

Learning by Heart

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It is my privilege to be able to say a few words to you. I would like to begin by offering my personal congratulations to the graduates and to the families and friends here today. It is a day of joy and a day when we praise the Lord for the many mercies He has given us.

My husband, John, just had a birthday. As we gathered to give him our gifts, our celebration looked a little different from that of most families. There was very little wrapping paper and ribbon and hardly any tangible evidence of gifts. Instead we presented him with memorizations as our gifts. For as long as I can remember John has discouraged using store-bought presents to celebrate his holidays. Instead he has asked that we memorize a poem, song, or scriptural passage to recite for him. This way our offerings could be described the same as William Shakespeare described mercy: “It is twice blessed; It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (*The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, scene 1, lines 186–87). I know this passage because I once memorized it for John. He has always felt that memorization gives our children and me a chance to give him something that we can also keep for ourselves. It is a gift from the heart.

I have learned that there are many benefits to memorizing. For me, personally, it deepens my understanding of the passage and fixes it in

my heart. As you go over and over a passage in your mind, you think about it again and again. The richness of the words, the way they are put together, the possible symbolisms, the clever use of literary devices, and new meanings that you may never have noticed or understood before—all become apparent in the process of memorizing. Memorizing can put words in our hearts as well as in our minds. Learning by heart—which may be somewhat of a dying tradition—means to learn something so deeply that it becomes part of our core: it fills us; it changes us. Often my heart has been filled during early morning runs as I have gone over in my mind the words from “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (*Ensign*, November 1995, 102), “The Living Christ” (*Ensign*, April 2000, 2–3), or some scripture or poem I was memorizing.

I had read the family proclamation many times and felt love and appreciation for it. But as I memorized each word and sentence, I began to see how it spoke in detail to each of the cultural ills that plague our society. I felt hope that the eternal truths taught in the

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proclamation could arm me as I faced current and difficult moral issues. I began to feel greater personal affirmation from apostles and prophets and from the Lord for the family choices I had made over a lifetime. I felt strongly the knowledge that we have a Father in Heaven who has an unfailing plan for us. I felt His matchless love and goodness. I felt, as it explains in Proverbs, that “the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” and “wisdom entereth into thine heart” (Proverbs 2:6,10). My heart was filled with knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and love. This knowledge encouraged gratitude, personal improvement, and the desire to strengthen others.

This tradition of memorizing and reciting has allowed us as parents additional glimpses into the hearts of our children. As they choose their own passages, we often discover what challenges or joys they are experiencing. We also learn of their wisdom and sometimes of their sense of humor. I remember on John’s 40th birthday when our then 15-year-old daughter presented a poem by Lewis Carroll:

*“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,
 “And your hair has become very white;
 And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
 Do you think, at your age, it is right?”*
 [“You Are Old, Father William,” stanza 1]

Although somewhat dismayed that year at feeling kind of old, my husband was even more delighted at our daughter’s sense of humor. Another time a daughter chose to recite Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 29”: “When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes / I all alone bewep my outcast state” (lines 1–2). This came at a time when she was feeling inadequate and friendless. One child chose a love poem when he was feeling heady and in love. Another memorized section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants and announced to us that she had decided to serve a mission. What

our children learn by heart and share with their father becomes an expression of their own heartfelt emotions.

Learning by heart is a rich phrase. Think about the word *heart*. We all know that our hearts are central to life. Physically the heart is the life-sustaining organ of our bodies. Likewise, *heart* is used to describe the essential, most vital part of our spiritual being—one’s innermost character, feelings, or inclinations. In a gospel sense the heart is our spiritual core. Hence the scriptures teach that “as [a man] thinketh in his *heart*, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7; emphasis added) and that “where your treasure is, there will your *heart* be also” (Matthew 6:21; emphasis added). The gospel must be “written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the *heart*” (2 Corinthians 3:3; emphasis added). Over and over in the scriptures prophets remind us, as Alma told his son, to “let the affections of thy *heart* be placed upon the Lord forever” (Alma 37:36; emphasis added). Learning by heart in its richest sense is a gospel duty. It is a twin commandment to remembering. We are to learn spiritual truth by heart and then retain in remembrance what we have placed deep in our hearts.

Many of you here today have spent the last four years (or maybe more) at this wonderful university to become educated. What have you learned by heart? Some of it is factual or informational. Such learning is useful. It helps us solve daily problems and meet immediate needs. Dr. Todd Britsch, former academic vice president of BYU, said:

We remember some data that helps us solve a problem, we direct someone to a particular location, we discuss a painting without a copy of it in front of us, we order a part for a computer without a catalog at hand. In each case we have memorized something that helps us shorten the process of dealing with daily experience. Without this storehouse of facts and data, we would be helpless.

Other things we learn by heart serve even more profound ends, as Dr. Britsch goes on to describe:

A scripture that aids in counseling a sorrowing friend; a hymn whose words and music express our most profound religious feelings when we are struggling with a matter of faith; . . . a technical point that helps us defend a position that is important for us, our family, or our community. [Todd A. Britsch, “Memorization: ‘Regurgitation’ or ‘Learning by Heart’?” *Focus on Faculty* 5, no. 3 (summer 1997): 2]

Have you deposited rich and worthwhile learning into your memory bank so that when you need to make a withdrawal there will be abundant treasures of knowledge and wisdom available to you? Have you acquired both the skill and the love of learning so that you can continue throughout your life to fill your bank and thus be more serviceable to others?

Learning by heart enables us to pursue lifelong learning and service more fully—which should be an ongoing outcome of a BYU education. *The Aims of a BYU Education* states:

*BYU should inspire students to keep alive their curiosity and prepare them to continue learning throughout their lives. . . . A BYU degree should educate students in how to learn, teach them that there is much still to learn, and implant in them a love of learning “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). [In *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 1996), 12]*

Brigham Young stated: “We might ask, when shall we cease to learn? I will give you my opinion about it; never, never” (*JD* 3:203). He also taught: “Our education should be such as to improve our minds and fit us for increased usefulness; to make us of greater service to the human family” (*JD* 14:83).

I am grateful for powerful examples in my life of people who are continually learning and serving—thus making the world a better place by using their vibrant minds and hearts.

John’s 84-year-old mother is one such example. She is currently serving a temple mission—her sixth mission. It is always fun to talk to her because there is such excitement in her voice about each new discovery—be it about our church or a country’s history or the local culture. She has taught herself to speak several languages to be more useful in her temple service. Over the years she has been a great source of suggested reading ideas for my book group because she is continually learning from interesting books. She is the mother of 13 children who follow her example in hungering for knowledge. She is someone who has taken learning to heart.

I likewise saw a pattern of learning by heart in my family that began with my grandpa. It then extended to my dad and now to my generation. My grandfather and father had a love for geography, history, and cultures. They traveled as much as they could and can still recount in great and correct detail names of villages, mountains, rivers, and lakes they have visited. In my home as we grew up we had contests to memorize the county seats of all the counties in the state, then the capitals of all the states in the United States, then the capitals of the countries on each continent. Of course in the process we studied maps, learned about languages and cultures, and visited lots of beautiful places of interest. My grandpa took us on trips and thus began the tradition of filling our hearts with knowledge and memories. He believed in giving his posterity experiences rather than things. My father has continued this.

One of the experiences my dad gave me that has filled my memory bank is climbing mountains together. It was hard work, but he taught me that the spectacular view from the top was more magnificent because I had earned it. He

taught me to photograph exquisite scenes in my memory so that I could recall them anytime I needed the serenity of soul they could bring to me. I gained the knowledge that Heavenly Father loved me enough to create this world “to please the eye and to gladden the heart; . . . and to enliven the soul” (D&C 59:18–19).

My dad just returned from Nauvoo, where he served as temple president. He is almost 80 now and sadly admits that he probably won’t stand on top of any of his favorite mountain peaks again. But he has those vistas that he loves so much stored in his memory bank, reminiscent of William Wordsworth’s poem about seeing a host of golden daffodils that Dad so often quoted to me:

*I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:*

*For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.
[“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” (1807),
stanzas 3–4; emphasis added]*

Because my dad memorized those mountain scenes, he can return to them when in “vacant or in pensive mood” and again fill his heart with pleasure.

One of the many things I love about our dear President Hinckley is his bright mind and his love for learning. At the dedication of the remodeled library on this campus, there was much talk about the vast technology we had acquired that would help people distant from the campus access information from our great collection of books. President Hinckley was grateful for that, but then he tenderly held a beautiful book in his hands. He talked of his great love for the heft and feel of a book, about how nothing surpassed the pleasure of hold-

ing it and reading from its pages. He inherited a vast library of books from his father, and he knew its contents. Books have become part of him. His daughter Virginia Pearce said of him, “He frequently quotes Shakespeare. He quotes Kipling. Passages of great literature are just floating around in his head” (quoted in Jake Parkinson, “U. Endowment Expands,” *Deseret News*, 6 April 2003, A7). This is because he memorized them in his youth and sometimes recited them to his parents—as our children have done for us.

My husband and I have heard lots of other relevant information “pop out” as we had the opportunity to take two ambassadors to visit him—one from the Czech Republic and one from China. In each case we were astounded at the depth of his knowledge of the historical and political events of those lands. He is well read. He is a good thinker. He has a good memory and is wise in his ability to assimilate and utilize his knowledge. This lifelong learning has allowed him to be much more serviceable in the kingdom. He is able to draw treasures of wisdom out of the abundance of a heart well stocked with knowledge.

The BYU *Aims* document explains that greater knowledge gives us the ability to be more serviceable:

Well-developed faith, intellect, and character prepare students for a lifetime of . . . service. . . . BYU students strengthen not only themselves—they “also bring strength to others in the tasks of home and family life, social relationships, civic duty, and service to mankind” (Mission Statement). [Aims, 12]

I memorized a poem by George Eliot that speaks eloquently about developing ourselves so that we may become one of the “choir invisible” whose lives “bring strength to others”:

*O may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again*

*In minds made better by their presence: . . .
 . . . May I . . .
 . . . be to other souls
 The cup of strength in some great agony,
 Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,
 Beget the smiles that have no cruelty—
 Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
 And in diffusion ever more intense.
 So shall I join the choir invisible
 Whose music is the gladness of the world.
 [“O May I Join the Choir Invisible,” 1867]*

Through lifelong learning and service we may “join the choir invisible Whose music is the gladness of the world.” As graduates of BYU we have a special duty so to live. As President Kimball said at the dedication of the Carillon Tower, may “the morality of the graduates of this University provide the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet” (Spencer W. Kimball, “Second Century Address and Dedication of Carillon Tower and Bells,” Brigham Young University, 10 October 1975, 12).

For our lives to become the music of hope for the world, our learning must be heart deep; it must reach our very core. We must be able

not only to access information but to understand; we must acquire not only knowledge but wisdom. In this day and age we can look up anything, but it can only change us if we know it in our hearts. T. S. Eliot said, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” (*The Rock* [1934], I).

“O remember, remember,” Alma said to each of his sons (Helaman 5:9). Let us “treasure up wisdom” in our hearts (D&C 38:30) by dwelling in our hearts on blessings of protection, comfort, and peace; by pondering in our hearts moments of inspiration and revelation; and, above all, by remembering that we are covenant children of Heavenly Father. We must engrave our covenants in the fleshy tables of our hearts.

It is my hope and my prayer that, as Jeremiah said, God “will put [His] law in [our] inward parts, and write it in [our] hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). May we learn by heart those things that will continually fill our memory banks with wisdom and then use that wisdom in His service is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

