

Harvey and Howard: Lessons from Two Grandfathers

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I appreciate the wonderful music today. Music always brings such a peaceful spirit to these devotionals. I feel blessed to be at Brigham Young University and would like to thank the Lord for helping me in so many ways as a faculty member here. I would also like to thank my wife and family for their support.

A month ago I woke up at 3:30 in the morning with one of those anxiety dreams in which it is a relief to know that it was only a dream. I dreamed that I had gathered with my family for this devotional address. It was 10:55 a.m., and no one was in the hall. I then realized in my dream that I was in the Joseph Smith Auditorium rather than in the Marriott Center. My family and I ran to the Marriott Center, where President Samuelson was waiting, tapping his watch. In my dream I was quite late for this address; all of the students had been sitting quietly for five minutes, waiting for me to arrive. Today I seem to be in the right place at the right time.

As I thought about a topic to share today, I thought of the purpose of devotionals. A devotional at BYU is a meeting in which we listen to a religious message that helps us lift our devotions to the Most High God. These messages are intended to lift our spirits and

inspire our minds as we progress in our journey toward eternal life. As I tried to listen to the Spirit and contemplate what message I could share that would be uplifting to the students and faculty at BYU, my thoughts kept returning to the same topic: the lessons I've learned from my two grandfathers, Harvey Fletcher and Howard Tonks. I mentioned this topic to some colleagues, and they all said, "I know who Harvey Fletcher is, but who is Howard?" This is the point of my talk.

I approach this topic knowing that we each have wonderful ancestors who have had experiences that teach us about life. I draw from these two people because of their influence in my life and because of the contrasts and similarities of their lives.

Harvey Fletcher

One of my grandfathers was Harvey Fletcher. He became very famous in the field of physics and acoustics, and a building at BYU was named after him. Let me tell you a little about him. He was born in Provo in 1884.

Thomas H. Fletcher was a BYU professor and associate chair of the Department of Chemical Engineering when this devotional address was given on 7 February 2012.

As a point of reference, the Brigham Young Academy was started in 1875. Harvey attended the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple in 1893 when he was nine. The Salt Lake Temple was dedicated by Wilford Woodruff. Harvey was born into a humble family, the fifth of eleven children. He and his family were great fishermen and would take a covered wagon to the Strawberry Valley to catch barrels full of fish. Utah was a very primitive place, and Harvey loved the outdoors. His first experience with physics was when he sat on top of what is now Y Mountain, viewed the puff of steam from the train locomotive, and timed the arrival of the sound of the whistle.

Lesson 1: Be “Both ‘Good’ and ‘Great’”

When Harvey was in Primary, he delivered a short memorized speech from the pulpit of the Provo Tabernacle. Brother Karl G. Maeser was in attendance, and before Harvey could sit down, Brother Maeser put his hand on Harvey’s head and said, “This boy will go a long way in the Church and among the leaders of men.”¹ He then said, “This little boy will one day be a great man.”² The boys Harvey’s age teased him about being a “great” man. A few years later, as president of his Aaronic Priesthood quorum, the bishop asked young Harvey to stand up and give a speech to the quorum. Harvey said that he was dumb-founded and stood nervously on one foot and then the other. Then he blurted out, “I would rather be good than great,” and sat down.³ About eighty years later he retold this story to the College of Engineering at BYU in the de Jong Concert Hall. Harvey mused, “It wasn’t such a bad speech after all, now that I think about it.”⁴ On Harvey’s gravestone the following message was engraved: “Both ‘good’ and ‘great.’”

So what is the lesson here? To me the lesson is that it is most important to be good. Here, to be good means to be a follower of the Savior Jesus Christ and His teachings as revealed

in the scriptures and through modern-day prophets. In part, this lesson is the message of the prophet Jacob:

But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God.

And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted.
[Jacob 2:18–19]

Lesson 2: Do Your Best in School and at Work

As a young man Harvey worked in the grocery business and saved enough money to enter Brigham Young Academy in the fall of 1900. There were two courses of study: commercial and normal. Harvey entered the normal curriculum because it was less expensive. He also said that he entered the academy mainly because his friends were there. He breezed through the mathematics classes, feeling almost like he had studied them before. One of the other classes that he took was physics. He said that he understood the subject by just sitting in the class, listening to the teacher, and plying him with questions; but Harvey did not do any of the assigned work. In particular, he did not keep a laboratory journal. As a result he obtained an F grade.

Harvey later wrote the following in his autobiography:

It was the first and only grade failure that I ever received. This jolted my pride, and I think from then on I took my education seriously. I repeated the course the next year, obtained the highest grade in the class, A+, and was given my first paid job in the school, an assistant in the laboratory. During the following three years I taught physics and mathematics courses while carrying the regular college courses. At the end of these three years I graduated with a B.S. degree. The next year I was a full-time teacher at a salary of \$750.00 a year.⁵

By the way, there were only six students in the graduating class of 1907. Harvey ended up becoming president of the American Physics Society later in life and was the first LDS scientist elected to the American Academy of Science (in 1935).

So what is the lesson here? Perhaps it is to do all of your homework in school. Perhaps it is to do your best the first time or you will have to do it over. I think that the real message is that you should do something that you really want to do, no matter how hard it is. Don't be discouraged if it does not work out the way you wanted at first. Keep trying with your best effort.

Bishop Victor L. Brown said the following:

At whatever level our children complete their formal schooling, they should have learned how important excellence is in all they do. There is always room at the top in any enterprise, and it is always crowded at the bottom. It doesn't matter what the field of endeavor—plumber, doctor, teacher, lawyer, farmer, carpenter, whatever—if our children learn early in their lives that they should do their very best, they will be eminently better prepared for the responsibilities of life.

We should teach our children the importance of schooling as a help in discovering how to think and to learn. They need to know, and we need to be reminded, that schooling is merely the formal part of education. Education should never stop, but should be a continuing activity throughout life.⁶

Lesson 3: Stay True to Your Testimony

Harvey went to the University of Chicago in 1908 and, under the direction of Robert Milliken, earned a PhD in 1911 by measuring the charge on an electron. Harvey returned to BYU to teach physics but received an offer to become a researcher in New York City at Western Electric, which was the premier physics lab in the country. This lab became the main research lab for AT&T. After several years of persistence from Western Electric, Harvey

asked BYU president George H. Brimhall for permission to go to Western Electric. BYU was struggling for prestigious faculty, and President Brimhall told Harvey not to go. However, soon after that Church president Joseph F. Smith attended a board meeting at BYU, and Harvey asked President Smith the same question. After listening to Harvey's story President Smith sat quietly in a thoughtful mood for a few minutes and then said:

Yes, I want you to go and take this position, but promise this, that you will keep your testimony strong and keep up your Church activities. If you do so you can do more good for the Church in New York City than you could do here at the BYU at the present time and you will be successful in your work. We need more Mormon boys to go out into the world of business and scientific research to represent our ideal of living.⁷

Harvey took his small family to New York City in 1916 and stayed there until he retired. He served first as president of the Manhattan Branch for ten years and then in the district presidency, stake presidency, and high council for thirty-five years. He was an emissary for the Church in the scientific world. He went around the world giving lectures about science and religion. Let me show a video recording of Harvey Fletcher bearing his testimony to the scientific world. This clip was made in the 1960s. [A film clip was shown with the following testimony:]

There's a great tendency in this day and age to think that as one becomes mature one must throw off his belief in God just as one discards his belief in Santa Claus. Just where would such a position leave us? We would be forced then to admit that this beautiful world of ours is not the product of design and planning but of mere, undirected chance, that your dearest friend is simply a jumble of atoms and molecules that just happened to land together to make a dear and loving personality. I, myself,

have a firm belief that God lives and that life has purpose for each of us living here upon earth. I did not obtain that faith through scientific reasoning but rather through spiritual experiences which are hard to explain to others but nevertheless are very real. True religion never hesitates to be held up by investigation by men of science.

So what is the lesson here? In my mind the lesson that I have learned is to stay true to your testimony. I have met many people in science who seem to ignore God because they cannot prove that He exists. There is no logical argument that can persuade someone that the Church is true. The only way to know of the existence of God is to have a personal revelation through the Holy Ghost, as explained in Moroni 10:5: “And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.”

Howard Tonks

Now let me switch to talk about my other grandfather. His name was Howard Tonks. He was never famous. He was born in Morgan, Utah, in 1895. While Howard was still a child, his family moved to Victor, Idaho, and started a dairy and sheep farm. Victor is a small town on the Idaho side of the Teton Mountains near Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Victor is where the trains turned around because they could not make it over the pass to Jackson. Needless to say, in the early 1900s Victor was a very small place, even compared to Provo. Howard was the eighth of eleven children. His father raised sheep and dairy cows.

So what lessons did I learn from Howard, a person from such a small town who was raised on a farm?

Lesson 4: Serve Faithfully in Callings

Howard Tonks was called to serve a mission to Australia on November 17, 1916, by President Joseph F. Smith. It is interesting to me that this was the same year that President Smith told Harvey Fletcher to go to work in New York

City. Howard left his home in Victor, Idaho, on December 30, 1916, by train; reported at the Office of the First Presidency in Salt Lake City on January 3, 1917; and boarded a steamer in San Francisco on January 31, 1917, bound for Hawaii, then Pago Pago (Samoa), and finally Sydney, Australia. This was during World War I, and he saw some German battleships and merchant ships being held by the United States in Pago Pago. He finally arrived in Sydney on February 21, 1917 (a three-week voyage!).

Howard kept a brief journal of his mission experiences that is cherished by his family. Howard served in Melbourne and Perth. It was wartime, and many young men his age were being sent to Europe to fight in the trenches of World War I. He watched as thousands of Australian men were loaded onto ships to go to war. At first Howard was very lonely and a little discouraged. However, he learned to love the Australian and Maori people, and they learned to love him as he brought them the truths of the gospel.

Howard had to stay in Australia a little longer than the average missionary because of the war. Due to submarine danger there was a genuine concern for ships traveling the oceans. The armistice for World War I was signed in November 1918. Most of the ships were used to bring troops home from overseas, so Howard served until March 1920—a little over three years from when he began his mission. Let me show a photo from a preparation day in which the elders were having a little fun. [A photo was shown of Howard Tonks with several other missionaries.]

On my first trip to Australia to attend a scientific conference, I was able to read copies of some of Howard’s letters to former missionary companions who were still serving in Australia and New Zealand. These letters gave me a love for my grandfather and a love for my brothers and sisters in Australia.

So what is the lesson or lessons learned from Howard Tonks’ mission experiences?

First and foremost he was a great example of missionary service. This helped me have a determination to serve a mission. I learned that missions can be hard and that people are not always accepting of your beliefs. I also learned that while serving the Savior in a calling, you serve as hard as you can and do not worry about how long you serve in that calling. I had the privilege of serving in the Ecuador Quito Mission, and at the end I wished that I could have served three years instead of two.

Harvey and Howard

Lesson 5: Be Devoted to Your Spouse

I have to mention how Harvey and Howard met the girls that they eventually married.

Harvey was attending a stake conference meeting in the Provo Tabernacle and getting drowsy in the balcony. All of a sudden a rose came floating down and hit him in the head. He turned around, and three girls, who were sisters, were giggling. One had a red face, so he knew the culprit: Lorena Chipman. After the meeting he went up to her and asked if he could take her to the dance. She accepted. When he arrived to take her to the dance, all three girls were dressed up and ready to go, so he took all three. He married the girl that hit him with the rose. Now I am not advocating throwing roses at cute guys.

Harvey was good friends with his two sisters-in-law. One of these sisters, Fern, married Karl Eyring. Karl Eyring died early, and so did Harvey's wife. Harvey married his sister-in-law Fern when he was eighty-five and she was eighty, and they were married for twelve years. So in the end Harvey married two of those three giggling girls from the Provo Tabernacle.

My grandmother Firl Bagley was born in Charleston, Utah. Charleston is the small town at the far end of Deer Creek where you turn to go to Midway. She was the tenth of eleven children. Her family decided to move to Victor, Idaho, when she was young. Her mother was ill, and they left her in Salt Lake City to

recover. However, her mother died when Firl was four years old. Firl's dad could not take care of a farm and eleven kids by himself, so Firl was put in a foster home with a German couple. This couple raised her in Victor until she left to go to Sugar City to high school.

Howard met Firl in a very interesting way. Firl was in front of the church on a Sunday morning and noticed that a small child had fallen and scraped a knee. Firl reached her first, picked her up, and loved her. Howard was a young returned missionary with black curly hair, a beautiful smile, and a twinkle in his eye. He said to himself, "That girl is going to be my wife."⁸

So what is the lesson here? I don't think the lesson to be learned is to fall in love at first sight with just any person who catches your attention. However, I do think that the lesson is that when you do fall in love, make the commitment 100 percent. Both Howard and Harvey were sealed to their spouses in the temple of God, and they were very devoted husbands. If you are still looking for a spouse, pray that the Lord will guide you and let you know when it is right. If you have made a marriage covenant already to someone with whom you fell in love, stay in love and honor your covenant.

Lesson 6: Have a Positive Attitude

Perhaps the biggest lesson that I learned from Harvey Fletcher was to be personable to all people. Everywhere Harvey went he tried to be friendly to people. Even though he was widely recognized in the fields of acoustics, physics, and science, he was always known as Uncle Harvey to his associates. He never sought recognition—at least he never tried giving the impression that he was better than someone else. He always tried to be happy. Even in his later years, when slowed by a body getting older, he never complained about aches and pains. People at church would come up to him when he was in his nineties and say, "Uncle Harvey, how are you doing today?"

He would smile, shuffle his feet, and respond, “I can still dance!”

What a beautiful example to me of having a positive attitude and treating other people with respect.

Lesson 7: Be Humble and Try to Be Like Jesus

The biggest lesson that I have learned from Howard Tonks is to be humble and to be close to Jesus Christ. Howard worked hard on the sheep ranch and dairy farm. The climate in Victor, Idaho, is harsh, yet animals still have to be fed and cared for every day. Despite the hard, rugged work, Howard remained faithful to the Lord his whole life. He served on the high council in the Driggs Stake for close to twenty-five years. The stake president wanted Howard as a counselor, but there was no telephone line to Howard’s farm. Serving on the high council involved traveling long distances, sometimes in heavy snow using a team of horses and a sleigh. Traveling over the pass to Jackson in the winter was especially difficult.

Despite having little formal education, Howard was a student of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He loved the scriptures. He would often stand up in a Sunday School class or a priesthood meeting and give insight or correction on a gospel topic. He had a quiet reverence about him, and he inspired me to try to be closer to the Lord.

Howard developed Parkinson’s disease in his old age. He had been struck by lightning three times while working on the farm in Victor, which may have contributed to his disease. Most of my personal recollections of him are as an older man suffering from Parkinson’s disease. He still had the twinkle in his eye, but the black curly hair was thinned and gray. Whenever we spoke he was always interested in me and always cheerful. I never heard him complain about anything. He was always gentle and kind and seemed to be a very spiritual person. What a great example of trying to be like Jesus.

Summary

So these are my two grandfathers, Howard and Harvey. I hope that these stories were inspiring to you; they certainly are to me. Let me summarize the lessons learned from these stories:

1. Be “Both ‘Good’ and ‘Great’”
2. Do Your Best in School and at Work
3. Stay True to Your Testimony
4. Serve Faithfully in Callings
5. Be Devoted to Your Spouse
6. Have a Positive Attitude (“I can still dance!”)
7. Be Humble and Try to Be Like Jesus

I am sure that there are unique stories from your grandparents that are equally inspiring. Perhaps one of my messages today is to learn from our family histories. Both Howard and Harvey were born in large families in small towns. One became an internationally known scientist, bearing his testimony to large numbers of people throughout his life and while working in New York City. The other quietly served a mission, raised a family, worked hard on a farm in Victor, Idaho, and served the Lord with all of his heart whenever called. Perhaps in the eyes of the world one was great and one was relatively obscure. However, in the eyes of the Lord, I think that both were good. Both were valiant servants of our Lord Jesus Christ throughout their lives.

In the end, when we come before the Savior, the words that I would most like to hear would be “Well done, thou *good* and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21; emphasis added). It is my prayer that we can all strive to be *great* at what we do but *good* at who we are. I bear testimony that Jesus lives and that He loves us enough to give us His restored Church and His priesthood. I bear witness that He sees what is in our hearts and always invites us to be a little better. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Karl G. Maeser, quoted in Harvey Fletcher, *Autobiography of Harvey Fletcher* (Provo: H. Fletcher, ca. 1967), 39.

2. Edward L. Kimball, "Harvey Fletcher and Henry Eyring: Men of Faith and Science," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 74.

3. Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 39.

4. From a recording of a speech given by Harvey Fletcher to the BYU College of Engineering, 6 September 1979; at et.byu.

edu/~tom/family/Harvey_Fletcher/Talk-BYU; track 02.

5. Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 9–10.

6. Victor L. Brown, "Preparation for Tomorrow," *Ensign*, November 1982, 80–81.

7. Joseph F. Smith, quoted in Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 43.

8. "Bagley Family History," compiled and edited by Evelyn T. Ricks, Chloe H. Nelson, Willa Bagley, Myrle B. Hilton, and Rita B. Crapo (William Henry Bagley Family Organization, 1987), 110.