

Let Us Think Straight

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

I recognize, my fellow students, that I certainly will need the help of the Lord this morning. My family, when they learned that I was going to have this opportunity to speak here, asked me on a regular basis what I was going to say. I have not been able to tell them because I have not really been sure until this moment. I have a thought in my mind, one that I feel should be said. I am fully aware that perhaps I am not the best qualified to say it but would ask you to bear with me because I feel what I have in mind, if communicated to you in the right way, can help you. That is, of course, what I would like to do—to help you.

Future Leaders

In 1978 I stood at this pulpit. I was impressed on that occasion to talk to those students about the great role that lay ahead in their lives to become the leaders in the Church in 1988. That was five and a half years ago. Many of those students who sat where you are now sitting are out in the Church. Several are now serving as bishops of their wards in just five and a half years. Many of the sisters who were sitting in the same seats you occupy are now serving as presidents of their Relief Society, Primary or Young Women organizations. So, when I tell you this morning that you will in

fact be the leaders of the Church in a few years, I can demonstrate from past experience that that truly is going to occur in your life if you are ready.

In 1978 we had 950 stakes of the Church. Five and a half years later, we have 1,450 stakes. The church is moving forward. It is growing, meeting its ongoing charge and commission from the Lord to fill the whole earth. As more stakes are organized and more wards and branches are created, pressure will increase for new leadership to lead the units of the Church. You in very deed will become leaders in the next five and a half years.

The Principle

I have now had the experience of almost eight years as a General Authority and have had the opportunity to see the Church in operation worldwide. I came from the business community to the assignment as a General Authority. I had some interesting business

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experiences upon which I have been able to think back and reflect. I have tried to isolate a principle to discuss with you this morning. If understood and properly practiced, this principle can help you be successful in your journey through mortality. The principle I have felt to speak about this morning is learning to *think straight*. I recognize that all of you are thinking. Some of you are thinking that you wish you had studied harder now that you anticipate next week's finals. I realize that sometimes some of you think that you are thinking too much. But my charge to you this morning is to develop the skill and the capability of *thinking straight*.

In my office I have a little plaque that reads, "Above all else, brethren, let us think straight." These were the last words in mortality spoken by my grandfather Melvin J. Ballard. As I understand the circumstance, Grandfather, after the very grueling experience of preaching the gospel all through the eastern part of the United States, drove his car from New York to Salt Lake City. When he came into the driveway of his home at 80 North Wolcott Avenue in Salt Lake City, he collapsed. He was rushed to the LDS hospital, where he was found to have acute leukemia. He never came out of the hospital. He went in and out of a coma. As I have had it told to me by my father, who was there, Grandfather pushed himself up in bed, looked into his hospital room as though he were addressing a congregation or a group, and said clearly, "And above all else, brethren, let us think straight." Then he died. I don't go into my office any day of the week that I don't see those words, and I find that they help me a great deal.

Think until It Hurts

How do we learn to think straight? The book of Proverbs has a little guide that might be helpful. It is found in the nineteenth chapter, twentieth verse: "Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise." I would

suggest that straight thinking probably begins with straight listening, with careful listening, with accurate listening. Those men with whom I have associated who have developed the instinctive ability to think straight are very good listeners. As they receive counsel and instruction, they are able to extract principles that will be eternally important in their lives and then make them part of their lives.

I would like to suggest that it is important to act slowly. Know the facts. All the years that I was in business I had a little sign that sat on my desk that read, "Don't confuse me with the facts. My mind is already made up." Sometimes you can get locked in to that kind of thought process. I had the sign there to stimulate thinking on the part of those who associated with me, to remind them that indeed we wanted to deal with the facts.

Fact finding sometimes requires patience, time, and very careful consideration. A long-time friend of the Church who has since past away was Lord Thompson of Fleet. Lord Thompson, at the age of sixty-seven, started out to build a great empire. In a very short time, the Thomson Enterprises consisted of 464 different independent businesses. It is one of the most successful business ventures in the entire world. He wrote a book in the twilight of his life and said that we are all averse to thinking; that to be successful, one must think until it hurts. Thinking is the process of worrying about a solution to a problem and considering every possible aspect. He went on to say that if we learn to make good decisions in our youth, we will build up a bank account on which we can draw in later years, and decision-making becomes less painful.

Sloppy, inconclusive thinking becomes a habit. The more one does it, the more one is unfitted to think a problem through to a proper conclusion. [Lord Thomson of Fleet, *After I Was Sixty* (London: Hamis Hamilton, 1975), p. 106]

I like those words. We can learn to be careful, fact-oriented thinkers, or we can become sloppy, inconclusive thinkers. We are living in a world which is crying out as never before for sound, solid, well-grounded thinkers.

I would like to continue with a further statement of Lord Thomson. I think it is especially applicable to you at this point in your university training.

*If I have any advice to pass on as a successful man, it is this: if one wants to be successful, one must think. One must think until it hurts. One must worry a problem in one's mind until it seems there cannot be another aspect of it that hasn't been considered. Believe me, that is hard work and, from my close observation, I can say that there are few people indeed who are prepared to perform this arduous and tiring work. But let me go further and assure you of this: while in the early stages, it is hard work, and one must accept it as such, later one will find that it is not so difficult. The thinking apparatus has become trained; it is trained even to do some of the thinking subconsciously. . . . The pressure that one had to use on one's poor brain in the early stages is no longer necessary . . . one's mental computer arrives at decisions instantly or during a period when the brain seems to be resting. It is only the rare and most complex problems that require the hard toil of protracted mental effort. [Thomson, *After Sixty*, p. 106]*

In effect he is saying that, as we learn to think straight, to put this thinking process in gear and move it forward in a positive direction in our lives, we really do build up a bank account of experience. Problems that seem almost insurmountable to you today seem relatively simple to someone as old as I am. That is because many older people have thought, experienced, and worked through some of these problems in life.

Maintain An Equilibrium

There are those who become professional thinkers. I don't want to encourage that. Brigham Young said,

Some think too much, and should labor more, others labor too much and should think more, and thus maintain an equilibrium between the mental and physical members of the individual; then you will enjoy health and vigor, will be active, and ready to discern truly, and judge quickly. Is it not your privilege to have discernment to circumscribe all things, no matter what subject comes before you, and to at once know the truth concerning any matter? [JD 3:248]

I have met men who should really be out producing who are still studying. I think that there is a point at which you graduate and go on to the things that you have in mind that you want to try to accomplish in life.

As you go through life, there will be a lot of things about which you are going to be concerned. Some of you are thinking about marriage. Maybe some of you sisters are thinking more about it than some of you brethren. If the General Authorities had anything to do about that, we would try to get an equal balance so that all of you are thinking about marriage in the right way and at the right time. Some of you are undoubtedly thinking about what you want to do with your lives. Perhaps there might even be a few of you here this morning who have not yet thought out what you want to be as it relates to your professional life after you graduate.

Ask for Guidance

President Harold B. Lee gives some very good counsel to those of us pondering, studying, and thinking about our futures:

If there should come a problem as to what kind of business a man should be engaged in, whether he should invest in this matter or that, whether he should marry this girl or that one, where he should

marry, and how he should marry—when it comes to the prosecuting of the work to which we are assigned, how much more certain will those decisions be if always we recall that all we do, and all the decisions we make, should be made with the eternal goal in mind: with an eye single to the ultimate glory of man in the celestial world.

If all our selfish motives, then, and all our personal desires and expediency would be subordinated to a desire to know the will of the Lord, one could have companionship of heavenly vision. If our problems be too great for human intelligence or too much for human strength, we too, if we are faithful and appeal rightly unto the source of divine power, might have standing by us in our hour of peril or great need an angel of God. One who lives thus worthy of his testimony that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ, and who is willing to reach out to Him in constant inquiry to know if his course is approved, is the one who is living life to its full abundance here and is preparing for the celestial world, which is to live eternally with his Heavenly Father. [Stand Ye in Holy Places (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), pp. 102–3]

If we learn to put into our lives a process that is based on thinking straight, we can take any point where you are today at Brigham Young University, can apply some of these basic principles (If we are living righteously and worthily so that we can supplicate the Lord for direction), and, according to President Lee, can expect to have divine inspiration and direction to help us in the mighty and heavy responsibilities of life.

The Way the Brain Works

I would like to share with you a story without sharing any names. I have a very good friend who was the chief executive officer and principle owner of a very large corporation. He was called to preside over a mission. Like so many of our wonderful men who have great skills, capabilities, and responsibilities, when the call came from the Lord, he did not

question. He had thought enough through his life that it was instantaneous in his mind to accept the call.

But what was to happen to the business, what was to happen to this great enterprise? Situations and management were worked out for the best, but in three years lots of things can happen to a business when the guiding light is not there on a day-to-day basis. Ultimately some of the assets of the company were sold. But toward the end of the mission of this great man, an opportunity arose. Within days after his release he was back in business with a program far bigger than anything he had before he was called to be a mission president. He is presently bringing into being one of the major corporations to be based in the state of Utah.

How did he do that? I suppose he learned from the mistakes he made through his life, but, most importantly, he had learned to think straight. When the second opportunity came up, it was easier for him to define, to determine, to make decisions, and to move forward with that second opportunity.

I would like to share one more statement from Lord Thomson which pertains to this manner of thinking.

It was at least partly due to my discovery over a fairly long period, but more than ever during these latter years in Edinburgh and London, that experience was a very important element in the management side of business, and it was, of course, the one thing that I had plenty of. I could go further and say that for management to be good, it generally must be experienced. [Thomson, After Sixty, p. 104]

I'd like to pause for just a moment and infringe on Mr. Thomson's statement to say please think in terms of Church leadership: to be good, it must be experienced. To be good at anything at all requires a lot of practice and skill in making decisions. The more one is exposed to the necessity of making decisions, the better one's decision-making process becomes.

I was entirely convinced that, through the years, in my brain as in a computer, I had stored details of problems themselves, the decisions reached, and the result obtained; everything else was neatly filed away there for future use. Then, later, when a new problem arose, I would think it over and, if the answer was not immediately apparent, I would let it go for a while, and it was as if it went the rounds of the brain cells looking for guidance that could be retrieved, for by next morning when I examined the problem again, more often than not the solution came up right away. That judgment seemed to come almost unconsciously, and my conviction is that during the time that I was not consciously considering the problem, my subconscious had been turning it over and relating it to my memory; it had been held up to the light of experiences I had had in the past years, and the way through the difficulties became obvious. I am pretty sure that other older men have had this same evidence of the brain's subconscious work.

This makes it all very easy, you may say. But, of course, it doesn't happen easily. The bank of experience from which I was able to draw in the later years was not easily funded. [Thomson, After Sixty, p. 105]

Funding Your Bank

I would suggest to you here this morning that you are funding your bank. You are funding it in many different ways. Some of you young women will become mothers, and maybe you will never participate actively in the field in which you graduate. But when those children come and climb on your lap and start asking you some of the questions that children do ask as they are trying to get through grade school, junior high school, and high school, you will be grateful that you got this bank that you are presently funding here at Brigham Young University.

I would like to add one other dimension to this business of thinking. How do you develop the inherent, native ability to have good

judgment, just good common sense? As I look about me and see men whom I admire, who I think are successful in their fields, I find that most generally they know how to respond with good judgment and good common sense. Lord Chesterfield is quoted as saying, "Common sense (which, in truth, is very uncommon) is the best sense I know of. Abide by it, it will counsel you best" (H.L. Mencken (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Quotations* [New York: Knopf, 1942], p. 1084). Benjamin Franklin said, "Where sense is wanting, everything is wanting" (*Poor Richard's Almanac*). Not using common sense can be fatal. Consider the pharmacist who was compounding a prescription that called for as much strychnine as you could put on the face of a dime. He didn't have a dime so he used two nickels. We don't need that kind of common sense. I could tell you story after story after story of those kinds of exercises of common sense. What I hope happens in your thinking process, as you study and try to become the very best you, is that you learn to think straight, the foundation being the building of a bank that causes you to instinctively have good judgment and common sense.

In all of this, the Lord has given us some very wonderful counsel: the problems of life, whether they be in business, government, social life, or church activity, can best be solved by following this little formula that he gave to Oliver Cowdery in the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. [D&C 9:7-8]

You all know that, you have read it, and you have quoted it to each other in your

various teaching relationships. I call on you to practice it.

At the risk of having all of you lose your faith in me, I am going to tell you a story about my own life. When most of you were still in the spirit world, I signed an Edsel franchise with Ford Motor Company. Some of you may not know what the Edsel was. The older brethren know that it was one of the most disastrous national marketing mistakes ever made in the United States. Ford Motor Company spent over two hundred million dollars producing an automobile that would carry the name of Edsel Ford, the father of Henry Ford II, who was then the president of Ford Motor Company. The sales promotion, anticipation, and the excitement were unbelievable. You can appreciate what it was like, being a relatively young businessman and having all the power of the Ford Motor Company brought to bear on me to encourage me to become the Edsel dealer for Salt Lake City. I wrestled with the decision. I said to my father, who was a great man in my life, “Before I sign the franchise, I want to see the car.”

They made special arrangements for us to fly to California to see the car. Now, as I wrestled with this, I was also asking the Lord about it, asking for direction. It was a big decision; it involved a lot of money, a lot of commitment on my part. The minute my father and I saw the cars I had the distinct impression not to go ahead with the franchise. When I got away from the new car showing, the sales power of Ford Motor Company started to work on me again—they assured me the car was going to be the greatest thing that ever came into the automobile industry. And I allowed myself to drift from the promptings of the Spirit that I had earlier. I had followed the counsel of the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants, but I wavered from the impression the Lord had given me. I made the decision to sign the franchise, then went through the torments of the damned, almost. If we had more time, I could tell you that it is not fun to lose a lot of

money fast. Regardless of what I did, it didn’t matter; I couldn’t stop the losses. Ultimately I had to sell the franchise at a great loss. This was a learning experience. I am now able to sit down with just about anybody who wants to talk about the automobile business and instinctively draw from my bank of experience to give pretty good counsel.

I can think straight now when it comes to those kinds of decisions because of what I suffered. Perhaps we need to understand that failure is part of life. We are not going to be successful in everything we do, but we never need to fail to learn the lesson and to place in the bank of our memories those things that will then cause us to become increasingly powerful and, most importantly, increasingly helpful to the building of the kingdom of God.

Straight Thinkers

We have much for which we look to you, the youth of the Church. You just can’t imagine the conversations that go on at the Church headquarters about you. We worry about you; we pray for you. Not that we don’t trust you; that is not the case at all. We just want you to be ready. We want you to be prepared. We want you to be able to think straight in this very crooked-thinking world. There are many things going on all about us at almost every level—international, national, local—that are going to require the soundest and the most solid-thinking generation that our Father in Heaven has ever raised. We believe you can be that. We want to do our part as your leaders. We want to sustain you and to help you. We want you to become the very best you.

My purpose this morning is to ask our Heavenly Father to bless you with the instinctive desire to plead with him in prayer that you might arrive at the point in your life when you can consistently think straight. For straight thinkers, my brothers and sisters, do not make serious mistakes in life. Those who think straight do not have moral problems. Those

who think straight really do not have problems with the Word of Wisdom. They don't have problems paying tithing. They don't have problems with being righteous and good. Build your bank while you are here at this great university, build it and struggle, really struggle if necessary, with this concept: "Heavenly Father, bless me to be a good thinker, a straight thinker, so when I am called upon to be the bishop of my ward, a member of the stake high council, president of my elders quorum or Relief Society, Primary or Young Women organization, I might bless those who will look to me for leadership."

God bless you then in your struggle to think straight. Make this principle part of you so you will be a great source of power for the

building of the Church in the future. I, of course, would like to give you the greetings of the First Presidency. Certainly I would like to leave the greetings of President Kimball. He loves you far beyond your ability to comprehend. His great desire is that the youth of Zion, the young men and women who are members of the Church, attending universities about the world, may become educated in the ability to have common sense and the ability to think straight. May this be your lot. I leave my witness and testimony with you that I know that Jesus is the Christ. This is his Church, he presides over it, and we are on his errand. I leave this testimony humbly in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.