

Consecrating Our Education

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Before commencing my first semester at Brigham Young University, I had the opportunity of visiting Bourton-on-the-Water, a small village in the English Cotswolds. Replete with honey-colored houses, bridge-crossed brooks, and sheep-trodden meadows, the town represented all things quintessentially English. While wandering through the narrow streets along the Windrush River, I entered the Church of St. Lawrence. I thought that no one else occupied the silent church, but I soon noticed an elderly woman in a dark wool suit and sensible shoes sitting in the third pew from the altar.

At first I thought she was praying, but upon closer inspection I realized that she was doing needlepoint, so I felt more comfortable approaching her. We sat together for some time talking about everything from the local tourist sights to the latest tabloid embarrassment of the royal family. As we talked I became intrigued by her handiwork. She explained that she was making a prayer cushion like the dozens hanging from brass hooks on the pews around us. She carefully described the entire process—from the type of materials used to the time and patience required for completing such an undertaking. As a budding young economist, I asked her how much such an endeavor cost.

“I buy the materials for 30 pounds,” she replied.

Next I asked how much she charged for the prayer cushions.

“The church buys them for 20 pounds each,” she said.

Now it doesn’t take an economics major to do a profitability analysis of *this* cottage industry. As I puzzled over her 10-pound loss and obviously irrational economic behavior, she responded with a somewhat bewildered smile, saying, “Oh, but you mustn’t think in *that* way!”

Awkwardly I considered her admonition before responding that all that really mattered was that she derived a great deal of pleasure from her efforts. By saying so I graciously restored her economic sensibility. Again she looked at me with the same smile. I could almost hear her say in response, “Oh, but you mustn’t think in *that* way either!”

Not knowing how to think, I said good-bye and excused myself. It wasn’t until some time later, long after I left the Church of St. Lawrence and the Cotswold hills, that I understood her

Richard J. Hawkins spoke as the representative of his graduating class at BYU commencement on 22 April 2004.

primary motivation. Her labors were not a profit-maximizing investment decision; neither were they necessarily an exploration of her passion. Rather, she consecrated her needle-point prayer cushions as a simple gift to her God and her fellow parishioners. Therein lay the importance of her act and her fulfillment in the action.

I am reminded of that sage woman as I reflect today upon our experiences at Brigham Young University. With hard-earned degrees in hand, we might be inclined to congratulate ourselves on an important investment in human capital. We have all devoted significant time, effort, money, and talent to acquiring these important degrees. Although our undergraduate and graduate programs have prepared us to encounter the world with necessary and refined training and skills, we should remind ourselves of the elderly woman's wise saying: "You mustn't think of it in *that* way!" Our years here were more than just an economically profitable investment.

Our university experience has given each of us ample opportunity to explore our passions through many general education and special interest classes. My passion for studying the literature of the American West and northern European baroque art history has taken me to unexpectedly beautiful places. I hope that each of us has experienced that same unparalleled excitement about learning varied subjects during our time here. Finding and developing our passions have been critical elements of our education, but, as I say that, I can see the old woman smiling and hear her saying, "You mustn't think of it in *that* way either!" Our years here were more than just an exploration of our passions.

When I reflect upon our experience here at Brigham Young University, I realize that, like the prayer cushions in Bourton-on-the-Water, our education is also a gift that we must consecrate for the benefit of those around us. More important than developing our careers or passions, our unique secular and spiritual education

at Brigham Young University has developed within us the capacity to "go forth to serve" so that we might more fully bless the lives of others.

I'm confident that for the Cotswold woman, seeing her prayer cushions used every week in church gave her great satisfaction in knowing that she'd done some good in her corner of the world. However, I'm also sure that she never imagined that six years later and 5,000 miles away, her attitude of consecration would continue to inspire an economics student whom she probably doesn't even remember. Whether building freeways, preserving history, raising families, teaching students, or healing patients, we will each see the direct impact of our education on the lives of others. But, like the Cotswold woman, consecrating our education and cultivating a giving attitude will enable us to bless many more individuals than just those who use our freeways, read our histories, meet our families, learn in our classrooms, or receive our care. These will be the people who years later and thousands of miles away will not necessarily remember what we did but rather how we did it.

As graduates we can follow the examples of consecration given us by loving families, loyal friends, inspired professors, wise leaders, and humble tithe payers from around the world—some of whom are in attendance today. This class was sustained and supported by individuals who gave freely and unselfishly of their time, talents, energy, and resources to make our experience here possible. They never thought in *that* way, preoccupying themselves with their own economies and passions. They truly understood that we must think in terms of serving our fellow brothers and sisters and our Father in Heaven. Through their attitude of consecration they have blessed the lives of many more than just those individuals whom they have come to see today. On behalf of the entire graduating class and a wise woman in sensible shoes, I extend our sincere appreciation.

Thank you.