

Learning for Eternity

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President Bateman, distinguished faculty, students—brothers and sisters all—coming to Brigham Young University is always a pleasure for many reasons. One is the special spirit on this campus. Another is the friendly, understanding atmosphere that obtains between students and faculty. A few years ago the *Reader's Digest* printed the following account from a student at this university:

During my first semester at Brigham Young University, I forgot to take a science test. Panic-stricken, I approached the professor to explain my predicament. He looked at me sternly and asked, "Were you ill?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, did you have a family emergency?" he questioned.

"No," I repeated.

He tried once more. "Are you a freshman?" I nodded. "Good enough," he said and handed me the make-up slip. [Campus Comedy, Reader's Digest, October 1992, p. 7]

You young people live in a time of peace and tranquillity. As I began my college career, we were faced with the ominous clouds of the terrible Second World War. You are also enjoying a time of economic prosperity.

We were just emerging from the Great Depression.

I congratulate you students. You have the high honor of attending what a recent article in *Insight* magazine described as the most politically incorrect university in America (as reported in "BYU Praised for Political Incorrectness by Magazine," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 25 September 1997, p. D3). As I understand it, this dubious honor was earned because this institution knows its purpose. It has not strayed from its mission by following the popular sophistries of education. The article stated that prestigious schools such as Harvard and Yale, which were founded as religious institutions of learning, have "altered their academic makeup to fit notions of what's fashionable in education" ("BYU Praised," p. D3). In education, being politically correct implies following the philosophy of the current trendsetters.

I have said repeatedly that Brigham Young University is a continuing experiment on

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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. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said it well: “The ‘watchmen on the tower’ cry out for those who will integrate, coalesce, clarify, and give both order and rank to important human knowledge” (“A School in Zion,” BYU Annual University Conference address, August 1988, p. 27). At Brigham Young University the secular must be taught in a spiritual context. Indeed, as President Spencer W. Kimball points out, “The secular without the foundation of the spiritual is but like the foam upon the milk, the fleeting shadow” (TSWK, p. 390).

Each of you, on a personal level, has the same challenge that exists for the university. You need to know the purpose for your being. Each of you needs to ask yourself, Why am I here on earth? Why am I at this university rather than at any other university, one that will teach only secular learning? Am I here to enjoy a scintillating social life? Is it to support the athletic program? Is it to find a companion? The answer is, You are here to learn for eternity.

A year ago, when President Gordon B. Hinckley was on this campus, he admonished:

If this university meets the purpose for which it is maintained, then you must leave here not alone with secular knowledge but, even more important, with a spiritual and moral foundation that will find expression to improve the family, the community, the nation, even the world of which you will be a part. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Up for Truth,” *BYU 1996–97 Speeches* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1997), p. 23]

Learning and education have always been the hallmark of our people. Every president of the Church, beginning with President Joseph Smith, has zealously fostered, encouraged, and

supported the cause of education. The reason for this emphasis is that education equates with our eternal well-being. In a First Presidency message dated March 26, 1907, the Brethren said:

To the Latter-day Saints, salvation itself, under the atonement of Christ, is a process of education. That knowledge is a means of eternal progress, was taught by Joseph Smith:—It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.—A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge.—The glory of God is intelligence. [Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, comp. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:146–47]

In the law school I attended not far from here, our dean told us we were studying the law so that we could learn to think straight. He said the law would change, but if we could learn to think critically by separating the wheat from the chaff, we would be better qualified to become effective advocates. Brigham Young stated it better: “Education is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world’s work, and the power to appreciate life” (Brigham Young, quoted by George H. Brimhall in “The Brigham Young University,” *Improvement Era*, vol. 23, no. 9 [July 1920], p. 831).

Think Clearly

Thinking clearly does not mean we can think “by infection, catching an opinion like a cold” (John Ruskin, in *Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*, ed. Evan Esar [New York: Paperback Library, Inc., 1949], p. 154). Thinking clearly is the ability to discern things that matter most and separate them from things of less importance. We can think more clearly when we:

1. Take an interest in current events: listen to the news or read a newspaper.
2. Discuss ideas with one another, even in the courses you are taking! The Internet can be fascinating, but so can a conversation with a

live person with whom you can exchange original thoughts.

3. Read good literature. This is, of course, expected of English majors, but for the rest of us good literature is just as important. It improves our vocabularies as well as our minds.

4. Keep our bodies healthy. Go for a walk and look at the trees, the birds, the flowers, the mountains, and the sky. This campus has one of the most beautiful settings in the world. Enjoy the view along with your exercise. A healthy body promotes a healthy mind.

Questions—in the sense of searching, not doubting—seem to be essential for learning. They are a primary means of expressing curiosity, the self-motivation to search for knowledge. Indeed, many of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s revelations

came in response to enquiry, in response to prayer. “Ask and ye shall receive;” “Seek and ye shall find,” seems to have been the principle on which the Lord has acted with reference to giving revelations. [HC 2:210, footnote]

Such inquiries may be considered as a condition precedent to his receiving revelations. [HC 5:xxxiv]

In today’s jargon, thinking clearly is often characterized as “prioritizing.” But clear thinking means more than that: it is choosing the better part, not the one that will bring the most money or fame. It also means making the best use of our time. Let us not be like he who said: “I never put off till tomorrow what I can possibly do the day after” (Oscar Wilde, in *Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*, p. 191).

Act Well

We have all heard the axiom that knowledge is power. But President Stephen L Richards put this into proper perspective when he said:

Knowledge is power, today and always, but it is power only when it is put into service. The acquisi-

*tion of all the world’s learning is really futile, except in application. The best in life is that which is given to serve the noblest causes and the highest purposes. [Stephen L Richards, *Where Is Wisdom?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1955), p. 408]*

What kind of a heart will each of you have when you graduate from Brigham Young University? Graduating from this distinguished school with any degree is a notable achievement. Having higher degrees can promote a sense of pride. All of you are anxious to receive your degrees, particularly a doctor of philosophy. This is a high academic achievement. A newly degreed professor at the University of Southern California reported that “a friend had called his home and asked, ‘Is the doctor in?’ The professor’s ten-year-old son replied, ‘Yes, but he’s not the kind who can do you any good’ ” (Campus Comedy, *Reader’s Digest*, April 1997, p. 48.)

Dealing with lofty issues should not generate pride, which is an enemy to learning spiritual things. The training of the heart comes by and through the Holy Spirit. Reaching for eternity requires an understanding heart. We can all learn from the great Solomon, who, when he was made the king of Israel, said:

I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. . . .

Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people? [1 Kings 3:7, 9]

This so pleased the Lord that he said, “I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee” (1 Kings 3:12).

The patient training of the heart will also lead us to acts of kindness. You may have heard the old ditty: “Kindness is to do and say

the nicest things in the nicest way.” This means being courteous at home to roommates and in the classroom to other students. I mentioned the *patient* training of the heart because right now with all our road construction we need to be more patient and consciously courteous while driving on the busy highways. You can make a difference. Do not let yourselves be drawn into road rage. Slow down. Play a tape of pleasant music and remember what the Savior taught: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34).

Sometimes we get too caught up with our cars. I remember reading about Ty, a young man in Seattle who was preparing to go to college:

[He] *pleaded with his parents to let him take his car to school. They consented, with words of caution about driving around town when he should be studying. But they needn't have worried.*

After a few weeks on campus Ty called home for some supplies. His mother said she'd send him money. "You can drive to the shopping center and get what you need," she said, "and we'll save the shipping cost."

"What!" exclaimed Ty. "And lose my parking space?" [Campus Comedy, Reader's Digest, June 1994, p. 123]

Appreciate Life

Enjoy what you do whether it be studying for a degree, earning a living, or raising a family—or all three! In the rush of campus life we are prone to a kind of blindness that keeps us from appreciating our full opportunities. In Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, the heroine, Emily, recognizes too late some of those simple but beautiful blessings that she had taken for granted all of her life. Emily dies in childbirth, but before passing on, she is given the opportunity to relive one day of her life. She chooses her twelfth birthday and is able to watch herself and others as they were on that day. It is then that she realizes the precious beauty of the

ordinary things of everyday life—clocks ticking, sunflowers, the old white fence that once stood around her house, food, freshly ironed dresses, hot baths, sleeping, and waking up.

At last the magnificent beauty of all she had barely seen as she lived overwhelmed her, and she cried out:

Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute? [Thornton Wilder, Our Town (1938), act 3]

The clocks tick as you pursue your studies at Brigham Young University. This should be a happy time as you move forward, tooling up for your working lives. Don't forget to laugh at the silly things that happen. Humor is built very largely upon incongruities and contrasts. It is a powerful force for good when used with discretion. Its physical expression, laughter, is highly therapeutic.

To summarize, President Brigham Young's statement really is talking about internalizing what we learn, going from what we *know* to what we *do* to what we *are*. All our learning and living should prepare us for leadership in the Church and the community. As President Hugh B. Brown pointed out:

Every doctrine has its associated duty, . . . every truth has its task. The gospel when the Master first proclaimed it, was not intended primarily for preaching—it was intended for action. . . .

No man can truly assimilate Christianity by impression alone, there must be expression as well. ["Service," Relief Society Magazine, December 1969, p. 888]

For 25 years I have been privileged to walk with and sit at the feet of the prophets almost daily. Some have excelled academically or in the business world. Others achieved distinction in medicine, in science, or in law. Yet they are all men of great humility and wisdom.

They bear witness, as expressed by our late President Howard W. Hunter, that

belief must be realized in personal achievement. Real Christians must understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a gospel of belief; it is a plan of action. His gospel is a gospel of imperatives, and the very nature of its substance is a call to action. [CR, April 1967, p. 115]

Do not become puffed up with pride as you progress in secular learning.

My challenge to you is to learn to think spiritually. That is far harder to master than learning by rote the many facets of secular education. I emphasize spiritual thinking because secular learning is ever changing. Even the so-called exact sciences, with some exceptions, are changing. Spiritual knowledge and intelligence are unchanging and eternal.

Your purpose in being at Brigham Young University is to help you reach to eternity. The quest for eternity begins now, this year, this month, this day, this moment. You want to be able to compete as competent equals with others in your discipline.

As we think about what we will take into the eternities, it will only be our faith and our understanding and knowledge, both spiritual and temporal.

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. [D&C 130:18-19]

We do not want to arrive in the next world educationally bankrupt, though I am afraid I have a lot of chemistry and math to learn! I hope I will be a better student there. Also, I expect our teachers there will have enhanced abilities.

For many students in higher education, going to a university is a game, a self-defeating game. To them it is a process of cramming like the seagulls in pioneer times when the crops were threatened by crickets. The gulls came and devoured, then they would fly off to disgorge and return to devour again. Learning is more than cramming for tests. Education is more than bulimia at exam time.

I learned that in my own discipline of the law. Reading the cases and briefing them for possible recitation in the classroom is difficult, arduous, challenging work. You cannot learn the rules of law just by having a good heart. Some found that they could buy canned briefs as a shortcut to the laborious work of reading and briefing the cases. However, in an hour of need in the courtroom, they were apt to find themselves doing a disservice to their clients and embarrassing themselves. There is no simple substitute for the hard work of learning well the rules of law. And so it is with us. In the courtroom of life we need to have well-honed skills.

President Lorenzo Snow taught:

The whole idea of Mormonism is improvement—mentally, physically, morally, and spiritually. No half-way education suffices for the Latter-day Saint. He holds with Herbert Spencer that the function of education is to “prepare man for complete living,” but he also maintains that “complete living” should be interpreted “life here and hereafter.” Joseph Smith declared that the glory of God is intelligence, that a man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge, and that whatever principles of intelligence he attains to in this life, they will rise with him in the resurrection, giving him the advantage over ignorance and evil in the world to come. He taught that man by constantly progressing may eventually develop into a divine being, like unto his Father in Heaven. [Teachings of Lorenzo Snow (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), p. 27]

My dear young friends, we hope you are enjoying your years at Brigham Young University. As you grow older you will look back on this season of your life as one of the sweet experiences in your preparation for eternity. Please know that we have confidence in you. We pray for you. Only through the quality of your lives, your achievements, your faith, and devotion can you justify the expenditure of the widow's mite to provide this religious and secular education for you. I know of the heartache of thousands who are not so privileged. I have a beautiful, gifted, intelligent granddaughter who applied for admission to Brigham Young University and was not accepted because her grades were just a whisker below the minimum requirements. It made all of our family feel bad, but she has fully recovered. She has gone to another

university and is getting a good education, and she will be married to an exceptionally fine young man in the Salt Lake Temple in just a few weeks.

May our Heavenly Father bless you so that you will have the vision, an enlarged vision, of the purpose of your being at Brigham Young University and a full realization that you are in fact learning for eternity.

I bear witness of the divinity of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, of his atonement, of his resurrection, of the restoration of the gospel in our day and time by our great prophet of this dispensation, Joseph Smith. I also bear testimony of the divine leadership that is coming to this church through the present prophet of our day and time, President Gordon B. Hinckley. I leave you this witness and testimony in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.