Notes from an Amateur on Academic Excellence

JOHN S. TANNER

In the days and weeks following my appointment as academic vice president, I received many kind notes from faculty colleagues. Thank you. Your confidence means so much to me. I only hope that I can fulfill your hopes rather than confirm my doubts. Your expressions of support have made me feel like Shakespeare's Portia:

Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you,
I would be trebled twenty times myself.
[William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice,* act 3, scene 2, lines 150–53]

As the congratulations came in, I must confess that I often thought of some sobering remarks by Hugh Nibley:

Anyone can become a dean, a professor, a department head, a chancellor, or a custodian by appointment—it has happened thousands of times; but since the world began, no one has ever become an artist, a scientist, or a scholar by appointment. The professional may be a dud, but to get any recognition, the amateur has to be good. [Hugh Nibley, "The Day of the Amateur," *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints,* ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994), 303]

This is a salutary insight for those of us who hold professional positions in the academy by appointment—which, may I add, includes not only administrators but virtually everyone in this hall. Nibley aptly reminds us all that true excellence comes not by appointment but by accomplishment. In doing so he posits, paradoxically, a link between excellence and amateurism. At first blush this may seem counterintuitive. Normally we presume just the reverse: that the professional has to be good while the amateur may be a dud—and there is certainly ample evidence for this view. But today I want to explore the less intuitive connection between amateurism and academic excellence because I think it holds a key to the "more excellent way" we are called to pursue at Brigham Young University (1 Corinthians 12:31; Ether 12:11). I have entitled my remarks "Notes from an Amateur on Academic Excellence."

John S. Tanner was academic vice president when this address was delivered at the BYU Annual University Conference faculty session on 24 August 2004.

First let me confess to a bias: Although I recognize that the term *amateur* often has pejorative connotations—as in an amateurish performance, presentation, or paper—I am personally drawn to the idea and ideal of the amateur. Thus I generally prefer amateur to professional athletics and deplore the intrusion of a professional ethic into ever-lower levels of athletics—until even youth sports camps and Little Leagues are deadly serious, drained of the joy of the game by the relentless pursuit of quasi-professional athletic excellence. I am likewise suspicious of advertisers' attempts to convince me to hire professionals—whether to paint a room or change an air filter—because as an amateur I would surely botch the job. Although I would not give up its benefits, nonetheless I lament the increasing specialization and bureaucratization of modern life, which requires ever more dependence on professionals. We live in the age of the professional. I long for the age of the amateur, when a da Vinci could excel in science and art, a Milton could master most of what was known, and a Newton and Leibniz could not only each independently invent calculus but do moral philosophy and theology as well.

The word *amateur* derives from the Latin for "love." An amateur is at root a lover—a lover of sport, science, art, and so forth. It is this root sense of *amateur* that I believe we must preserve as BYU faculty if we are to achieve a more excellent way. As faculty we are properly concerned about our professionalism. There is much to recommend the professional ethic, including rigor, methodology, high standards of review, and so forth—values I wholeheartedly subscribe to, as do most of you, I suspect. Yet I hope that we also never cease to be amateurs in our professions—that is, passionate devotees of our disciplines. I have told some of you that I hope to be an "academic" academic vice president by still teaching, reading, and writing a little. Even more, I aspire to remain an avid amateur, still smitten with the love for learning that first drew me to the academy.

I have recently been reminded of the ideal of amateur excellence by the Olympics and by a new book about Roger Bannister, the first man to run a sub–four-minute mile, entitled *The Perfect Mile.* The Olympics were once a bastion of world-class amateur athletic competition. This has all changed, most dramatically in the seventies and eighties as the West sought creative ways to underwrite Olympic sports in order to match the state support available in the Soviet bloc. Bannister was among the last genuinely amateur world-class runners. He trained while doing medical "research at University College London and rounds at St. Mary's Hospital. . . . Nowadays, any athlete with Olympic potential has to make his or her sport a vocation, not an avocation." By contrast, after his "four minutes of fame," Roger Bannister went on to become a neurologist and master at Pembroke College, Oxford. "That was the beauty of amateur sports." (Welch Suggs, Short Subjects, "Students of Speed," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 7 May 2004, A6.)

In reality, the professionalization of track and field began well before Bannister. The film *Chariots of Fire* (1981) depicts an important episode in this process during the 1924 Olympics. In fact, the whole movie is organized around the contrast between the professional and amateur. It tells the true story of two protagonists: Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell—both gifted sprinters and both, eventually, gold medal winners. But Abrahams exemplifies the spirit of the professional: he is driven, highly coached, and obsessed with winning and with personal glory. Liddell, by contrast, embodies the spirit of the amateur: joyous, heartfelt, and animated by the love of running and by the glory of God. Harold Abrahams runs on his nerves; when asked why, he says that winning is a weapon against pervasive anti-Semitism. Eric Liddell runs from his heart; when asked why, he says, "I run for God."

We see this contrast in their respective running styles. Abrahams's running is technically sophisticated and fierce; he scowls his way across the finish line. By contrast, Liddell runs like a wild animal racing exuberantly across the hillsides. At a certain point in each race Liddell leans back his head, opens his mouth, and turns on the jets—abandoning himself to the pure expression of his divine gift. I understand that the actor's portrayal of Liddell's running style is historically accurate. It is also symbolic of the fact that Liddell's running is inspired. *Inspire,* you'll remember, literally means "breathed into" by God. Eric's inspired passion for his sport is captured by a famous line from the movie spoken to his sister Jenny, who is worried that her brother is beginning to take his running so seriously that he is forgetting his higher commitment to God and to an eventual mission to China. Eric says:

> *Jenny, Jenny. You've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt. You were right. It's not just fun. To win is to honor Him.*

The story goes on to tell how Liddell is required to make a terrible choice—between God and a possible Olympic gold medal. His qualifying heat for the 100 meter is scheduled for Sunday. Against great pressure, including from the Prince of Wales, he refuses to violate the Sabbath—which is just as well, for his speed is a function of his faith. Fortunately he is given a chance to run the 400 meter instead and wins the gold.

Let me show two clips from the movie: One, a scene that cuts back and forth between Liddell preaching on the very Sunday he was supposed to run and his teammates competing and often failing. The other is Liddell's gold-medal, 400-meter race, in which we hear statements he had previously made about the divine source of his strength. [Two movie clips were shown.]

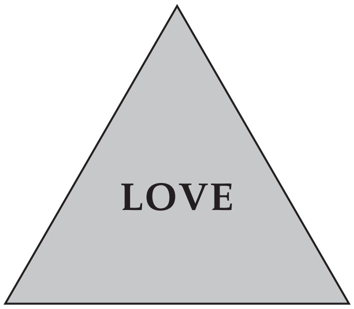
This is stirring stuff. I call attention to it today to illustrate an amateur who exemplified a more excellent way to greatness—a way rooted in love for his discipline and the divine. I see in Eric Liddell a model for the kind of excellence we, too, should seek at BYU—both in athletics (as recent events have painfully reminded us) and in academics. Most of you will quickly agree that student-athletes and coaches need to be committed not just to winning but to the larger purposes of the university—to academics, character building, etc. By the same token, we as faculty need not only to run like the wind, academically speaking, but run for God; delight in the intellectual gifts that make us strong of judgment and quick of wit, yet exercise them in the context of our covenants; pursue our careers with vigor, yet not for laud but for love. Which is to say that we need to be professionally excellent faculty who retain the spirit of the amateur. Ours should be a more excellent way to academic excellence.

I am persuaded that our professional lives, like our personal lives, ought to be grounded in love. Love is indeed the only motive truly worthy a life. It is the authentic ground for every truly Christian life and for all aspects of our lives as disciples, including our lives in the disciplines.

Some years ago I made the conscious determination to try to ground my own career on love. Faced with a critical review in the rank and status process, I felt tempted to react with bitterness. I quickly realized, however, that if I yielded to petty emotions, something essential would die inside me, rendering me ineffective as teacher, scholar, and colleague. For my professional strength, such as it is, comes from my passion—for my discipline, for my students, and for BYU. I therefore resolved not to let the amateur die in pursuit of professional credentials. I resolved to seek "a more excellent way."

In the process I formulated a personal paradigm for my professional commitments that I came to call "the pyramid of my profession." Let me share it here in the hope that it might help you, too, pursue "a more excellent way" in your professional faculty roles.

First, I resolved that my professional life must remain founded on love rather than on fear of failure, devotion to duty, or even vaulting ambition. I felt that ignoble motives were not worth a life's work. Love of learning had drawn me to the academy and to BYU. I could not imagine a career here absent such passion. As Thomas à Kempis observed, "Without love, the outward work is of no value; but whatever is done out of love, be it never so little, is wholly fruitful" (in "On Deeds Inspired by Love," chapter 15 of *The Imitation of Christ,* trans. Leo Sherley-Price [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1952], 43). So I resolved to self-consciously re-situate my career on the passion that led me to choose it. I encourage you to consider this, too, in your quest for a more excellent way at BYU.



Professional Pyramid

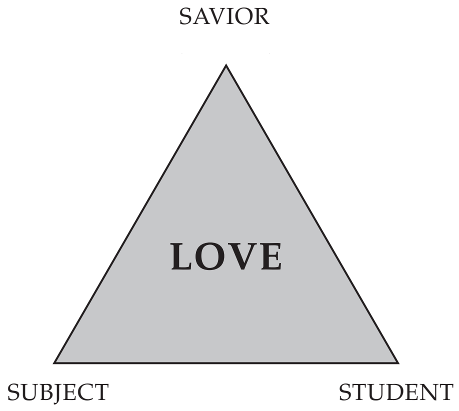
As I reflected more closely on what particular loves animated my academic career, it seemed to me that my professional passions were directed toward three principal objects. One was my field of study—that is, my subject expertise or discipline. I had pursued a PhD in English at great hazard, entering graduate school even though my acceptance letter warned that few English PhDs were getting jobs and that the market was predicted only to get worse. I nevertheless chose to enter graduate school precisely because I felt a passion for great literature and ideas and felt that the academy would allow me to pursue this love more fully. At midcareer I resolved to reclaim the love of subject that first drew me as an amateur to the discipline. I resolved to seize the expectation for scholarship not as an exercise in résumé building or hoop jumping but as an opportunity for deeper engagement with a subject I loved. This is a choice that I invite you to consider as you pursue a more excellent way as scholars. What a blessing to be given time and means to pursue our scholarly studies!

Like many of you, no doubt, I was also drawn to the profession by love of teaching as much or more than by my subject matter. I loved my students. I loved to teach. Yes, some aspects of teaching are wearing and wrenching—like grading papers—but so are aspects of research and of virtually every job. Even so, I often feel gloriously alive in the classroom. And I never cease to feel compelled by the faces of students eager to learn. What a privilege to touch their hearts and minds in an attempt to impart love of learning to them! In this regard I recall William Wordsworth's remark in his poem addressed to Coleridge: "What we have loved, / Others will love, and we will teach them how" (*The Prelude* [written 1799–1805], book 14, lines 446–47). This is the teacher's task. I resolved to pursue it with renewed joy and enthusiasm. I hope that you will consider renewing your commitment to your students, too, in your quest for a more excellent way. BYU is and must always remain a great teaching university where faculty care deeply about students.

These dual loves for subject and student enliven the professional lives of faculty at every great university to one degree or another. Students are fortunate indeed to find faculty who embrace both loves fully rather than imagine themselves positioned along the bottom of the pyramid—as if student and subject, teaching and research, were in competition rather than complementary parts of a whole. In my view this is a false dichotomy. Love for students unattached to rigorous concern for the subject fails to serve either, while love for subject uninflected by genuine interaction with students risks becoming sterile and self-absorbed. How can we love our subjects without wanting to share them with those who come to us to learn? Or truly love our students without holding them accountable for knowing the subjects? BYU faculty should eschew false either/or thinking about teaching and research. Professorial excellence here is governed by a both/and imperative: we are to love both student and subject and do so fully, wholeheartedly, and with appropriate rigor.

In addition, BYU faculty are called to an even more excellent way. Overarching these professional loves ought to be our love for the Lord. As I reviewed my professional commitments, I realized that I could love neither my students nor my subject properly unless my concern for each was disciplined by and enveloped in a larger love for the Savior. The gospel provided essential perspective on my discipline; it disciplined the discipline. It also instilled in me the desire to diligently seek truth to become more like God, whose glory "is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth" (D&C 93:36). Likewise, the gospel taught me to see my students for who they really are: not only my neighbors but my brothers and sisters, children of a Father in Heaven in whose sight there are no ranks or titles, just sons and daughters needing to become more like Him on their journey home. As I reflected on these things, I resolved to let my deepest and highest love—love for the Lord—become the lodestar in my quest for professional excellence. I urge us all to enshrine love of God in our professional lives.

Professional Pyramid

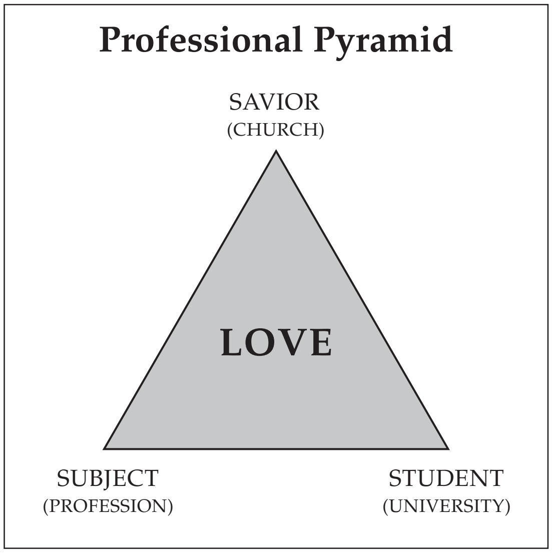


This pyramid has helped me strive to keep the amateur alive in my quest for professional excellence. Perhaps it can help you, too. Before leaving it, let me briefly note institutional commitments that I associate with each love.

First, love of subject compels me to be involved in professional institutions that organize and advance the discipline. We ought to be engaged in our professional organizations—bringing to them the rigor of the professional and the passion of the amateur. Such involvement, which ought to be a natural outgrowth of our love of subject, can help us avoid the pitfalls of amateurism: lack of method, rigor, mentoring, and peer review.

Second, love of student requires me to commit myself to the institution that facilitates their education—namely, the university. We should not confine our professional commitments to our own teaching and research but generously give needed service to the institution. One well-documented danger in large universities such as ours is faculty disengagement. Faculty attachment to home institutions has become increasingly attenuated in the academy. Many faculty now feel connected more closely to colleagues around the world than across the hall. We deliberately try to counter this trend here by such things as our faculty development seminar, fall annual university conference, spring and summer commencement exercises, and campuswide forums and devotionals. But we see the same trend here toward loss of community. So I strongly encourage participation in campuswide events including lectures, concerts, plays, and sports. One can't do everything, but one should do some things. To paraphrase Mark Twain, you should not let your schooling [read, *careers*] interfere with your education. Find time to balance your professional interests with your broader loves. If you do so wisely, I'll wager that you will be a better professional for it. You will certainly be a more interesting one.

Third, love of the Lord leads me to give myself wholeheartedly to His Church. Latter-day Saint faculty should be exemplary role models of gospel living—loyal to inspired Church leaders and consecrated citizens of the kingdom. I recognize that this takes time that could be used in professional pursuits. Yet faculty devotion to the Church is more important than many imagine—for our students, for our board, and for rank and file Latter-day Saints worldwide whose tithing and goodwill sustain us. It makes a material difference that students can find role models in us of men and women who are committed and active in both our professions and Church. Moreover, your time commitment to the Church is no different from that of any other LDS academic. For all men and women of Christ, covenants must come first—not just in academic professions but in any profession. Faithfulness does not guarantee we'll succeed in our careers (receive tenure, full professor, academic honors), but lack of it guarantees we'll fail in the only vocation that really matters.


Professional Pyramid

I have said much today about the need for us to pursue an oxymoronic path in our quest for a more excellent academic way—as amateur professionals or professional amateurs. Let me conclude with a few cautionary remarks on "excellence" itself.

Excellence is the coin of the realm in the academy: all want it, most claim to have it, and we think we know it when we see it, although there is little agreement as to what it really means. While biking by a local junior high school this weekend, I saw a sign proudly announcing it was a Utah School of Excellence. Pardon me for wondering what actual academic realities lay behind this ranking. I feel the same misgivings about most polls that rank academic merit, including ones where we fare well. This is based on a healthy skepticism that you can assign weights to indicators as various as class size, alumni giving, and reputation among uninformed people like me and come out with a precise ranking of excellence. I worry that the popularity of such rankings marks a trend toward consumerism in education—as if a student's education were a commodity one could assess as *Consumer Reports* does automobiles.

We should also remember a theoretical problem with excellence described by Bill

Readings in his book *The University in Ruins.* Readings argues that excellence is an empty signifier. It always begs the question "Excellence with respect to what?" He notes that one university was given an award for excellence in parking service. "What this meant was that they had achieved a remarkable level of efficiency in *restricting* motor vehicle access" ([Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996], 24; emphasis in original). At BYU we need to be very clear about what kind of excellence we seek and what criteria matter most to us. We need to ask ourselves not only if we are at the top of the ladder but what wall the ladder is leaning against. Are we breaking into Babylon or building Zion's walls?

But I have a deeper concern about the uncritical pursuit of excellence. Excellence is originally a pagan concept. It comes from the Greek *areté,* which means being the best—whether as an athlete or warrior, sculptor or shoemaker, poet or prostitute. Excellence is essentially a competitive as well as content-neutral ideal, yet an extremely powerful one. It played a key role in the great flourishing of ancient Greek culture, as it has in Western civilization ever since.

Christianity has traditionally been ambivalent about the idea of excellence. For the desire to excel is generally wrapped up with pride, vanity, selfishness, and other attitudes opposed to Christian humility, meekness, and cooperation. It is not surprising therefore, but still telling, that the Lord chastises William W. Phelps because "he seeketh to excel" (D&C 58:41). Our contemporary ears may be tone deaf to the divine dissonance regarding the word *excel* here. We might ask, "I thought that God wanted us to excel, to be on the Wheaties box or be rated number one in *U.S. News and World Report."* Well, He wants us to be good. And He expects us to do our very best, but not to lust for excellence as the world does. Hence Brother Phelps is roundly rebuked, "for he seeketh to excel, and he is not sufficiently [humble and] meek before me." Brother Phelps evidently wanted to excel in the world's way—that is, in the original pagan sense of the word: he wanted to be better than anyone else. Such is not the gospel's more excellent way to excellence.

A Hellenized Jew, Paul daily negotiated the tension between the Greek culture of excellence and the Christian culture of humility. He therefore knew all about the problematic pagan connotations of *areté;* he also knew its power. Not surprisingly, our conference theme scripture about "a more excellent way" derives from Paul's epistle to the Saints in Corinth. Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, whose fame rivaled that of the Olympics. Paul alludes to these games in his epistle to the Corinthians, encouraging the Saints to devote themselves to righteousness with the same dedication that athletes bring to the pursuit of victory in the games:

> *Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.*
>
> *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.* [RSV, 1 Corinthians 9:24–25]

Paul here co-opts the Greek ideal of athletic excellence to describe the Christian quest for perfection. Christians, too, must strive for excellence in the race of life—not, however, for a fading crown of laurel leaves but for an immortal crown. Paul will later describe his own life in terms of excelling in Greek games:

> *I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*
>
> *Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.* [RSV, 2 Timothy 4:7–8]

For Paul, Christian excellence entails the same striving and effort as does Greek excellence—just as does the academic excellence we seek at BYU. My plea is for more excellence, not less. But the Christian doesn't look sideways at his competitors but upward to a "righteous judge" who passes out victor's crowns to *all* who love Him. So should we at BYU look upward, for like Paul and Eric Liddell, we, too, run for God.

This defines "a more excellent way" to professional excellence. It is the way of pure love or charity. *Areté* is grounded on *agape*—that is, excellence on charity. It will not have escaped the notice of some of you that the scriptural phrase "a more excellent way" serves as Paul's bridge to his great discourse on charity. Charity—or the pure love of Christ—is the more excellent way. Charity contrasts with Greek excellence, for

> *charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.*
>
> *Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own.* [1 Corinthians 13:4–5]

I believe that our only hope to find the "more excellent way" at BYU is through charity, the pure love of Christ. It is the way of the amateur. May we bring this pure love to our professions and thereby qualify for crowns that never fade, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.