

## Reflections on the BYU Experience

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As I contemplated my theme for this talk, I was reminded of a clever cartoon that was published in the *Daily Universe* when I was a BYU student in the 1970s. It illustrated a part of our culture—the BYU experience—that we continue to share in 2005.

The scene is the BYU campus. A BYU security officer is standing over a student who has been bloodied and bruised, apparently by several stones that lie next to him. The officer is dutifully taking careful notes. The caption reads, “And then I said . . . he who is without sin, let him cast the first stone.”

My recollection is that Elder Dallin H. Oaks, then president of BYU, referred to this cartoon in a devotional address. He regarded it as one of his favorite humorous entries in the *Daily Universe*. He reminded us that although we are not perfect, the standards we set at BYU are so unusual, even peculiar, that it’s easy to let a spirit of self-righteousness appear on our campus. He also reminded us that it’s all right to laugh at ourselves occasionally as we strive to live these standards.

I have good memories of my BYU experience as a student—ward activities, teaching at the MTC, intramural football games, challenging business classes, and weekly devotionals here in the Marriott Center. But I didn’t

really appreciate what BYU offered until I had graduated and left the campus.

Since returning to BYU in 1994, I have started to understand the unique opportunities offered to students that make this campus different from our peer institutions.

In a campus devotional seven years ago, President James E. Faust made the following statement:

*Brigham Young University is a continuing experiment on whether an institution—the majority of whose trustees are prophets, seers, and revelators—can continue to be true to its trust by the world’s changing standards and yet be a first-class university academically. [James E. Faust, “Learning for Eternity,” *BYU 1997–98 Speeches* (Provo: BYU, 1998), 75–76]*

We indeed are part of a grand experiment as we study, work, and live on this campus. This morning I will discuss three observations about the BYU experience. Hopefully, as we understand these points, we can appreciate and even enrich this experience we share together.

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*Brad W. Farnsworth was administrative vice president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 8 February 2005.*

Observation number one: Sacred tithing funds given by faithful members of the Church are used to support the operation of this university. I believe this first observation is one of the reasons why this campus is holy ground as we consecrate our efforts to your education and preparation for life after graduation. The Gospel of Mark in the New Testament teaches the doctrine of the widow's mite:

*And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much.*

*And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.*

*And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury:*

*For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living. [Mark 12:41–44]*

In 1985 President Gordon B. Hinckley, then second counselor in the First Presidency, shared a devotional message on this campus entitled “The Widow’s Mite.” Let me summarize some of his thoughts from that talk. President Hinckley began:

*Some time back a small, bent, elderly woman came to my office. For the purpose of this talk I shall call her Mary Olsen, although that is not her name and she would not wish her identity disclosed. She said she had just come over from the temple. She took from her purse her checkbook. She said that she had been a widow for many years, that life had not been easy for her. She had a great love for the Lord and his Church. She had faithfully paid her tithing all her life. She felt she would not live much longer. Now, she said, she felt she ought to be doing more to help than she had done. In a hand shaky with age, she wrote a check for \$5,000. She handed it to me. I noted the address where she lived. It was in a poor neighborhood. I confess that as I looked at that*

*check tears came into my eyes. I have held many larger checks than that in my hands. But as I held the check of this widow woman, I was almost overcome by her faith and the seriousness of the trust that was mine in the expenditure of her consecrated contribution.*

*. . . She gives her offering to the Lord, and she is then released from responsibility. The responsibility then becomes mine — and yours!*

*What might she expect of you [at this institution, which is supported by tithing funds]?*

President Hinckley then shared five points that he believed this faithful widow, Mary Olsen, would expect of you as students of Brigham Young University:

*First, [you will have] a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation [for] the sacred funds of the Church [that are appropriated to operate this university]. . . .*

*Second, [you will] save, protect, and do all you can to preserve these remarkable facilities that have cost so much. . . .*

*Third, . . . you will experience an increase in faith and a strengthened knowledge of the things of God, and, more particularly, of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .*

*Fourth, . . . many of you will find your companions here. . . .*

*Fifth, . . . you will better qualify yourselves to fill positions of responsibility in the world of which you will become a part. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Widow’s Mite,” *BYU 1985–86 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo: BYU, 1986), 10–11]*

I’ve read this talk by President Hinckley several times. I often reflected upon the Mary Olsens whom I have met in my life:

- A poor widow in Argentina who lived in a humble house made of cinder-block walls and a simple tile floor. She was faithful in paying her Argentine mites, and the Spirit of the Lord was present in her home.

- A six-year-old boy who came to his bishop sitting on the stand before sacrament meeting and handed him a tithing envelope. As the bishop felt the few coins in the envelope, he shook the young boy's hand. The young boy looked into the bishop's eyes and seemed to say, "Be careful with this money. This is a lot of money to me."
- A father and mother sitting in the bishop's office committed to pay a full tithe so they could return to the temple some time in the future. As they gave the bishop an envelope with their first payment, their eyes seemed to cry out, "Please reassure us that this is right. We barely have enough money for our young family. Are you sure the Lord will bless us?"

All of us know one or two Mary Olsens in our lives. They are the humble and faithful members of the Church who, despite their want, do cast in all that they have, "even all [their] living" (Mark 12:44), because they love the Lord and obey His commandments. Such are the funds that are used to operate this university.

Do we really recognize and appreciate the sacrifices of Mary Olsen and other faithful members of the Church that allow you students to participate in the BYU experience?

President Hinckley's invitation applies to all of us—students as well as faculty and staff. We should have a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation for the widow's mite. When I am filled with gratitude and appreciation, a spirit of humility is invited into my heart. I am then more ready to be taught and to serve with the Spirit of the Lord.

Although the amount of tithing funds appropriated to the university is significant, it's not as important for us to know the amount of such appropriations as it is for us to follow President Hinckley's counsel and receive these funds with "a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation." I'm pleased to work with

colleagues, both in Salt Lake City and on this campus, who have taught me over the years how to translate this gratitude and appreciation into an efficient use of funds. So what can you students do to show your gratitude and appreciation for these sacred funds?

Talking to full-time missionaries in the Washington, D.C., area, President Hinckley stated, "If each of you is the kind of missionary your mother thinks you are, then you are all right" (Gordon B. Hinckley, *News of the Church*, "President Hinckley Visits U.S. President, Others During Busy Period," *Ensign*, February 1996, 74). In a similar way, if each of you is the kind of student your mother or even your bishop thinks you are, then you are probably showing gratitude and appreciation for these sacred funds.

I firmly believe that the Brethren want BYU to offer you, the students, an excellent education. I also believe that adequate funds will always be available to fulfill that objective if we are wise and unselfish with our use of resources on this campus.

May I comment briefly on one other point in President Hinckley's talk: He encouraged the students in 1985 to save, protect, and preserve the facilities on this campus. I believe his counsel continues to be heeded by many of you students today. Let me relate a recent experience.

I was walking toward the Wilkinson Student Center last summer. A group of visitors had finished eating lunch, but not all of their garbage had been properly disposed of. A pile of trash was conspicuously in the patio area and needed to be removed. As I reached down to grab an armful of boxes, I noticed a BYU coed next to me picking up the rest of the boxes. She looked at me and said with a smile, "Some of our visitors don't appreciate what it takes to keep this campus clean." I think her mother and bishop would be pleased with the kind of student she had become. Her actions showed the gratitude and appreciation she had for the tithing funds allocated to BYU.

As a matter of fact, a letter to the editor in this morning's *Daily Universe* reads:

*BYU is a phenomenal school—our facilities, faculty, and students are among the best in the world. What a privilege it is to attend such a school and receive a higher education. I personally hope that there is a spirit of gratitude in every student's heart and mind for the chance to be here. —Adam Olsen*

My second observation is that it is a great blessing to have prophets, seers, and revelators lead the board of trustees of this institution. President J. Reuben Clark Jr. stated:

*Some of the General Authorities have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people. ["When Are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?" address delivered 7 July 1954 for the summer session of seminary and institute teachers at Brigham Young University, 9; also reprinted as "When Are Church Leaders' Words Entitled to Claim of Scripture?" *Church News*, 31 July 1954, 9; quoted in Boyd K. Packer, "The Twelve Apostles," *Ensign*, November 1996, 6]*

Elder Charles A. Callis of the Quorum of the Twelve once remarked to Harold B. Lee that

*the gift of discernment was an awesome burden to carry. To see clearly what is ahead and yet find members slow to respond or resistant to counsel or even rejecting the witness of the apostles and prophets brings deep sorrow. [In Boyd K. Packer, "The Twelve Apostles," *Ensign*, November 1996, 7]*

Do we truly recognize and appreciate the blessing of having prophets, seers, and revelators preside over Brigham Young University? Are we prepared to listen with an open heart

and apply their counsel in our lives without hesitation?

BYU's board of trustees currently consists of the First Presidency (who are the board officers), three members of the Quorum of the Twelve, one of the Presidents of the Seventy, and the presidents of the General Relief Society and Young Women. Through my assignment at BYU I have occasionally attended meetings of the board of trustees or interacted with board members in other settings. It is my strong conviction that these men and women understand all aspects of higher education and, through their love for the young adults of the Church, are very wise and diligent in this part of their stewardship. We will be blessed both individually and as an institution as we listen to and follow the counsel of our board of trustees, which is led by prophets, seers, and revelators.

My third observation relates to why we faculty and staff elect to work at BYU. Those of us who serve on this campus do so because of the love we have for you students. Universities are traditionally known for developing close and personal relationships between a professor and a student—referred to as student mentoring. BYU is no exception to this tradition, but it also has the spirit of the gospel on its campus to enrich mentoring experiences.

When you graduate you most likely will have a professor or perhaps a job supervisor who has made a difference in your life—not only in your academic preparation but in broadening your perspective of life, enlightening your knowledge of the gospel, and preparing you for leadership positions in the future.

As a student I was blessed with caring mentors in the School of Business, the MTC, and my BYU ward. One such mentor was H. Verlan Andersen, who taught business law. I took my business law classes from him, and we had several good discussions in his office.

Ten years after I graduated, I ran into Elder Andersen, then a General Authority, in Salt Lake City. I was a new bishop, and we began to

chat. He invited me to his office. He then took an hour out of his busy schedule to offer counsel for me as a new bishop, young father, and former student. He had not forgotten me, and he remained interested in my success.

Do you have a professor or job supervisor who is your mentor and friend as part of your BYU experience? Are you taking the initiative to develop such relationships with these individuals who serve professionally on this campus?

The Aims of a BYU Education suggest different ways in which student mentoring will offer you a total BYU experience: “A BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service” (*The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* [Provo: BYU, 1996], 3). Our success as mentors is chiefly measured by your happiness and success as you strive to live gospel principles.

Let me offer an example of how the Aims of a BYU Education affect the daily operations of this university. To my knowledge BYU has more student employees than any other institution of higher education in the United States. This is by design. Not only does it provide you students the opportunity to pay for your education, but it also allows you to develop and nurture a work ethic, leadership skills, a sense of responsibility, and an appreciation for the widow’s mite that we’ve previously discussed. During the fall and winter semesters we employ more than 12,000 students to operate this campus as library assistants, grounds workers, custodians, secretaries, research assistants, tutors, cafeteria workers, and computer technicians. And the list goes on.

This does not go unnoticed by visitors to our campus. Each year quality assessment reviews are done in selected departments across campus, including my area of responsibility. These reviews include an individual from another university who is expert in that area. The outside observers often suggest that we are using

student employees in positions that should be staffed by full-time professionals.

“You’re asking these young people to do jobs that would be done better by those who are professionally trained and who can offer continuous service over many years,” they suggest.

“You’re right,” I usually respond, “but we have a different mission at BYU that offers a complete educational experience for our students. We believe that with proper training and supervision, our students can provide a service to this campus that will enhance our operation while allowing them to build their character.”

Having such a large labor force of young adults on this campus does not go without challenges. However, as we reflect upon the mission statement of Brigham Young University—“to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life,” (*Mission and Aims*, 1)—and as we listen to that still small voice within us, we remember the love that we have for you students and pledge to ourselves that we will exercise a little more patience, provide a little more training, and still strive for excellent service to this campus community.

If you are a student employee, are you taking full advantage of the mentoring opportunities with your supervisor?

With your permission I would like to share a personal experience that helped me appreciate the joy of associating with you students.

As I began my fourth year working on this campus, I felt a hollow commitment to my job. Everyone else on campus seemed thrilled to associate with the students. However, my experiences consisted of contact with those students who were upset because they wanted an exception to policy or were having problems with part of my area of responsibility. Looking back, I realize this was a very small group of students, but they were the only ones with whom I had personal interaction.

I mentioned my feelings to a good friend, Larry Dahl, who was then associate dean of Religious Education. He replied, “Brad, what

you need to do is teach a freshman Book of Mormon class.”

I remember reacting, “That’s just what I need—another thing to do.”

But after prayerful reflection, I accepted his invitation and taught my first class the winter semester of 1998. I have taught this class every winter semester since. I’m beginning to appreciate the joy and satisfaction that comes from associating with you wonderful students.

In my first semester of teaching we were studying 3 Nephi 11, and, as we had done all semester, the students were taking turns reading aloud verses from our assigned reading. As you know, chapter 11 of 3 Nephi records the appearance of the resurrected Savior on the American continents. As we approached verse 15, it was the turn of a young freshman girl to read. I hardly knew her voice since she sat in the back and was too shy to participate. She began reading:

*And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record. [3 Nephi 11:15]*

Then she paused. She could no longer read. There was silence in the class. The other students and I recognized that the peaceful spirit of the Holy Ghost was manifesting to her that what she was reading really did happen. Our Savior did appear in the Western Hemisphere. The Book of Mormon was true.

Several weeks later I was grading the final exams. I came to the exam of this young freshman girl. On the last page she had written: “Brother Farnsworth, thanks for asking me to read in 3 Nephi that day.”

I recognize that such experiences happen continually on this campus because of dedicated faculty and staff who enjoy their association with you students.

Our board of trustees also has great love for the students of this institution. Perhaps their greatest display of love for you is to have one of their Brethren, a General Authority, preside over Brigham Young University. It is with no small sacrifice that the leaders of the Church assign to this campus one of their most able leaders when there are so many pressing needs in the operation of the worldwide Church. I hope that we show our appreciation for this love by praying for our president, Elder Cecil O. Samuelson, and his family during this wonderful but challenging assignment.

May I share a lesson from the Book of Mormon? The prophet Alma and his missionary companions were faced with many afflictions. But these afflictions “were swallowed up in the joy of Christ” because Alma “prayed in faith” (Alma 31:38).

In a similar way we can lighten the load of our president and can lighten the loads of each other as we offer prayers of faith and express gratitude for the opportunity to learn and to serve on this campus. I believe that a BYU education, now extended through three separate campuses, is like no other academic experience.

In summary, my three observations of the BYU experience are:

- Receiving sacred funds to operate this campus places us on holy ground.
- Prophets, seers, and revelators lead the board of trustees of Brigham Young University to show us the way if we are prepared to listen to and follow their counsel.
- Those of us who work at BYU are here because of our love for you students and our desire to prepare you for future service throughout the world.

I pray that our hearts will be filled with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation for these spiritual blessings as we share the BYU experience. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.