

Spiritual Thoughts in the Classroom

JAMES C. BRAU

Thank you, President Samuelson. Good morning, brothers and sisters. It is a wonderful delight to be here with you. In fact, on the way over we saw a bunch of tents and students camped out at the ticket center. One of my colleagues, Craig Merrill, said, “Wow, Jimmy, how’s it feel to have all those students camped out to see the devotional?” I said, “Craig, they’re here to see a Jimmer, but not this Jimmer.” Seriously, I am deeply humbled to have been asked to address the BYU community today as the devotional speaker. Since being asked, I have prayed each day that the Lord would inspire me to give a talk that would be spiritually uplifting for those who listen. I pray I do not fail in this regard.

I was asked to give this address on Tuesday, January 4. You may ask, “How does Brother Brau remember the exact date he was called by Vice President Worthen to give a talk?” If you look on the screen at this headline banner of the *Wall Street Journal*, you will see that it reads, “The New Science of Conquering Fear.” The paper is dated January 4, and it happened to be the first thing I saw after accepting the offer to give the devotional. Who says Heavenly Father doesn’t have a sense of humor?

One of the most powerful and favorite quotes of the BYU community was given

to President Karl G. Maeser by President Brigham Young in the early days of Brigham Young Academy. You have heard it often from this pulpit. Here it is again: “I want you to remember that you ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God” (in Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928], 79).

It is this charge that separates BYU from other excellent universities. For example, if your desire is to obtain an undergraduate degree in finance, you could attend the university an hour north of here and learn all about discounted cash flows, capital budgeting, and optimal capital structures. In fact, the finance that you learned there would be very similar to the finance you would learn from my department here at BYU. However, we seek to explicitly teach with the Spirit here, which sets us apart. This idea was reinforced to me in a recent seminar by Professor Dennis Wright, one of the deans of religious education and a good friend of mine, when he taught that

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“spiritual development at BYU is not a by-product, but it is a central focus.” Think about that. Spiritual development here at BYU is not a by-product.

Recognizing that you, as students, have come to BYU for more than academic rigor, I have made it a point to share a spiritual thought in each section I teach every day I am in the classroom. It is my meager effort to attempt to teach not even finance without the Spirit of God. I strategically wait for the two- or three-minute spiritual thought to coincide with what I estimate to be the maximum doze-off time of the class. You know this time, for all of you have probably experienced it in at least one lecture. I teach in the large lecture halls of the Tanner Building. The seats are fluffy and soft. Most of the students can stay awake at least through the opening prayer. Over the next 75 minutes, however, you can see the doze monster quietly conquering a student here and a student there. About the time I see the third student in class starting to doze—it’s usually about halfway through the class—I wake everyone up with a spiritual thought.

Here is some feedback from an anonymous student: “I really like the spiritual thought. That is what makes BYU better than other schools. Besides that, it breaks up your class and helps me rejuvenate for the second half of your lecture.”

This note was received without identification in my suggestion box. I bring this box to class and let students know they can leave anonymous suggestions for class improvement or other notes for me. The notes I will share in this talk are from this box through the years.

Today I would like to share some of my classroom spiritual thoughts with you. Each semester the thought I share on the first day of class pertains to the fourth aim of a BYU education, specifically lifelong learning. We discuss how education is of eternal importance.

The slide that you see on the screen compares students to learners. I received this slide

from my good friend Professor Doug Prawitt at a brown-bag teaching improvement seminar sponsored by the business school about 10 years ago. I have used it on the first day of class ever since. The slide is based on an academic study titled “Attitudes and Behaviors of Participants: Traditional Students Versus Learners.”

On the left you’ll see a list that describes many students who “play the game” of school. You know the type. They were able to make it through high school with good grades and little effort. They knew the bare minimum they would have to study to earn an A. They would cram the night before the test, earn the A, and then forget the material within a week. Unfortunately, many students carry this same strategy to BYU. As freshman, they perfect the cramming technique, earn As, and mistakenly feel they are being educated. The fourth aim of BYU, however, would suggest we all become learners instead of students.

Now note the right column. Notice how scholars with these types of attributes are well on their way to becoming lifelong learners. I then share the scriptural basis for becoming a lifelong learner and not “gaming” the college system to my class. Consider the next slide, “The glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36), and the next, “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18).

Next, I share a slide featuring a devotional quote from President James E. Faust when he addressed the BYU community in 1997. I thank my colleague and good friend Professor Stan Fawcett for pointing me to this quote several years ago.

For many students in higher education, going to a university is a game, a self-defeating game. To them it is a process of cramming like the seagulls in pioneer times when the crops were threatened by crickets. The gulls came and devoured, then they would fly off to disgorge and return to devour

again. Learning is more than cramming for tests. Education is more than bulimia at exam time.
[James E. Faust, "Learning for Eternity," BYU devotional address, 18 November 1997]

I ask you, have you ever heard a General Authority speak about throwing up? Can you sense the magnitude of his counsel to BYU students?

As a last slide on this topic, I share a quote from the Church's *Friend* magazine. Consider this 2007 quote from Elder David A. Bednar, which I came across while reading the *Friend* with my children:

*I have spent most of my life involved in education. When I was younger, I thought education meant going to school, taking tests, and getting good grades. But as I grew older, I began to learn the difference between doing well in school and becoming educated. A person can do well on tests and still not be educated. True education is learning how to learn. Once I discovered that lesson, learning became fun. ["The Glory of God Is Intelligence," *Friend*, October 2007, 6]*

Elder Bednar's quote can be used as a litmus test. Ask yourself right now: Am I enjoying the rigors of my studies? Is learning fun for me? If the university has become drudgery for you, I urge you to pray to your Heavenly Father on bended knee for Him to put the love of learning in your heart.

My challenge to you is that if you are still gaming the system to earn the highest grade with the least amount of effort, if you are cramming like the seagulls and then regurgitating that information on your exams only to soon forget it, change your game plan! Become a scholar, a true learner, not a mere student. In a short period of time, there will be no more exams for you to game; you will hold a university degree. The exam that you will face every day will be called life. Our goal at BYU is for

all of you to become true learners so that you may have success in that test of life.

Here is some feedback from a student about wanting to learn:

I just wanted to thank you for everything you do for us as your students. I really appreciate that you care about us, and because of that I actually want to learn this information. I just want to thank you because I stopped caring about school and my grades a long time ago, and you made me care again. Thanks again for your time and effort.

And consider this quote from the same 1997 devotional of Elder Faust:

Each of you, on a personal level, has the same challenge that exists for the university. You need to know the purpose for your being. Each of you needs to ask yourself, Why am I here on earth? Why am I at this university rather than at any other university, one that will teach only secular learning? Am I here to enjoy a scintillating social life? Is it to support the athletic program? Is it to find a companion? The answer is, You are here to learn for eternity. . . .

President Lorenzo Snow taught: "The whole idea of Mormonism is improvement; mentally, physically, morally and spiritually. No half-way education suffices for the Latter-day Saint." ["Learning for Eternity," BYU devotional address, 18 November 1997]

Let me say that again. No halfway education suffices for the Latter-day Saint.

The thought I share on the second day of class is on the importance of honoring the Sabbath day. I explain how I have an unshakable testimony of honoring the Sabbath, specifically as a student. I take a couple minutes to share my experience as I went through graduate school. I testify of how I was blessed for never studying or doing homework on Sunday. I challenge my students to arrange their schedules so they can complete their home studies

Friday and Saturday so they can leave Sunday for the Lord. I ask them to never violate the Lord's day for my class. Some students probably think I took it a little too far when I was in graduate school. I relate how I would set my alarm for 11:59 p.m. on Saturday night and when the alarm went off, I would stop studying. I would then set my alarm for 12:01 a.m. Monday morning to begin studying again. Maybe it's my training from the military academy at West Point, but I have always felt it is important to have precision and exactness in following the Lord's commands.

I am not the only one to take honoring the Sabbath day this far. I recall a story from the *Ensign* that struck me when I read it, and it has never left me. Two farmers were haying their fields. They were both in a hurry because they had to harvest the hay before the weather turned on them. It was late at night, and each farmer could see the lights from the other farmer's tractor across the fields. One of the farmers was the bishop of the ward, the other a ward member. The ward member kept checking his watch, wondering if the bishop would stop haying at midnight when the Sabbath day began. As the time grew short, the bishop continued to hay. At exactly midnight, the ward member turned off his tractor and finished for the night to honor the Sabbath. As he looked across the fields he saw that his bishop powered down his tractor right afterwards. The next day at sacrament meeting, the ward member said that he was glad the bishop had his watch as well so he knew he had ended his work on time to honor the Sabbath day. The bishop replied to his ward member that he did not have a watch with him the night before, but he knew he wouldn't need one. He told the ward member that he knew all he had to do was watch the ward member's tractor across the fields, and when his lights went out, it would be exactly midnight. These farmers believed in precisely following the Lord's command.

Here is some feedback from an anonymous student put into the suggestion box after I shared the spiritual thought on honoring the Sabbath day:

Thank you for your spiritual thought today. As a freshman, I decided not to do homework on Sunday. I very much agree with everything you said. As a student, I have found it very nice to have a day off from homework. However, it has taken some planning to get my homework done during the week. This year I was called as the Relief Society president in my ward. I cannot tell you how nice it has been to already be used to not doing homework on Sunday. My Sundays are very full between all the meetings I am involved with. Having already set those habits has made my service easier because I don't feel like I am losing study time on Sunday. I believe that it is important for the students here to have the idea of no homework on Sundays [given to] them.

One of my favorite spiritual thoughts relies on the time in the Book of Mormon when Amulon was persecuting Alma and his followers. Recall the account in Mosiah 24:12–15:

And Alma and his people did not raise their voices to the Lord their God, but did pour out their hearts to him; and he did know the thoughts of their hearts.

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord came to them in their afflictions, saying: Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage.

And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.

And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord.

Please note *how* the burdens became light. I liken it to weightlifting. Did the Lord promise that the amount of weight the people had to push would be lessened? Instead of bench-pressing 225 pounds, would they be required to press only 135 pounds? Let's look at the passage in Alma again. First, the promise was made from the Lord that the burdens would be eased. Second, the Lord fulfilled His promise, and the burdens were in fact made light. Third, we learn the key to the lightness of the burdens: the Lord did not decrease the persecution or opposition that was upon his people; He made His people stronger. Going back to the weightlifting analogy, often the Lord does not take weight off of our barbell. He makes us stronger so that we can lift the same amount of weight—only now it feels light.

I try to stress to my students that oftentimes this is how the Lord works. As we become spiritually stronger, He allows more pressures and oppositions to beset us. Because we rely on Him for strength, we grow even stronger, and we can handle the increased challenges.

Consider this student feedback after sharing this spiritual thought:

Thanks for your spiritual thought today. I needed it more than you will ever know. Ever since my mission I have been faced with some very hard trials and have almost given up many times—most recently last Saturday before school started. I was about to drop out because of my trials, but because of my parents and now you, I will stay and somehow continue to face my trials with the help of the Lord. Thank you.

Here's another:

Hey! I just wanted to say thanks for your spiritual thought. I work two jobs on campus to afford to go to school. One starts at 5 a.m. every morning, and I often don't get to bed (after homework and other commitments) until around 10 p.m. This morning I felt really down because I just wished I had more time to sleep and do homework. I just wanted to quit one of my jobs even though I wouldn't be able to really afford it. Your spiritual thought was kinda like "It's good to be busy" and "You can do it," and I really needed to hear that.

On at least one occasion, I gave a spiritual thought with one message in mind, and the Spirit conveyed a totally different message to a student who was listening. Here is one such example from an anonymous student:

Thank you so much for your spiritual thoughts. A few weeks ago you shared a scripture that really changed my life, no exaggeration. I had been on a bit of a downward spiral, and to tell you the truth, during the first month of class it kind of irritated me that we would have "spiritual thought time" in a finance class, when the thought would have nothing to do with what we were talking about. The scripture you shared was in [Doctrine and Covenants] where the Lord tells Joseph that he is chosen, but because of transgression he will fall if he isn't careful. He tells Joseph to repent and that he is still chosen and called again to the work, but if he does not repent, he will lose his gift and his chosen status (see D&C 3:4–11). That scripture hit me hard and started a chain reaction of introspection with my wife into our lives, so that now I feel like I'm back on a spiritual high akin to that on my mission.

This week I found out that my dad has been [struggling with personal issues that would in the end cause him to leave my mother]. . . . [Y]esterday I was able to talk to him and share everything that has happened to me over the last month (starting with your scripture) to help me find my testimony again and get myself back on track. I felt the Spirit so strong, and I know he did, too.

I'm telling you this story because it is very likely that your scripture not only saved me, but it could save my family and my parents' temple marriage. If my dad could [move beyond his struggles] to making the right decision, it would be nothing short of a miracle—all because of how you have let the Lord work through you. Don't ever stop the spiritual thoughts, no matter what anyone else says! Thank you!

A couple weeks later, I received this follow-up from this unknown student in the suggestion box:

I just wanted you to know that over the past two weeks my dad got his act together. My parents are going to stay together! His testimony is starting to return, and he is committed now to working hard on it and his marriage. Thank you! I truly believe this is all because of your spiritual thoughts.

To be totally honest, I cannot remember the specific thought I shared that day, but the Spirit was able to work through this absentminded professor to do the Lord's work.

Of all the spiritual thoughts I have shared, perhaps I remember this one most often: My wife and I have a friend who lost her husband to suicide. It was a tragedy. We attended the funeral. Shortly after, I felt inspired by the Spirit to share in my classroom a thought on suicide and how it is never the answer. I testified that the answer lies in the mercy and comfort of the Savior. It is fair to say I was shocked when I found this anonymous note in the suggestion box:

Thanks for your sharing last Tuesday. I was thinking about suicide the night before. I've been wondering why I am taking this class. I think this is the reason.

Brothers and sisters, I do not know how many times I have thanked the Lord for inspiring me to share that specific spiritual thought that day.

To summarize, you'll have to remember that I am a convert of the LDS Church. I joined the Church while I was a cadet at West Point in my third year. As such, I had a military obligation and could not serve a mission. Unlike most of my peers here at BYU, I did not have the opportunity to offer challenges after each of the six discussions on their missions. I am sure my students and home teaching families wish I had gotten the "challenge bug" out of my system on a mission, but Michelle and I have to wait some more years until we get to serve our missions. So here are my challenges for you and me to consider. If you are going to take any notes from this devotional, I would ask that these following challenges be the notes you write down.

First, to the faculty: Whether you teach religion, physics, humanities, music, business, or anything in between, do not let one day in the classroom pass without explicitly sharing the Spirit with your students. Begin each class with a prayer. Make your classroom a true Zion. Make it different than any other university class in the world because of the Spirit. Look at your course evaluations. Along with focusing on your instructor rating and your course rating, consider the question that asks students if your class was spiritually strengthening. Make it a goal to earn high marks for this question. Remember, your students can go to many universities and they will find outstanding instructors and outstanding courses in the exact field you teach. What will set your class apart from these other courses is the Spirit you bring into the classroom. In just a couple minutes in each class period, you can change lives.

Consider this anonymous feedback from a student: "Thank you for all of your lessons. Life-changing! I am getting ready to serve a mission, and I can't count the number of times when I needed some answer and heard an answer in one of your spiritual thoughts. Thank you."

Next, to the student body: Here are your challenges. First, adhere to the fourth aim of a BYU education and become a true learner, a scholar. If you are gaming the education system, stop! Remember Elder Faust's words—do not be cramming seagulls. Learn how to learn, and learn how to love learning as Elder Bednar counseled.

Second, arrange your schedule so you do not have to study or do homework on Sunday. Honor the Lord's day and He will bless you. Remember the farmers in the field; they turned off their tractors at exactly midnight.

Third, if you feel like life is getting overwhelming, feast upon the scriptures. The Lord will strengthen you. Pray and fast with real intent. Listen for answers through the still, small voice. The Lord has promised us that He will make our burdens light by making us stronger. Seek that strength from the Lord, for with it we can do all things (see Philippians 4:13). Remember the account from Mosiah; the burdens became light because the Lord made His people stronger. He will make you stronger.

Fourth, dedicate yourself right now that you will always be on the Lord's side. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). Use your time at BYU to absolutely solidify your testimony of this great latter-day work. "Enter to learn; go forth to serve."

So why does Brother Brau share spiritual thoughts in class when those two or three minutes could be spent doing something else? In the end, I hope I can be a tool in the Master's hand to point my students to Him. In the words of an unknown student, "You helped me today with the light of 'a testimony of the Atonement.' I needed and have been seeking this with my wife. We are going to do it and strengthen ourselves in Him. Thank you for pointing me to Him."

Now I will close with my testimony. I was not raised in the LDS Church, but like Nephi of old, I was raised by goodly parents. My mother

and father honored God and taught my three brothers and me to do the same. My mother, now a widow, still sets the example for me by attending Catholic mass seven days a week. In my 42 years of life, my mom has always been a constant source of spiritual strength for me.

While I was at West Point as an undergraduate, I came across the Book of Mormon. I read it as a skeptic, in an attempt to prove it wrong. Halfway through that sacred text, I came across Alma 32 and the experiment. Recall that Alma compares the Book of Mormon to a seed and explains that if a person performs the experiment of reading and praying over the Book of Mormon, he or she can find out through the witness of the Holy Spirit if it is true.

I took the experiment, my heart was softened, and the Spirit bore testimony to me that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. With this knowledge, it was confirmed to me that the Bible is also the word of God, for the Book of Mormon testifies of it. Joseph Smith was an actual prophet, for he translated the work. The Lord's Church has been restored on earth in these latter days. And most important, the Book of Mormon clearly testifies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

It has been over 20 years since I felt the still, small voice testify to me that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. I have felt that testimony many times between then and now. Along with the testimony of the Spirit, the fruits of the Church drive my testimony. I have seen firsthand for two decades the fruits of this great Church. As the scripture says, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). Through the Primary, Young Women, and Young Men programs, I have personally watched the teachings of the Church influence my own four children, who are here on the front row. I have seen them grow in the gospel and develop their own testimonies. All four of my children are better people than their father, which I fully attribute to the teachings of the Savior Jesus Christ and the teachings of His

restored Church. Another fruit is that of eternal families. My father, while not a Latter-day Saint, taught me my entire life that families are forever. He always looked forward to being with his father in the afterlife, a father who was taken from him by death when he was only four months old.

The truth of eternal families that my father taught me is a wonderful fruit of the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. In holy temples, families are sealed for eternity. Here on the stand with me is my beautiful wife, my

eternal companion, my best friend, Michelle. I thank Heavenly Father every day that He has allowed us to be sealed together and that we will be together for eternity with our children. What a wonderful fruit of the gospel.

As we leave the Marriott Center, I want each of you to know that, based upon the witness of the Holy Spirit and the fruits of the Lord's restored gospel, this finance professor knows that God lives. I know that Jesus is the Christ, and it is in His sacred name, even Jesus Christ, that I close, amen.