savior. Each of these interactions at various stages of my life was profound for different reasons, and I am so grateful for how they helped me improve myself.

What is true of the relationship between President Worthen and me is true of all of us here today. Our lives are not disconnected from one another. They are intertwined in intricate ways. Just like a social network that forms as people make connections to others, the sequence of relationships that links you to others is a finite set. Some have postulated that the number of links or degrees of separation from one person to any other person is only six small steps. The network that connects each of us to others may look at first like a set of random occurrences.

Like a network illustrating social media connections, our lives are intertwined in nonrandom ways—and as a statistics professor, I know a thing or two about randomness. Our lives become richer when we understand that our mortal relationships flow from God’s keen interest in our lives and reflect His divine plan for each of us. These divine orchestrations reveal God’s profound investment in our growth, development, and eternal welfare. Elder Neal A. Maxwell clearly and beautifully refuted the limited perspective that would attribute the intersection of our lives with others’ lives due to coincidence or chance:

*None of us ever fully utilizes the people-opportunities allocated to us within our circles of friendship. You and I may call these intersectings “coincidence.” This word is understandable for mortals to use, but coincidence is not an appropriate word to describe the workings of an omniscient God. He does not do things by “coincidence” but instead by “divine design.”*<sup>2</sup>

God is, indeed, intimately involved with the details of our lives because His love for us is infinite, eternal, and complete. In His consummate love for us, He has given us the most fundamental gift of mortality: our agency. God’s personalized plan for each of us and His investment in the details of our lives do not in any way undermine His sovereign gift of agency. He honors that gift always and trusts us to use it well. We are all, as

the scripture affirms, “free to choose.”<sup>3</sup> My message today is that God loves you and that He will direct your path to places where you can serve, to people whom you can love, and to situations in which you can bless others and they can bless you. It is about these divinely designed interactions that I speak today.

### Coincidence Versus Design

The numerous seemingly disconnected points of connection are a manifestation of our Heavenly Father’s love and concern for us.

People describe freakish events that occur at the same time as “coincidences” because the similar timing seems so improbable as to preclude anything but chance being the cause. But as the Book of Mormon teaches, “time only is measured unto men,”<sup>4</sup> and God is not limited by our mortal perspectives about time and timing. God’s hand is often manifest in our lives through His timing of the events in our lives. In a remarkable address given on this campus more than twenty years ago, President Dallin H. Oaks said this about the importance of relying on the Lord’s timing: The timing of the elements of the Lord’s plan for us may not match the timing we have in mind.<sup>5</sup>

*In all the important decisions in our lives, what is most important is to **do the right thing**. Second, and only slightly behind the first, is to **do the right thing at the right time**. People who do the right thing at the wrong time can be frustrated and ineffective. They can even be confused about whether they made the right choice when what was wrong was not their choice but their timing.*<sup>6</sup>

President Oaks also said:

*Do not rely on planning every event of your life—even every important event. Stand ready to accept the Lord’s planning and the agency of others in matters that inevitably affect you. Plan, of course, but fix your planning on personal commitments that will carry you through no matter what happens. Anchor your life to eternal principles, and act upon those principles whatever the circumstances and whatever the actions of others. Then you can await the Lord’s timing and be sure of the outcome in eternity.*<sup>7</sup>

Note that our part in submitting our will to the Lord’s plan is allowing for His timing.<sup>8</sup> Most of the things that happen at uncanny times—the things we might call coincidences—can more accurately be attributed to the Lord’s will and to the Lord’s timing. This often requires patience and understanding on our part. It requires us to take the “long view.” Understanding God’s divine design for our lives demands deeper discipleship and fuller acknowledgment of His overarching will.

### People by Divine Design

In a prophetic message given to honor BYU’s one hundredth anniversary in 1975, President Spencer W. Kimball described a stunning vision for the future of this university. This address is called “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,”<sup>9</sup> and I invite each one of you here today to study it carefully and prayerfully. It will bless you with a sense of mission and divine purpose as you pursue your education here. In this amazing address, President Kimball outlined a path for our future that will strengthen us as we embrace our uniqueness. In 2025 we will reach the halfway point of our second century as a university. Although we have made important progress, much remains undone, and you will play a critical role in helping us to realize President Kimball’s incredible vision.

In his landmark message, President Kimball urged us to preserve our uniqueness as a university and encouraged us to use “gospel methodology” to “help us . . . do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”<sup>10</sup> “Gospel methodology” means that we will—at appropriate times and in appropriate ways—take approaches to solving problems and addressing issues that deviate from approaches taken at other universities. These approaches will be rooted in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and will allow us to strike at the root causes of the problems of our time.

One such problem has been described as an epidemic of loneliness among college students. Earlier this year the president of Yeshiva University visited BYU. He has described a manifestation of this problem as “a crisis of meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a program for addressing this challenge—a program rooted in “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights.”<sup>12</sup> Imagine how the world might marvel to see a large college campus in which all students were organized into groups of one or two hundred people. Each group could have some responsibility for the welfare of each member of that group. Perhaps the students in each group could reach out to one another periodically, just to check in. They could send a text to see how someone’s day was. They could prepare a quick meal or drop off a treat if someone was sick or just having a bad day. They could share a spiritual pick-me-up if someone was feeling down or distressed or lonely or sad. They could visit one another in their apartments. They could celebrate together when someone did well on an exam. This would be a world-class program, and it would be fully sustainable! It would, at any other university, cost millions of dollars to implement. The wonderful part about this program is that it is already established at BYU. We call it ministering. It is already organized and shepherded in your young adult wards—single and married.

Today I invite each of us to help alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness through dedicated ministering—both in formal assignments and at any other time you feel you should do something kind for someone else. And while we are talking about ministering, please refrain from worrying whether someone did it just because they were assigned. The important thing about ministering is that someone did it! Whether you were cared for out of pure love or out of a noble sense of duty, it is a sign that God is in the details of your life. He knows and cares for you individually. These experiences are manifestations of His personal care and concern for you. They are *not* mere coincidences.

### Places by Divine Design

Another way to invite the Lord’s influence into your life and to prepare for the Savior’s return is to stand in holy places. The scripture states, “Stand ye in holy places, and be not moved.”<sup>13</sup>

As Sister Reese pointed out today, the holiest place in which you can stand—the place where you can find peace—is the temple.<sup>14</sup> I add my witness to hers: the temple is a holy place where you can find peace in times of turbulence, answers to all of your questions, and certainty when you just don't know what to do. It is the holiest of places. We hope that you will make your time at BYU a time of intensive learning, not only on campus but on the temple grounds and in the temple. You will find more than mere coincidence and will find more meaningful experiences as you draw closer to the temple with your feet and your heart.

Another noncoincidence is *you* being on the BYU campus at this time in our history. You are not here by accident. You *belong* here. I am so certain of that because I know that you have been prepared for some of the changes that are happening right in front of our eyes. An important example is the release of the new principle-based dress and grooming expectations.

As a new president, I have been reviewing all of my predecessors' messages in their first devotionals. In his first devotional message as BYU president, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland noted that BYU is a university with a mission,<sup>15</sup> and, like the Church's full-time missionaries, we at BYU have chosen to be distinct from the world. Our dress and appearance are outward reflections of our inner commitment to live by certain principles. They reflect our unique mission.

Students who were part of a focus group at BYU were motivated and inspired by principles that could form the basis for conversations about *why* they *choose* to dress a certain way or groom themselves differently from friends at other universities. It is part of what makes them unique.

While there are relatively few changes to the Church Educational System (CES) Honor Code, we have added some language to remind each of us of the blessing of our unique governance—that is, at BYU we have a board of education that has three chairmen: a chair, a first vice chair, and a second vice chair. These three chairmen are, respectively, President Russell M. Nelson, President Dallin H. Oaks, and President Henry B. Eyring. No wonder our Honor Code begins with an acknowledgment

of the benefit and blessing of the support from our prophetic board.

The Honor Code also underscores the primary mission of a Church-sponsored education, which is to develop disciples of Jesus Christ. While many institutions of higher learning have codes of conduct that prescribe standards of acceptable behavior, I love the distinctive nature of our Honor Code, beginning with its name. It is an *honor* code because we believe that its principles and expectations foster an environment marked by “honor, integrity, morality, and consideration of others.”<sup>16</sup> The Honor Code thus helps us accomplish our spiritual mission by engendering an atmosphere conducive to that mission:

*Brigham Young University . . . exist[s] to provide an education in an atmosphere consistent with the ideals and principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That atmosphere is created and preserved by a community of faculty, administration, staff, and students who voluntarily commit to conduct their lives in accordance with the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ and who strive to maintain the highest standards in their personal conduct regarding honor, integrity, morality, and consideration of others.*<sup>17</sup>

The Honor Code's updated dress and grooming principles and expectations are grounded in core principles. We each agree to

1. *Represent the Savior Jesus Christ, the Church, and the Church Educational System*
2. *Preserve an inspiring environment, without distraction or disruption, where covenants are kept in a spirit of unity so the Holy Ghost can teach truth*
3. *Promote modesty, cleanliness, neatness, and restraint in dress and grooming*
4. *Maintain an elevated standard distinctive to educational institutions of the Church of Jesus Christ*<sup>18</sup>

It is so empowering for each of us when dress and grooming guidelines are rooted in enduring principles. We are confident that an understanding of and commitment to those principles will certainly follow—even if it takes some time for that understanding and commitment to take hold.

Let me restate something today that I shared with our employees two weeks ago:

*As your president, I commit to uphold these principles. I am today asking you to commit to uphold these principles for yourselves. It is a privilege to represent the Savior, His Church, and its educational system. . . . The impact of our efforts is magnified when we invite the Holy Ghost to be part of our learning environment. As President Russell M. Nelson has prophetically declared, "In coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost."<sup>19</sup>*

My invitation today is this: Will you join me? Will you embrace these principles in your own life?

It is clear to me that the changes to the dress and grooming principles on this campus represent an elevated approach, not a reduced standard. What a wonderful thing to be at BYU during this amazing season! However, if we are to be principle based, then we have to be open to conversations about the principles. Our campus unity will be magnified as we personally commit to those principles and make individual choices with respect to dress, grooming, and honor. This will require effort from each of us. We will need to speak with civility and listen with soft hearts. I invite everyone on this campus—employees and students alike—to be part of those conversations and to make adjustments as needed.

### **Our Opportunities to Participate**

Hopefully each of you has recognized the divine design that has brought people and places into your life. But some of you might be wondering

- How can I find my way into situations that are divinely designed?
- How can I recognize that these experiences are gifts from a God who knows me, loves me, and simultaneously honors my agency?
- What can I do to recognize and welcome such heavenly orchestration?

Today I offer three specific suggestions for how we might invite God's direction into our lives more fully:

1. Recognize the Lord's timing. As President Oaks suggested, doing the right thing at the right time is the most important thing. We will be patient with the Lord's timing and gain a greater sense of His design in our lives as we understand His timing.

2. Look up—both upward to God and up from your phone. Note that many on this campus are feeling a sense of loneliness. Some merely need a smile from you and from me. We can only see that need and see those smiles as we *look up!*

3. Cultivate a sense of gratitude. This must be a deliberate and intentional act to recognize God's hand in your life. We are better at acknowledging His hand when we are looking for things to be grateful for—and when we readily express gratitude to God and to others.

In closing, I reiterate what Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles shared on this campus in April 2021: "There is no such thing as a coincidence in the work of the Lord."<sup>20</sup> Each one of you is a beloved child of heavenly parents with a divine destiny.<sup>21</sup> Wendy and I love that you are here at BYU, and we want you to flourish! As you begin a new school year and find yourself juggling way too many to-dos, activities, homework assignments, jobs, dating-life experiences, and everything else on your plate, I echo the words of Elder Holland:

*If we give our heart to God, if we love the Lord Jesus Christ, if we do the best we can to live the gospel, then tomorrow—and every other day—is ultimately going to be magnificent, even if we don't always recognize it as such. Why? Because our Heavenly Father wants it to be! He wants to bless us. A rewarding, abundant, and eternal life is the very object of His merciful plan for His children! It is a plan predicated on the truth "that all things work together for good to them that love God." So keep loving. Keep trying. Keep trusting. Keep believing. Keep growing. Heaven is cheering you on today, tomorrow, and forever.<sup>22</sup>*

I too am "cheering you on today, tomorrow, and forever." In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Neal A. Maxwell, “‘Brim with Joy’ (Alma 26:11),” BYU devotional address, 23 January 1996.

2. Maxwell, “Brim with Joy.”

3. 2 Nephi 2:27.

4. Alma 40:8.

5. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Timing,” BYU devotional address, 29 January 2002.

6. Oaks, “Timing”; emphasis in original.

7. Oaks, “Timing.”

8. Neal A. Maxwell said:

*The issue for us is trusting God enough to trust also His timing. If we can truly believe He has our welfare at heart, may we not let His plans unfold as He thinks best? The same is true with the second coming and with all those matters wherein our faith needs to include faith in the Lord’s timing for us personally, not just in His overall plans and purposes. [Even as I Am (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 93; quoted in Oaks, “Timing”]*

9. See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

10. Kimball, “Second Century.”

11. Ari Berman, summit on religious identity in education, American Council on Education, Washington, DC, 12 January 2023; quoted in Tad Walch, “The Case for Faith-Based College Education and What Other Universities Can Learn,” *Deseret News*, 12 January 2023,

[deseret.com/2023/1/12/23548705/the-case-for-faith-based-college-education-from-notre-dame-byu-yeshiva](https://deseret.com/2023/1/12/23548705/the-case-for-faith-based-college-education-from-notre-dame-byu-yeshiva).

12. Kimball, “Second Century.”

13. Doctrine and Covenants 87:8.

14. See Wendy W. Reese, “Comfort in Christ,” BYU devotional address, 12 September 2023.

15. See Jeffrey R. Holland and Patricia T. Holland, “Are You True?” BYU devotional address, 2 September 1980; see also Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Bond of Charity,” BYU annual university conference address, 26 August 1980.

16. CES Honor Code (30 August 2023), [honorcode.byu.edu](https://honorcode.byu.edu).

17. CES Honor Code (12 February 2020), [web.archive.org/web/20200220062451/https://policy.byu.edu/view/index.php?p=26](https://web.archive.org/web/20200220062451/https://policy.byu.edu/view/index.php?p=26).

18. CES Dress and Grooming Principles and Expectations (30 August 2023), [honorcode.byu.edu/dress-and-grooming](https://honorcode.byu.edu/dress-and-grooming).

19. C. Shane Reese, “Quick to Observe,” BYU university conference address, 28 August 2023; quoting Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018.

20. David A. Bednar, “Look unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not,” BYU leadership meeting address, 16 April 2021.

21. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).

22. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Tomorrow the Lord Will Do Wonders Among You,” *Ensign*, May 2016; quoting Romans 8:28.