

Bright Minds and Broken Hearts

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I have chosen a topic today about which I am still learning, both in principle and in practice. I claim no final expertise about it, but I do claim much thought and some experience. I have chosen this topic because of who you are—bright, faithful individuals, the “hope of Israel.” My desire is that you can learn from my words and my experiences and thus avoid some painful experiences of your own.

I am going to speak about the relationship between learning and humility. I am proceeding from the assumption that, because we are associated here at a university, all of us are interested in learning. I am also assuming that that interest is even stronger here than at most universities because we have been commanded to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Today, as I talk about the relationship of humility and learning, I’d like to begin by discussing some ways of acquiring humility. Then I’d like to offer some cautions about trying to learn without humility and discuss some thoughts about some of the costs that might be associated with humility. Finally, I’d like to look at reasons why we, as learners, would want humility in spite of the costs.

C. S. Lewis has treated the subject of humility in several of his works. One of my favorite treatments occurs in *The Screwtape Letters*. This

volume is a supposed collection of letters from an experienced and senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, the inexperienced and junior demon, Wormwood. Screwtape advises his nephew on how to tempt his “patient”—that is, the person Wormwood has been assigned to bring down. Uncle Screwtape begins his 14th letter to Wormwood with the following:

My dear Wormwood,

The most alarming thing in your last account of the patient is that he is making none of those confident resolutions which marked his original conversion. No more lavish promises of perpetual virtue, I gather; not even the expectation of an endowment of “grace” for life, but only a hope for the daily and hourly pittance to meet the daily and hourly temptation! This is very bad.

I see only one thing to do at the moment. Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle

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*into his mind the gratifying reflection, “By jove! I’m being humble,” and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt—and so on, through as many stages as you please. But don’t try this too long, for fear you awake his sense of humour and proportion, in which case he will merely laugh at you and go to bed. [C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 8th printing (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), pp. 71–72]*

I love Lewis because he makes me laugh at our human weaknesses. In this case, I think he also illustrates one of the ways of obtaining humility—learning to laugh at ourselves, our foolish pride, and other foibles. I have seen this trait in many great persons. They know how to laugh gently at themselves and the situations they’re involved in. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard President Hinckley say as he looked around a pretty impressive looking group of missionaries or leaders, “You’re not much, but you’re all the Lord’s got.” We all laugh, but we waited eagerly for the results when he told us last April about the upcoming broadcast of the CBS *60 Minutes* program with these words: “If it turns out to be favorable, I will be grateful. Otherwise, I pledge I’ll never get my foot in that kind of trap again” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “Remember . . . Thy Church, O Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1996, p. 83). Awakening our sense of humor about ourselves is a great step toward humility.

As a general rule, however, as we try to acquire humility, I think it is best approached through indirect means. There seems to be something a little strange about the “head-on” declarations “I’m going to become humble” or “I’m going to develop humility.” In some less than mysterious way, the very declaration both points out the need for such a virtue and tends to make the hearer suspicious about whether the virtue might be obtained.

When I was set apart for my mission to Chile I was told, “You will learn the true meaning of humility.” I recognized at the time that I probably had a problem with pride, and so I looked forward to what I might learn about humility. I think I assumed that I was going to learn this virtue by observation of its application in the lives of others, probably the people I was going to serve. But the Lord is a much more powerful teacher than that.

My oldest sister had served a mission while I was just six and seven years old. As long as I could remember, I had wanted to serve a mission, and, although I never would have said it this way, I was determined to be the “world’s greatest lady missionary.” I had listened for years to numerous stories told by my returned missionary friends and family of problems caused by lady missionaries (this was back in the old days when people didn’t think as highly of lady missionaries)—how the sisters couldn’t get along together, how they were always getting sick or needing the elders to do something, and how they slowed down the work. I was determined to not do any of those things; I was going to be exemplary.

And so I was off to Chile, where I worked very hard. Things were not always easy with my companions (isn’t that true of all missionaries, not just lady missionaries?), but we were able to work things out and get along. My companions and I worked hard, we followed the rules, and we had success. I felt that I was a good missionary, just as I had planned on being.

When I had been out in the field a little more than a year, I began to not feel well. At first I laughed at the way I felt, calling it hypochondria because my symptoms seemed to match the symptoms of people we visited who had health complaints. When someone complained of a headache, I smiled wryly because I felt that my head ached also. When someone complained that their side hurt, I was amused by that fact because I felt that my side hurt, too. When someone complained of being

exhausted, I understood and considered myself quite sympathetic because I felt that way also. But the “world’s greatest lady missionary” would not stop and just kept on working. So things got worse. Food would go down, but it wouldn’t stay there for long. I remember more than one visit that we concluded quickly so we could get out in the street before I threw up. Because great missionaries do not get sick and stop working, I found a way to handle this problem also: I stopped eating.

One day after this had been going on for a while and we came home for lunch, I told my companion to go eat and I would just rest until it was time to go out again. When it was time to go she came up to the room. I literally could not get out of bed. It would have taken more energy than I had even to roll over and *fall* out of bed. We got a doctor. I had a severe case of hepatitis. The world’s greatest lady missionary was sick, and it was not so great.

When I could not get off that bed, I learned something about the true meaning of humility, something I was able to think about a lot as I recuperated from the hepatitis in the next few weeks. I learned that you do not go out and do missionary work, you do not keep the rules, you do not teach, you do not do one thing that good missionaries do (in fact, you do not do one thing that bad missionaries do), you do not get out of bed, you do not even draw a breath—unless God wills it. I learned gratitude to him not only for a missionary call, for a missionary plan, and for truth, but also for health to get out of bed and for the ability to breathe. I learned that all of those things are privileges, and I was thankful for them. I learned who was really in charge of the work I was doing. I don’t think that anyone observing from the outside could have seen the difference in my missionary work before and after the hepatitis. My companions and I worked hard during both times; we followed the rules and we had success. But internally I was different. I knew it and the Lord knew it, and he could trust me more.

Now the Lord can use all kinds of things to help us be humble. He can use illness, and in Alma 32 we see that he uses poverty. He can use failures of one kind or another, and he can use disappointments. You may have noticed either in the newspaper or from the announcement last week that the title of this talk was to be “Bright Minds and Broken Hearts.” When I told some of my students a few weeks ago about the topic of the talk and then the title, they accused me of subterfuge because of the ambiguity of the term *broken hearts*. They suggested that some, hearing the title, would come in order to find ways of assuaging some of the grief they might be feeling from a disappointing romantic relationship. (I guess, if it’s disappointing, it really is an *unromantic* relationship!) I assured my students that, as a linguist, I was well aware of the ambiguity in the title and that I wanted to take advantage of it—not necessarily by using it to draw the lovelorn here but because I believe that often, particularly at the young-adult time of life, the Lord uses the one kind of broken heart (namely, the romantic broken heart) to produce the second kind of broken heart (namely, humility).

The real reason that I wanted to tell you about my missionary experience, however, was not to demonstrate that the Lord can find ways to make us humble but because I learned something about obtaining humility without having to be humbled. I learned that there is a very important connection between gratitude and humility. Although you may not be able to obtain humility by going at it directly, you may be able to obtain it by working on gratitude and the expression of gratitude. If you really think about all that has gone into making it possible for you to learn, for you to be here to learn, your own feelings of pride will diminish. And as you think about and truly understand the enormous cost that makes it possible for you to leave behind the mistakes you make as you learn, your heart will break at the great heart that broke for you on Calvary.

A year ago, at President and Sister Bateman's first devotional together at this university, I was touched by Sister Bateman's suggestions that we record "little miracles" and that we begin to notice the Lord's hand in our lives in so many small ways (Marilyn S. Bateman, "Memories," *BYU 1995–96 Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1996], p. 122). Though this is a small thing, I think that it is a very "doable" step toward humility. The maintenance of a journal acknowledging these many small miracles may be one of the best ways to obtain humility without the Lord's having to humble us.

I think that gratitude to others also works to develop humility in us. As we take more notice of all that others contribute to our lives and begin to express our appreciation for it more, we are less likely to treat others with arrogance. More important, we are much less likely to foster crippling expectations of others, the kind of low expectations that, when applied persistently or to entire groups, become the core of prejudice, chauvinism, and discrimination.

Because I have had the privilege of teaching English as a second language throughout much of my adult life, I have had the opportunity to come into contact with people from many other cultures. When I first started in that work, I felt a great deal of satisfaction because I could see that what I was doing was helping them. It was only as I grew older and wiser that I began to see that they were helping me. Likewise, my view of the value of my mission to Chile has changed over the years as I have looked with humbler eyes. Those of you who have served missions may add to your humility, too, if you reexamine the fruits of your mission. I think it is customary for us to think that we, through our missionary activities, were teaching others the gospel and bringing spiritual growth to the people where we served. If we look more honestly, we will see that they, through their living, were also teaching us the gospel and bringing spiritual growth to us.

I am grateful for and humbled by those I have taught whose lives, because they are so different from mine, have allowed me to see whole new vistas.

Now this leads me to some cautions about trying to engage in learning without humility. It begins with a caution about being able to learn from others. Probably most of you have heard humility defined as teachableness, the willingness to learn. The truth is that almost all of us are willing to learn if the circumstances are just right, if our teacher is someone with enough prestige or authority, if arguments are presented with sophistication and eloquence, if those around us extol our learning source. But how teachable are we if the circumstances are not just right? How willing are we to listen, to try to understand, to evaluate fairly the worth of the knowledge being imparted? Would we have listened to a 14-year-old backwoods boy who just happened to know more about God than any of the sophisticated teachers of his day? Some truth may come from unlikely and lowly sources. Humility is the price that must be paid to get such truths.

Humility is also the price that determines the value of learning—"to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God" (2 Nephi 9:29; emphasis added). Some of those counsels may not be what we expect or want. It has been my experience (maybe just because I have a tendency to succumb to pride) that the Lord will test those "ifs" sooner or later—or maybe even both for all those with bright minds and opportunities for learning.

One of those times came for me as I was nearing the end of my classwork in my doctoral program at UCLA and preparing to write my dissertation. At the time I needed to get a doctoral committee set so they could approve my dissertation prospectus. Because of some rather strong promptings and small miracles, I had come to know what the Lord wanted me to do—look at the language learning abilities of older adults, namely, our senior missionaries.

Part of what I wanted to do would use research methods that were quite common in our field. But, in consultation with the people at the MTC, I had determined that I also wanted to do some work more ethnographic in nature and requiring a more qualitative data analysis approach, something that was quite new and not as well known as it is now. The people at the MTC and I felt that gathering this kind of data would be more informative and helpful for putting together future programs for the senior missionaries. As I discussed the possibility of doing such work with teachers in my department at UCLA, none of those who had already agreed to serve on my PhD committee felt they had sufficient practice in these methods to be able to guide me. They requested that, if I wanted to do this kind of research, I find someone with this expertise to serve as one of the “outside” members of my committee. Otherwise, I would need to change my research.

At the time, members of my department and I were only aware of one person who had some expertise and interest in language instruction issues and who also had expertise in the kind of qualitative research I wanted to do. He was in the Education Department, but his training had been in anthropology. He had served on a couple of PhD committees for other persons graduating in my field. I went to see him to see if he would be willing to serve on mine. When I met the professor, I found him to be easy to talk with and, happily for me, very interested in my research topic. When he asked me where I was going to get a supply of older adult language learners to study, I told him about my plans to study our senior missionaries and about the time frame for the research. He told me that he thought the research would take longer than I was proposing, said he was a little uncomfortable with the idea of working with a “missionary” population, and asked me to think about those factors to see if I could make adjustments in what I was planning. He invited me to return the next

day with my answers; we would then discuss his serving on my committee.

I went home and thought about alternatives. Even though I wanted to complete my degree as soon as possible, I was much more concerned that it be well done than that it be “fast done.” I knew I could adjust my time schedule for carrying out the research. But the issue of a different population was more difficult. It wasn’t that other populations didn’t exist. I knew that my elderly aunt was currently living in a retirement community near San Diego and that she and others in the community regularly participated in language classes. My problem was that I knew that the Lord wanted me to study the missionaries. My whole selection of the dissertation topic had been with them in mind, and the Lord had confirmed to me in several small, miraculous ways that that was what he wanted me to do. But discussion of those kinds of miracles was not exactly the kind of thing I felt comfortable telling a UCLA professor about. Yet I desperately needed him on my committee. I needed to get my committee set, get my prospectus approved, and get up to Utah to begin the study here at the time that had been approved by the MTC. And there were no other willing professors with expertise in qualitative research whom I or any members on my committee knew about. I wondered if I could not study my aunt’s colleagues and then find the necessary applications for it later at the MTC. I went to the Lord. He wanted me to do the work at the MTC.

So the next day I went back to face the professor. He asked me about my decisions. I told him that I was willing to adjust my time schedule and that I would much rather have the work done well than to have it done fast. I could tell that that pleased him. And then I told him that I didn’t feel that I could adjust in the matter of the population I was going to study. I told him that I had observed the senior missionaries and their struggles with language learning. I knew they were not the same as the

seniors learning languages in the retirement community. Those seniors chose which languages they wanted to learn; they were in class a couple of hours a week; they lived at home and enjoyed all of the amenities of their usual lifestyle. The seniors in the MTC were quite different. I told this professor that I could not change populations because the seniors in the MTC and their levels of sacrifice and commitment mattered too much to me. As I finished speaking, I could tell that he recognized the depth of my feeling.

He then spoke of his convictions in his academic work. He said that, as an anthropologist and consequentialist, he was opposed to proselytizing. He said that, even if my results were not directly helping the missionaries I would be studying, he recognized and knew that eventually the findings would be put to that purpose. I agreed that that was exactly what I hoped. And, so, he said, “I cannot serve on your committee.” We both knew what that meant. As we parted, both of us had tears in our eyes at the mutual recognition of the integrity of the other’s choice.

As I left the professor’s office, although I didn’t know what I was going to do about my committee, I felt some satisfaction about having been strong enough to do what the Lord wanted me to do in spite of all the intellectual and academic reasons and pressures to do something else. I felt the peace of the Lord that comes from having chosen right. But I was not prepared for what came next. As I continued to think about the encounter and to bemoan to people who cared about me what had happened, I began to have an impression about something the Lord wanted me to do. I sensed that the impression had nothing to do with my getting a committee—an issue that I used to push the impression away with for a while. The impression that was starting to grow was that I needed to write to this professor and tell him about the Book of Mormon and its effects—this to a man who had just told me about how he

felt about proselytizing! You can bet this was one impression I tried to wish away or ignore.

I kept myself plenty busy for the next couple of days so that it wouldn’t be in my thoughts so much, but it was always there, nagging softly from the corners of my mind. I managed two or three days like this, and then the Lord did what he always does when he has something he really wants me to do: He woke me in the middle of the night with nothing but this issue fully on my mind. I thought about how I love the Book of Mormon; I have no doubts of its authenticity and truth. I knew its power to change lives for the better, to bring happiness and a higher sense of worth to those who read it and find out its truth on their own. Because of my experiences in South America, I especially knew its power to affect the peoples there. I felt I needed to tell this professor that. I also thought about him, about his integrity. What we had felt in his office was real. I knew he respected my integrity just as I respected his. But that was also part of the difficulty for me: Would I cause him to think that I did not understand the issue of his integrity, that I did not respect that? Would he dismiss me as some kind of a fanatical “proselytizer”? Would he, when we were not face to face, mock what I would say? Would he pass the letter on to members of my own department with questions about what kind of students they were producing and what kind of good sense these students might seem to be lacking?

Satan argued with great sophistication, appealing to my pride and desire not to be thought a fool and urging me not to do what the Lord’s impressions were telling me to do. I finally tumbled out of bed, fell on my knees, and told the Lord I would write the letter. I asked for his help and went to my typewriter. When I finally finished the letter, I went back to bed and slept peacefully. The next day I delivered the letter to the professor’s box.

Now I know how we all want this story to end—the professor read the letter, changed his

mind, decided to be on my committee, read the Book of Mormon, was converted, and is now a stake president somewhere. That is not what happened. He did read the letter, did not change his mind, did not serve on my committee (although I found someone with qualitative research expertise who did), and, as far as I know, has never read the Book of Mormon nor been converted. But something happened to me. I learned who I belonged to even in the academic world. And I had peace. The Lord helped me, and I learned again that, when we are true to him, he magnifies the intellect he has given us. I was able to get very thorough data for my dissertation, and, even though I expanded the gathering of data to match what had been suggested, I was able to complete the degree quickly.

This now leads me to the main reason why I wanted to talk about the relationship between learning and humility. Look in Alma 32, verses 16 and 25–29, to see that humility is the soil in which the seed of faith is planted. In fact, *humility* and *humus* (“material . . . forming the organic portion of soil”) come from the same root word (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. “humus”). And we are commanded, as I said earlier, to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). We must plant our faith in our humility.

A few years back I served on the Faculty Advisory Committee with Dana Griffen, a professor in the Geology Department. As we were contemplating at that time what it meant to have a BYU education, one where learning was enlightened by faith, Dana told of an experience he had had in his research. I have asked his permission to tell you that story today because I think it illustrates so clearly the relationship between humility, study, and faith.

At the time of this experience, Dana was involved in a research project in which he was trying to make a synthetic variety of a common mineral with uncommon elements—ones that as chemical components do not occur naturally

in nature. He was using equipment that would go to very high levels of pressure and temperature, and he had been working on this problem for quite a while. He tried every level of temperature and pressure that seemed reasonable, based, as all good research is, on the work presented by others. But nothing Dana tried was working, although he was totally convinced that the synthesis could be done.

One night, after trying everything he could think of, he was totally frustrated with the work. He knew that finding the right temperature and pressure was probably not a matter of great import in the eternal scheme of things, but he also knew that it was important to him, so he felt that the Lord would help him in some way. At his home, in his frustration, he humbly went to the Lord in prayer: “Father, I’ve done everything I know how to do. I know you know how to do this.” Immediately he had a clear impression, almost like a voice, that gave a specific temperature and pressure, and the pressure was at least 50 percent higher than what anyone had thought reasonable. The next morning Dana went quickly to the lab. He took the elements, set the equipment to the pressure and temperature he had heard the night before, and, within 20 minutes, produced the long-sought-for synthesis. He has replicated the experiment numerous times since then. If we do the work, seeking learning by study, and are humble, we can also seek learning by faith.

As I think of us all engaged in the learning process, I would like to conclude by telling you of an experience I had in Israel a few years ago. I had gone to the Jerusalem Center to prepare a program for a group of teachers in training to teach English as a second or foreign language. They were coming for summer term, and I went over to spend three weeks before they arrived making arrangements with local schools and officials so that our students could teach and observe there. Because I arrived when I did, the students who had been at the Jerusalem Center for a combined winter

semester and spring term were still there finishing up their studies. Among the larger group was a smaller intensive Arabic group directed by Dr. Kirk Belnap from our faculty. Kirk was a friend and former student of mine, so he invited me to participate with his group on their field trips. I was thus able to visit many sites that I visited again later with my own group.

There was one field trip, however, for which I was very excited to be invited. Kirk had made arrangements for us to visit an intensive language program out near Tel Aviv. Such intensive language programs, called *ulpan*s, are fairly common in Israel, where they have had large numbers of immigrants from many nations over the years whom they have tried to incorporate as quickly as possible into the society. The *ulpan* we were going to visit, however, was a little different. Rather than just teaching Hebrew, this school also taught intensive Arabic, making it possible for new immigrants and others to learn to communicate with the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the area as well as the Hebrew-speaking inhabitants. Kirk knew that I would be interested in seeing how languages were being taught there—especially interested because the director of the school was outstanding, having received awards, including a national award, for the innovative work she had done at the school. Kirk communicated this information to me and also told me that the director had had some contact with and admiration of Mormons through at least one Mormon student, a girl from the University of Utah who had come to the *ulpan* a few years back to learn Hebrew.

The day we arrived to tour the school and see the instruction was, unfortunately, graduation day for many of the students. Although instruction was continuing with some students, a great majority were involved in the traditional ceremony, packing, and saying good-bye to friends and teachers. We were able to observe and ask questions of some instructors,

but our conversation with the director was at first only in bits and pieces as she moved from one activity to another. In one of these quick moments Kirk introduced me to her, and she asked me what I was doing in Israel. I told her that I had students coming for a training program in teaching English as a second language. Then the woman rushed on to her next activity. Finally, following the graduation ceremony, the director, Kirk, and I were able to sit down for a few minutes in her office to talk. Once again she turned to me and asked what I was doing in Israel. I explained that I had a group of students coming and that I had made arrangements for them to do some practice ESL teaching at a secondary school in Jerusalem. She then said, “You know you can’t just go and preach your religion to them.”

I smiled and explained to her that our leaders had reached an agreement with Israeli officials and that all of the persons coming to the Jerusalem Center had to sign a pledge not to preach the gospel.

“Ah, yes,” she said, looking at us piercingly and thoughtfully, “but how do you stop the shining in your eyes? Every one of you has it.”

There is a shining in the eyes and in the countenances and in the minds of those who follow the Light of the World and acknowledge his place in their lives. In the Book of Mormon, Christ promises:

I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. [Ether 12:27; emphasis added]

Our learning will be great. Our intelligence will be strong. Our minds will be bright. May we keep bright minds and broken hearts, I pray in the name of the Light of the World, even Jesus Christ. Amen.