

# *A New Tradition*

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I'm grateful for this invitation to speak at devotional today. Devotionals have always been a part of Brigham Young University campus life. They were first instituted by Karl G. Maeser and early on were offered on a daily basis. By the 1920s, devotionals were held three times a week. Although the number of devotionals per week has changed over the history of the university, their importance to the campus community has remained constant. Karl G. Maeser's term as president ended in the 1880s, so we know it has been at least that long that these devotionals have been a traditional part of our campus.

Some years ago I was in a meeting with former academic vice president John Tanner. We were discussing some matters when the devotional became part of the conversation. Vice President Tanner mentioned the importance of the BYU devotional as one of the few experiences on campus we do as a community—what a rich tradition and one that brings us together in body and spirit.

Traditions have the ability to bind us generationally. Most often we associate traditions with holidays and celebrations. But they can simply be the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, and information that moves from generation to generation. This

can happen by word of mouth or by practice. Defining the word *tradition* varies by academic disciplines. I'm simply going to define it here broadly for discussion purposes. For my purpose it will encompass the idea of continued accepted norms, patterns, or customs.

My wife, Gwen, and I recently returned from New Zealand. She spent her teenage years growing up in Wellington. We accompanied other members of her family who were returning back home to New Zealand for the first time in over thirty years. Near the end of our trip, we were making our way from the Bay of Plenty area toward Auckland. En route we planned on attending church in the City of Tauranga. There was no particular reason for selecting this place other than it was halfway between our two destinations. While we were attending the Tauranga Ward, we met a Brother Tata, who invited us to follow him after church to a neighborhood within the city. We followed him to the gates of a Maori marae. A marae is a communal or sacred place that serves religious and social purposes in Maori culture. It

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doesn't have to be a building; it can be an open space. To the Maori, the marae is a place just as important to them as their homes.

Brother Tata invited us through the gates and into a courtyard. After a brief moment there, we walked over to the building, took off our shoes, and were invited in. We partook of a ceremony, much of which was spoken in Maori. He then explained to us that, as a young missionary and future apostle, Matthew Cowley began his mission at the location of this marae. He told us that David O. McKay had come to this marae when the New Zealand Temple was dedicated and had brought other General Authorities with him. Brother Tata explained that his ancestors had joined the Church in the 1880s and that he was a fifth-generation member of the Church. His grandchildren were seventh generation members of the Church.

I have a fascination with family history, and so I asked his distant cousin Brother Koryu, who was with him, if he knew of those ancestors who had joined the Church. He said, "I know them and can name them all." Impressed, I asked, "You can name seven generations of ancestors?" He said, "I can name twenty-seven generations of ancestors. Can't you?" Astonished, I responded, "You can name twenty-seven generations of ancestors?" He said, "Yes, I shared it with you in the ceremony, all the way back to when my ancestors came to New Zealand." After some more questions, I later learned that Maoris have a rich oral tradition in which they share their genealogy as part of ceremony and ritual.

And what a great and beneficial tradition! The cultural value of knowing their ancestors links directly with the gospel and the admonition of Malachi, "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers."<sup>1</sup>

Elder Richard G. Scott shared in a general conference, "Where traditions and customs are in harmony with His teachings, they should

be cherished and followed to preserve your culture and heritage."<sup>2</sup>

One of my favorite plays and movies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. It opens with the main character, Tevye, introducing the audience to his village, Anatevka, and to his way of life. He does this by singing a rousing song called "Tradition." Just before Tevye is about to go into song, he provides a background on life in his village. He says:

*Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything—how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you—I don't know! But it's a tradition.*<sup>3</sup>

Some traditions are beneficial. Some bind us to past generations and provide nostalgic notions for us. Some others are just plain whimsical or fun.

The Ohio State University has a tradition called the Mirror Lake Jump-in. Every year in late November, Buckeye fans gather at a large pond called Mirror Lake, just before the annual Michigan-Ohio State football game. The purpose of this activity is to jump in the frozen water to awaken the spirit of legendary Coach Woody Hayes so that the Ohio State Buckeyes can beat the Michigan Wolverines. This past year as the jump-time temperatures hovered in the mid-thirties, 6,000 Buckeye faithful gathered for the annual ritual. It is a popular event where you get that rare occasion of plunging into icy waters so your team can beat a rival. One student commented that the water was five times colder than you can imagine. Another student said it's not that bad once you get past the needles and your entire body going numb. Physicians might suggest that this reaction represents the early stages of hypothermia. My favorite part of this tradition is the

advisories sent by the Ohio State University office of student life to inform participants of the value of having a “designated dry person” available to stand by to hold on to your valuables.<sup>4</sup>

Some traditions are fun and whimsical and in unique ways work to unite people. Some, however, take us down unproductive paths and can even contribute to justifying sin. The Lamanites provide us with an example of generations of poor choices made because they followed the “traditions of their fathers.” Because of their traditions the Lamanites long remained in a state of ignorance. They knew little of Christ and of His teachings. They developed a hatred of their brethren because of misconceptions handed from generation to generation. There were efforts to reclaim the Lamanites, and missionary work was carried out by the Nephites. These missionaries not only had to teach the Lamanites correct principles, they also had to convince them of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers—note again—the incorrectness of their traditions. King Benjamin punctuated this when he said:

*We should have been like unto our brethren, the Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things, or even do not believe them when they are taught them, because of the traditions of their fathers, which are not correct.*<sup>5</sup>

Cultural geographers study how traditional ways of life intersect modern society and how adaptations may be made. A simple example of this change is illustrated when suburban cities encroach or encompass traditional farms or small villages. Traditional modes of rural society are changed as agrarian life transitions to accommodate urban norms and new ways of life.

These adjustments and transitions also occur when individuals move into a new place or culture. We may find we have to make a change from our established way of doing

things. This has happened to many of you who have served foreign missions, gone on a study abroad, or simply moved across the country to come and live in a new place—like Utah. A new place can cause us to reorient our thinking and to change our established way of doing things.

After I completed my doctoral studies in Ohio, we moved our family to the West Texas city of San Angelo. Neither my wife nor I had ever lived in Texas. This was a new place and a new adventure. It was mid-August when we pulled our moving van up in front of our new home. It had been vacant for a short time and the interior of the home was a mess. The lawn sprinklers had been turned off for some time, and it doesn’t take long for a lawn to die in the West Texas afternoon sun. With help from members of our new ward, we were able to get into our home, and then I turned my attention to our lawn. It was toward the end of the day and dusk was setting in as I surveyed our new yard. I glanced over the shrubs and trees and then cast my eyes toward the pitiful looking lawn. As I looked down I saw something strange: there was this weed stretching across my lawn. I grabbed hold and started to pull it up, and it kept going. I pulled hard, and as it came up it was about four-feet long. As I pulled it up, another appeared, and I pulled that one up. I was building a tidy little pile of these weeds. I soon discovered they were all over the place. I pulled up two more, and my next-door neighbor, who was a retired Air Force officer with a slight Texas accent, said, “Son, why y’all pullin’ up your grass?”

Now, have you ever had those moments when simply no answer will suffice for something you’re doing? This was one of those moments. I stood there looking at these long strands and thinking, “Soooo, this is *grass!*” My previous conceptions of grass changed. My lifetime experience told me that grass consisted of straight green blades shooting up from the ground. My neighbor then told me about

St. Augustine grass. By the time he got done, I realized I had to change everything I thought I knew about lawns and lawn care and, for that matter, grass. I wouldn't be sodding my yard here, I would have to lay in plugs of this grass, and they would grow together. Watering would be different. Mowing was different. Care would be different. Excited with my new discovery, I ran inside. I called my wife and said, "Hey, check this out—this is grass! We were in a new place and we now had a new mode of doing things.

Well, next year BYU will be in a new place. Next year we enter a new phase at BYU as we take the national stage as an independent football team and move to a new conference for other sports. A major network is promising national coverage for football, and we will be competing in a conference that is home to other religious-based universities and colleges.

For many of us we have spent a lifetime cheering our teams and our athletes. At the same time, the notion of booing, jeering, heckling, or even yelling at our opponents and referees entered into the national psyche of being a fan. It may have even felt like it was justified behavior, because this behavior has been popularized in movies and reinforced in nationally televised sporting events.

In some college towns, fan behavior has become unruly. Myles Brand, former president of the NCAA, stated in a column:

*There is something very wrong taking place in sports, including college sports. It isn't universal. It doesn't happen all the time. But it happens often enough to suggest that we—the fans—are losing our way. . . .*

*For a culture that holds dear the concepts of fair play, civility, honest effort—in short, sportsmanship—intercollegiate athletics at times sure has a strange way of showing its commitment to such values.<sup>6</sup>*

My academic area deals with mass communications: journalism, public relations, and advertising. In its most basic form, mass communications is primarily concerned with the differential impact of messages transmitted by various mass media. One of the pioneering researchers in our field is George Gallup. He began as a campus newspaper editor at the University of Iowa in the 1920s, and after receiving his PhD he ventured into advertising research. He became a pioneer in survey sampling techniques, and his research methods became the foundation for the Gallup Poll.<sup>7</sup>

One aspect of mass communication research is the study of public opinion, public perception, and media messages. Over the years basic research in the mass communications field has found a relationship between group behavior in the public sphere and public perception of that group. A recent Church press release on religious values found on LDS.org states, "Our public interaction reveals much about who we are as a people, what values we uphold, and what kind of society we want to live in."<sup>8</sup>

I came across a sportsmanship statement from a school district in New Jersey. This statement advocated a new standard for their schools. It was one that suggested they should welcome opposing teams with banners and posters, applaud the opposing team at introductions, and not boo or heckle opposing teams or referees. This is truly an example of relearning fan participation at sporting events.

In a small way, I experienced this spirit of sportsmanship while attending a BYU basketball game. My son and I were attending a game in the Marriott Center in 2009. The crowd was sparse with Christmas less than a week away. The opponent was Eastern Washington University. Nothing our opponent shot went in. Every shot was off the backboard, around the rim, or in and out. Every once in a while I glanced at the scoreboard. I saw 9-0, then 21-0; in fact, our BYU basketball team went ahead 33-0. I was beginning to find myself conflicted.

I was thrilled we were winning, and yet my heart sank for these poor athletes from Eastern Washington. I began privately pleading for them to make a shot. They were about 800 miles from home, it was just before Christmas, they were in an opposing arena, and the ball wouldn't drop through the hoop for them. Then suddenly they scored, and the Marriott Center erupted in spontaneous applause. I was never happier to be a Cougar as the fans began cheering Eastern Washington on. We didn't stop cheering our team, but we were also cheering for our struggling opponent.

Unfortunately, all too often, I have the opposite experience when attending sporting events or athletic competitions. Willard Hirschi, talking in a May 2000 devotional, said:

*Do BYU fans lose something as a result of poor sportsmanship? Yes! As we embrace the behavior of the secular world, we lose our distinctiveness regarding the sacred. More important, we individually lose the companionship of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>*

Elder Richard G. Scott said,

*You may ask how can one determine when a tradition is in conflict with the teachings of the Lord and should be abandoned? That is not easily done. I have found how difficult it is as I work to overcome some of my own incorrect traditions. Yet recognizing the need to do it is a major step towards success. Customs and traditions become an inherent part of us. They are not easy to evaluate objectively. Carefully study the scriptures and counsel of the prophets to understand how the Lord wants you to live. Then evaluate each part of your life and make any adjustments needed.<sup>10</sup>*

There is a new trend occurring in some colleges in America. There are football fans vying for the title of "friendliest fans." Booing is discouraged by some schools, visiting guests are invited to tailgating parties, and opposing fans are welcomed by the home team fans.

A 2008 book titled *Huskerville* chronicles the behavior of the football fan atmosphere at the University of Nebraska, which has a long-standing tradition of fan friendliness. The author begins with the following:

*I remember . . . [when] Florida State . . . [got] a chance to come up and play Nebraska and get on the map, and when they upset the Huskers early on, the people in the stadium gave them a standing ovation when they left the field. . . . As [Florida State Head Coach] Bobby Bowden jogged off the field, he saw something he'd never seen before: thousands of fans standing on their feet, clapping and saluting the victorious opponent.<sup>11</sup>*

The book goes on to tell of a school who respects the efforts of opposing teams. One fan states it this way: "Being a Husker Fan, as [we] see, is about being a Nebraskan."<sup>12</sup> It says something about who they are. Huskervillers, as they like to call themselves, say it's based on a spirit of neighborliness.

In a 1998 regional conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley shared the following:

*The Lord expects us to be Latter-day Saints. That isn't just an appendage phrase on the end of the name of the Church. It signifies something of tremendous importance. He expects us to show love of God by the way we conduct our lives. He expects us as those who have taken upon ourselves the name of Jesus Christ to walk in His way, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, to go the second mile. He expects us as His children to reach out to those around us, not only to members of the Church but to others. As sure and as certain as the sunrise in the morning, we Latter-day Saints and members of this great Church of the Lord should reach out in a spirit of neighborliness and helpfulness.<sup>13</sup>*

In the spirit of neighborliness as cited in the aforementioned book, and in light of neighborliness as mentioned by President Hinckley,

and as we understand the mission of this great institution, and as our athletic teams enter into a new place, shouldn't our fans be the friendliest anywhere? Wouldn't it be nice to have a new tradition in which opponents come into our stadiums, arenas, and centers and are welcomed with signs and placards? Wouldn't it be nice to respectfully applaud victorious opponents for their efforts as they walk off the field or the court? Wouldn't it be nice and wouldn't it help fulfill our campus mission if opponents and the national media proclaimed BYU as both the toughest and friendliest place to play a game. Now, *there* is a tradition worth celebrating.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, in a previous devotional talk, referenced the same *Fiddler on the Roof* moment I did when he said:

*When we come to BYU we come to take our position on the roof, with violin in hand, and we declare to the rest of the world, "Tradition." Our tradition. BYU tradition. And that doesn't just mean ringing the victory bell after a ball game or lighting the Y at Homecoming, as fun and rewarding as those lesser traditions are. Indeed, lighting the Y doesn't mean one thing, doesn't justify the electricity it takes to do it, if the meaning behind that mountaintop symbol, "the spirit of the Y," is not manifest in each of our lives.<sup>14</sup>*

Now, I have provided an illustration of changing an old traditional way of fan participation at sporting events, and in essence I have suggested a new tradition. Elder Scott counseled that we all should take inventory of the traditions in our lives that would lead us away from feeling the Spirit and make the necessary adjustments to bring our lives in accord with the way our Savior, Jesus Christ, would have us live.

When I was young my parents were faced with changing the long-standing religious traditions of their families. My parents moved from rural Ohio to the city of Flint, Michigan,

a new place. My father found a mechanic in the dealership where he worked who wasn't rude and didn't smoke, drink, or swear. He found him to be friendly and helpful, and he wondered why. This man told my father it was because of his church.

My life was forever changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ when my parents invited two young men to our home. I remember the day they drove up in their American Motors Rambler and walked up to our house. They sat on the couch and pulled out a large flannel board and proceeded to teach us the gospel. My brother and I sat on the floor and watched as the missionaries placed cutouts of people and other figures on the flannel board. We would watch these flannel-board cutout characters slowly curl down, and we snickered and laughed as they fell to the floor. My father had to nudge us with his foot to keep us quiet. I had no idea that that moment was the beginning of a change that would forever affect our beliefs, our way of life, and our previously held notions and traditions. Life changed for us. We began attending church a couple of days a week. New terminology entered into our life.

I went to something called Primary and attended classes called CTR, Targeteers, and Blazers. There were things called sacrament gems and two-and-a-half-minute talks. We went to progressive dinners, bazaars, and ice cream socials. There were road shows and gold and green balls. Some of these traditions of the Church have changed over time, but the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ remains a constant. My family had to rethink our priorities, rethink who we were, and change the way we did things. We made covenants with the Lord as we realigned our lives with this newfound gospel. My life was forever changed and set on a different trajectory, one other than where it could have headed.

As Elder Holland and Elder Scott suggest, let us all, both personally and collectively, look at our traditions and the established way we

do things and make sure they are in line with how the Lord would have us live and, if necessary, establish new traditions. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Malachi 4:7.
2. Richard G. Scott, "Removing Barriers to Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1998, 87.
3. Joseph Stein, *Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), 3–4.
4. See <http://swc.osu.edu/about-us/mirror-lake-jump-in/> and [http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local\\_news/stories/2010/11/24/school-spirit-trumps-cold-dirty-water.html](http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2010/11/24/school-spirit-trumps-cold-dirty-water.html).
5. Mosiah 1:5.
6. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/myles-brand/getting-a-grip-on-fan-beh\\_b\\_143034.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/myles-brand/getting-a-grip-on-fan-beh_b_143034.html).
7. <http://www.capitalcentury.com/1935.html>.
8. <http://newsroom.lds.org/article/religious-values-in-the-public-square>.
9. Willard M. Hirschi, "Gold Fever, Athletic Fervor," BYU devotional address, 16 May 2000.
10. Richard G. Scott, "Removing Barriers to Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1998, 86.
11. Roger C. Aden, *Huskerville: A Story of Nebraska Football, Fans, and the Power of Place* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 111.
12. See Aden, *Huskerville*, 14.
13. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Excerpts from Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, October 2000, 73.
14. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Who We Are and What God Expects Us to Do," BYU devotional address, 15 September 1987.