

The Arts, the Sciences, and the Light of the Gospel

DANIEL J. FAIRBANKS

Today's devotional will be a little unusual. I was raised in a family of artists. My father and grandfather both chose sculpture as their profession. My grandfather was well known for his demonstration lectures at firesides and devotionals, during which he modeled a statue in clay while speaking. My father and I have carried on that tradition. At the encouragement of several friends, I have decided to abandon the traditional podium lecture and work on a piece of sculpture while speaking in today's devotional. I am grateful to the people of KBYU for their willingness to project a live image on the screen so that all of you can see, as well as hear, this devotional. As I work on this statue, I would like to share some of my feelings about the relationships between the arts, the sciences, and the gospel.

Some students at BYU perceive general education as an unfortunate burden that does little for them professionally. I was rudely awakened to this perception the first time that I taught Biology 100. Having loved biology my entire life, I assumed that all 250 students in my class would be as enthusiastic as I was to study biology. I quickly learned that most of my students dreaded having to take the course and had little interest in the sciences. My challenge was to help them learn to reverently

admire the intricate wonders of God's creation that are evident when we study life. General education is especially important at BYU, for here a thoughtful study of the arts and sciences can be, in President Kimball's words, "bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel" (Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," preschool address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, 11). Let me share with you a few of my own experiences.

In 1978, shortly after returning from my mission, I had the opportunity to take the first of several trips to Italy to work with my father and grandfather carving statues from the crystalline-white marble quarried in the mountains above Carrara. On weekends we visited the great cathedrals and museums in Italy. One of the first cathedrals we visited was Santa Maria Novella, a quiet cathedral near the train station in Florence. As we entered the cathedral, the morning sun streamed through the stained-glass windows, projecting colored light along the walls and pews. I was drawn to a large fresco painting of the Trinity by the early

Daniel J. Fairbanks was a BYU professor of botany and range science when this -devotional address was delivered on 2 May 2000.

Italian Renaissance painter Masaccio. The painting depicts the three members of the Godhead: God the Father at the highest point, His hands supporting the cross that bears His Son, and the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove immediately above Christ's head. As I gazed on the painting, a strong spirit of reverence came over me. I remained there quietly admiring it, pondering the concept of the Godhead.

In the years that have passed since that time, the image of this painting has often come to mind, and each time I feel the same warm reverence that I felt that day. At the time I was 21 years of age and knew very little about the history of art. I later learned as part of my studies that this painting was among the most important in art history because it was the first use of scientific perspective in Western art. I also learned that Masaccio was only 21 years old when he painted the work. This masterpiece was one of only a few works that he completed before his untimely death at the age of 27. As I learned more about the technical details and historical significance of this work, my admiration for the painting, and its spiritual message, grew.

Another painting had a profound spiritual influence on me. As I child I lived in the Sugarhouse area of Salt Lake City. Our ward met in a lovely old meetinghouse built in an English Tudor style. The chapel had a long vaulted ceiling with dark oak woodwork and a wonderful pipe organ. At the front of the chapel behind the pulpit was a large mural of the Sacred Grove painted by the Latter-day Saint artist Lee Greene Richards. Every week as we met in sacrament meeting, I gazed at that painting. I don't remember any of the words I heard over the pulpit, but the sweet promptings of the Spirit that I felt as a child in that chapel will always remain in my heart and are forever associated in my mind with that beautiful image of the Sacred Grove.

The arts have always been important to the restored gospel. In the face of overwhelming

poverty and despite the challenge of cultivating the soil of an untamed desert, one of the first efforts of the pioneers as they settled in the Salt Lake Valley was to build a theater. Within a few decades all of the arts were flourishing, and Salt Lake City became the center for the arts in the Mountain West, as it still is. There are many touching stories of artists, musicians, actors, and writers who sacrificed much to devote their artistic talents to the building of the kingdom. Among my favorites is the story of the Paris Art Mission. In 1890, John Hafen, Lorus Pratt, and John B. Fairbanks, who was my great-grandfather, made a proposal to the First Presidency that they be called as art missionaries to Paris, where they could study painting in the great Parisian art schools. They could then return and paint the murals on the walls of the Salt Lake Temple, which was under construction at the time. After presenting their proposal, the three artists hiked to the top of Ensign Peak, overlooking the Salt Lake Valley, and offered a prayer to the Lord that their proposal would be accepted. The First Presidency called them to serve in Paris as "missionaries with a special purpose" (Linda Jones Gibbs, *Harvesting the Light: The Paris Art Mission and Beginnings of Utah Impressionism* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987), 18). On the 23rd of June in 1890 they left Utah. Their sadness in leaving their young families for a long period of time, mixed with their enthusiasm for their missions, is well expressed in the following passage from my great-grandfather's personal history:

I bade farewell to my wife, my family, and my home, and set out for a foreign land. Four of my darling little ones accompanied me to the depot, where I kissed their little faces, knowing I would not see them again for two years. On the Denver and Rio Grande train, I found Lorus Pratt, one of my fellow students. At Springville, a large crowd had assembled. In the midst of the crowd we saw John Hafen. . . . His eyes

were red as he slowly made his way to the train. "All aboard" came the cry of the conductor and we were soon speeding eastward. After a few moments of silent reflection, we began to talk of our plans for the future. In that we found consellation [sic]. [Condensation by Florence Fairbanks Cope of a history by Florence Gifford Fairbanks, artist files, Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City, Utah; quoted in Gibbs, *Harvesting the Light*, 18–19]

Once in Paris, the artists began their studies at the Julian Academy, the world's most prestigious art school in the 19th century. For several months their studies consisted of drawing from casts and live models. Eventually they broke from the strict academy environment and spent most of their time in the French countryside painting landscapes in the impressionist style. Impressionism became their chosen style for the remainder of their careers and established a movement known as Utah Impressionism, which is now recognized as an important chapter in the history of American art. Of their newfound style, John Hafen wrote:

In paintings that you may see hereafter cease to look for mechanical effect or minute finish, for individual leaves, blades of grass, or aped imitation of things, but look for smell, for soul, for feeling, for the beautiful in line and color. [John Hafen, "Mountains from an Art Standpoint," *Young Woman's Journal* 16 (September 1905), 404; also quoted in Gibbs, *Harvesting the Light*, 44]

This style is evident in their paintings, several of which are on permanent display in local museums.

Upon their return, the artists fulfilled the purpose of their mission by painting the beautiful murals on the interior walls of the Salt Lake Temple. Those murals have helped to convey the truths taught in the temple to many thousands of Church members.

Some of the most profound spiritual messages can be found in artistic works that are overtly religious. For those of you who are here in the Joseph Smith Building today, I invite you to take a moment as you leave to view the statue of Joseph Smith's vision in the atrium just to the west of this auditorium. Joseph is portrayed gazing upward toward his vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ. At the statue's unveiling ceremony, Elder Eyring said:

I hope that as young people through the generations see this statue, they will realize that though the building is named for Joseph Smith, and though the statue portrays him, this piece of art represents that moment when Joseph learned there was a way for the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ to be unlocked fully. Because of what Joseph saw and what began at this moment, the Savior was able, through this great and valiant servant and through others that He sent, to restore power and privilege. That power and privilege allows us, and all who will live, to have the benefit of Jesus Christ's Atonement work in our lives. Joseph Smith is looking up at the figures not shown. [Henry B. Eyring, dedicatory address for Avard T. Fairbanks' statue *The Vision*, 17 October 1997. Quoted from the text of the speech on a plaque near the statue in the Joseph Smith Building, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.]

In music we find some of the greatest expressions of the gospel. Although I have listened to it many times, Handel's *Messiah* continues to instill in me profound gratitude and admiration for the Savior and His Atonement. Imagine how Handel must have felt moments after writing the "Hallelujah Chorus," when he is reported to have said, "I did think I did see all heaven before me, and the great God Himself!" (quoted by Jay Welch in program notes for the recording of Handel's *Messiah* by the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (New York: Columbia Records)).

Artistic works, however, do not have to be overtly religious to inspire us. Great works of music, drama, film, dance, literature, and visual art can teach principles of love, morality, purity, and respect for God’s creation. A painting by John Hafen that hangs in the Church Museum of History and Art in Salt Lake City shows a young girl dressed in white standing among hollyhocks in bloom amidst a sea of green. Although the painting does not depict a religious subject, it exalts the innocence and purity of childhood in the midst of God’s creation.

I have always felt a deep reverence for the intricacy and beauty of nature. While I was an undergraduate student at BYU, I fell in love with biology, especially with genetics. As I studied the biological and physical sciences, I came to view the creation of life in a much broader sense than before. I now view creation not as something that occurred long ago but as a process that continues today in which we are given the sacred privilege to participate. Through the study of biology we are able to gain a glimpse of how the earth and all of life was, and still is, created. Several scientists have shared this sense of wonder as they have spoken of the forest canopy as a great cathedral or of microbes, plants, and animals as God’s creations with whom we share the earth. For example, Francis Collins, who is the director of the human genome project, one of the greatest scientific undertakings in history, said:

When something new is revealed about the human genome, I experience a feeling of awe at the realization that humanity now knows something only God knew before. It is a deeply moving sensation that helps me appreciate the spiritual side of life, and also makes the practice of science more rewarding. A lot of scientists really don’t know what they are missing by not exploring their spiritual feelings.

[Quoted by Gregg Easterbrook, “Science and God: A Warming Trend?” *Science* 277, no. 5328 (15 August 1997): 892]

A remarkable number of prominent scientists, both past and present, have expressed their own religious feelings, and I think it is appropriate at this university to share some of their writings. As a geneticist, I like to use Gregor Mendel, the founder of modern genetics who was also an Augustinian monk, as an example of an objective scientist who was fully committed to his faith. I have my students read Mendel’s classic work because it is such a superb example of scientific experimentation and objectivity. However, Mendel also left us some powerful religious writings. The following is an excerpt from an English translation of a poem he wrote:

*Wherefore was man created?
Wherefore did, into a pinch of dust,
An unfathomably exalted Being
Breathe the breath of life? Assuredly
The Most High, who so wisely
Shaped the round world, and who
For his own sage purpose fashioned the worm out
of dust
Created man also
For some definite reason. Assuredly
The capacities of the mind
Prove that for it a lofty aim
Is reserved. . . .
But unfading are the laurels of him
Who earnestly and zealously strives
To cultivate his mind,
Who with the full light of his understanding
Seeks and finds the mysterious depths of knowledge,
Of him in whose development the germ
Of glorious discovery implants itself.*

[In Hugo Iltis, *Life of Mendel*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1966), 36–37]

As we study the sciences, we are studying the details of creation. The words of Fyodor Dostoevsky from his classic work of literature *The Brothers Karamazov* summarize well the message of my devotional:

*Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. [Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, in Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990), 52:175]*

As you can now see, this statue on which I am working is of Christ, the creator of the earth and all of life. In the time available for this devotional, I can do little more than a brief sculptural sketch, but I hope the visual message of this demonstration has been memorable for you. I would like to conclude with a few words about the Savior. On January first of this year, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve published their testimony entitled *The Living Christ*. Speaking of Him, they wrote:

He was the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New. Under the direction of His Father, He was the creator of the earth. "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). . . . His gospel was a message of peace and goodwill. He entreated all to follow His example. . . .

We bear testimony, as His duly ordained Apostles—that Jesus is the Living Christ, the immortal Son of God. He is the great King Immanuel, who stands today on the right hand of His Father. He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world. His way is the path that leads to happiness in this life and eternal life in the world to come. God be thanked for the matchless gift of His divine Son. [The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1 January 2000)]

Notice that in this statue Christ's eyes are turned upward, representing Christ as He offered the great intercessory prayer just before His betrayal and crucifixion, as recorded in chapter 17 of the Gospel of John. I conclude this devotional with the first verses of that chapter:

These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee:

As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. [John 17:1–3]

I bear you my testimony that He lives, in His holy name, amen.