

Bright Minds and Broken Hearts

CHERYL BROWN

I am going to speak about the relationship between learning and humility. I am proceeding from the assumption that, because we are associated here at a university, all of us are interested in learning. I am also assuming that that interest is even stronger here than at most universities because we have been commanded to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”¹ . . .

. . . Humility is the soil in which the seed of faith is planted.² In fact, *humility* and *humus*—“material . . . forming the organic portion of soil”³—come from the same root word.⁴ And we are commanded, as I said earlier, to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” We must plant our faith in our humility.

A few years back I served on the Faculty Advisory Committee with Dana Griffen, a professor in the Geology Department. As we were contemplating at that time what it meant to have a BYU education, one where learning was enlightened by faith, Dana told of an experience he had

had in his research. I have asked his permission to tell you that story today because I think it illustrates so clearly the relationship between humility, study, and faith.

At the time of this experience, Dana was involved in a research project in which he was trying to make a synthetic variety of a common mineral with uncommon elements—ones that as chemical components do not occur naturally in nature. He was using equipment that would go to very high levels of pressure and temperature, and he had been working on this problem for quite a while. He tried every level of temperature and pressure that seemed reasonable, based, as all good research is, on the work presented by others. But nothing Dana tried was working, although he was totally convinced that the synthesis could be done.

One night, after trying everything he could think of, he was totally frustrated with the work. He knew that finding the right temperature

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and pressure was probably not a matter of great import in the eternal scheme of things, but he also knew that it was important to him, so he felt that the Lord would help him in some way. At his home, in his frustration, he humbly went to the Lord in prayer: "Father, I've done everything I know how to do. I know you know how to do this." Immediately he had a clear impression, almost like a voice, that gave a specific temperature and pressure, and the pressure was at least 50 percent higher than what anyone had thought reasonable. The next morning Dana went quickly to the lab. He took the elements, set the equipment to the pressure and temperature he had heard the

night before, and, within twenty minutes, produced the long sought-for synthesis. He has replicated the experiment numerous times since then. If we do the work, seeking learning by study, and are humble, we can also seek learning by faith.

Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.
2. Alma 32:16, 25–29.
3. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. "humus."
4. See *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "humility," "humble," and "humus."