

The BYU Experience

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

Thank you, President Bateman, for that introduction. Thank you, Brother Wilberg, for that stirring music. It was wonderful. I think I'd like to be the drummer. Thank you, Ri Ho Nam. It's nice to hear from you again. I first met Ri Ho Nam in 1960 when he was a little fellow in Korea. Now he's a little fellow in Provo. We've had many interesting times together over there in the Land of the Morning Calm. I have a great regard for this, my friend Ri Ho Nam.

My beloved brethren and sisters, what a wonderful thing it is to look into your faces, of the thousands and thousands of you who are here this morning. Thank you for coming. You do us great honor by your presence. We're grateful for your lives, for your faith, for your love of the Lord, and for your desire to walk his way and be the kind of men and women that the Lord expects you to be. Thank you for the goodness of your lives.

What a wonderful time it is to be alive. What a wonderful time to be a student at this great university. There is peace in the world. We are closing the bloodiest century in the history of all mankind. There are a few skirmishes here and there, but no great cataclysmic wars. How thankful you ought to be for that fact. You are free to go forward with your lives. You

live at a time when perhaps there are greater career opportunities than at any other time in the history of the world. I commend you most warmly on your presence.

In a recent meeting of the board of trustees, members of the administration of the university spoke of ways to give a larger number of young people a taste of "the BYU experience."

I thought of that much after the meeting. The BYU experience? What is it? What is unique about attending this university in contrast with another?

I recently spoke on the campus of another university in this state. The paper reported there were 20,000 in attendance. I think that figure was exaggerated. But the fact is, there was a huge crowd. Most of them were institute students. They looked just the way you look. They were clean, well-groomed, and neatly dressed. They were eager and attentive. As high a percentage of them will be married in the temple as there will be of you. They were much better behaved than some few of you I saw on television the other night.

Gordon B. Hinckley was the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 4 November 1997.

Returning from my experience on this other Utah campus, I asked myself, “What does BYU have to offer that this school does not?” Perhaps we need to go beyond our neighbor universities with their strong institutes. We need to reach out across the nation and beyond and take note of what is happening on the campuses of America. We have some truly great institutions of learning in this nation. But in so many cases are found circumstances that are seriously disquieting. Many of you, I am sure, read of the student who recently died of over-drinking—binge drinking, as they called it. There have been other cases of this. We have coeducational dormitories on some campuses. There are many faculty members who, perhaps even boastfully, speak of a lack of belief in God as if that were the mark of a great scholar. There are other problems—so very many of them.

I have reflected much of late on the unique features of this Church university. I am not surprised that students from far and wide are trying to get in here. It is a tragedy that so many must be turned away. Sometimes I wish we could support a dozen institutions such as this. But we cannot, and the problem becomes more serious every year as we have in the Church an increasing number of young people.

What do you have here that for the most part is not found elsewhere? Is there any substance to this so-called BYU experience?

I think so. For instance, you have student wards and stakes. I do not know how many of you really appreciate the meaning of this. There is no competition to get into social fraternities, and yet there is every opportunity for sociality. Here every student stands on an equal footing in belonging to a student ward. That ward is presided over by a bishop—a man called by the spirit of prophecy and revelation with all the keys and the authority of a bishop in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He stands ready to listen to your problems, and you seem to have so very many of

them. He stands ready to advise and counsel under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit. Your bishop is your friend. He prays about you. He worries about you. He stands ready to help you at all times and in all circumstances. Further, you have elders quorums composed of young men of dedicated purpose. They stand ready to help and to assist in any way that they can.

In a recent severe storm, lightning struck the house next to my daughter’s place. Windows were blown out of some 23 homes in the neighborhood. It was not 30 minutes, with the rain still falling, before an elders quorum was going from house to house boarding up the shattered windows so that there could be some measure of comfort in each home.

One of those neighbors was not a member of the Church. She had come from Europe. She was of a different faith. Her windows were boarded up along with the others. She said to my daughter, “I cannot understand your Church. These young men were here immediately when I needed them. They seemed to come out of nowhere. No money was asked for or expected. I do not belong to your Church, but I was treated as though I did.”

You young women have a Relief Society, a remarkable organization of your own. The Sunday before last I attended a stake conference where a young woman, president of the Relief Society of a singles ward, spoke of service and the great opportunity afforded the young women in her ward. You have all of this. You have your own organization. You have able leaders to counsel you. You have those who will reach out to you to help you in your times of trouble and distress.

I believe you belong to the greatest brotherhood and sisterhood in the world. You are bound together by an endowment of one faith, one Lord, one baptism. You work together with appreciation and respect one for another. This is all part of the BYU experience.

You of this great institution have just to the east of you the house of the Lord, the beautiful Provo Temple. Many of you go there on a frequent basis. You have been there before, and you return again and again. You go very early in the morning before your classes start. You have this great and remarkable opportunity to work unselfishly in the interest of others while growing spiritually yourselves. This is another aspect of the BYU experience.

I want to add parenthetically that we do not encourage our young sisters necessarily to go to the temple unless they are being married or going on missions. This is a matter of choice that they must make after prayer and much deliberation, as well as discussion with their bishops and stake presidents.

You have the proscriptions and the prescriptions of the Word of Wisdom. Hence, drinking is not one of your problems. What a wonderful thing it is to have pleasant and happy associations without any inclination whatever to indulge in drinking or any related practice. And beyond this is the wondrous promise that you will receive treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures. This does not mean that you will necessarily be smarter in your normal studies. It does mean that the power of the Holy Ghost may distill upon you and bring to you an increased knowledge and understanding of the sweet and marvelous things of the Lord. This is another phase of the BYU experience.

You have a unique and dedicated faculty to teach you. They bring to this great responsibility the learning of all the ages of man, in a vast variety of fields of knowledge. They are, for the most part, dedicated Latter-day Saints, men and women who feel as much at home in the house of the Lord as they feel in the classrooms of this university. When all is said and done, it is not this elaborate campus that really counts. It is the faculty who teach you, who lead you, who encourage you, who help you find your way as you go forward with your studies. This,

again, is an element of the singular BYU experience.

Your studies will qualify you for your vocations. Time here will pass quickly, and you will soon be out in the world of work. You have a great variety of job opportunities from which to choose. I hope that you will choose well, that you will be happy in the work you will undertake for the remainder of your lives. I hope you will make a great contribution in the fields in which you serve. I hope you will distinguish yourselves as leaders, as workers with a great sense of loyalty and dedication. I hope your training at this university will endow you with an interesting and powerful sense of responsibility toward the world of which you will be a part. Your performance will reflect honor on your alma mater.

I hope that the BYU experience will cause you to take on those qualities that will make of you a true disciple of Jesus.

All of you are taking religion classes while you are here. I hope that you are gaining much more than a knowledge of the organization of the scriptures and such matters as that. I hope that you are developing a great desire to walk in the footsteps of the Master, to reach out to those in distress, to serve the Church with great faithfulness, and to serve your fellowmen in a spirit of love and consecration.

I hope the lessons of going the second mile, of the prodigal son, of the Good Samaritan—and all the other lessons of the Son of God who gave his life in a great offering of atonement—will motivate you and never leave you.

I hope that this university will give to you a great sense of tolerance and respect for others not of your faith. The true gospel of Jesus Christ never led to bigotry. It never led to self-righteousness. It never led to arrogance. The true gospel of Jesus Christ leads to brotherhood, to friendship, to appreciation of others, to respect and kindness and love.

Mr. Shimon Peres called on us last Wednesday in the Church Administration

Building. He is one of the elder statesmen of the world, the former prime minister of Israel. He has seen much of conflict and trouble in his time. He is a wise and able man who speaks with the spirit of a sage.

I asked him whether there was any solution to the great problems that constantly seem to divide the people of Israel and the Palestinians. He replied that of course there is. He said an interesting thing. As I recall, he said, “When we were Adam and Eve, we were all one. Is there any need for us to be divided into segments with hatred in our hearts one for another?”

He told a beautiful story that he said he got from a Muslim. The Muslim told of a Jewish rabbi who was conversing with two of his friends. The rabbi asked one of the men, “How do you know when the night is over and the day has begun?”

His friend replied, “When you look into the distance and can distinguish a sheep from a goat, then you know the night is over and the day has begun.”

The second was asked the same question. He replied, “When you look into the distance and can distinguish an olive tree from a fig tree, that is how you know.”

They then asked the rabbi how he could tell when the night is over and the day has begun. He thought for a time and then said, “When you look into the distance and see the face of a woman and you can say, ‘She is my sister.’ And when you look into the distance and see the face of a man and can say, ‘He is my brother.’ Then you will know the light has come.”

Think about that story for a minute. What a wonderful truth it tells.

Not long ago I was asked to speak at a convention of the Religion Newswriters of America. Following my talk I invited questions. I was asked, “What are you going to do when 15,000 or 20,000 Baptists visit you in Salt Lake City next summer and try to proselytize you?”

I replied, “We are going to welcome them. We are going to do everything we can to make them feel at home. These are our brethren and sisters. They accuse us of not being Christian. I hope that our people will try to show them, by the very manner in which they act, that we are truly disciples of the Lord.”

I said to these professional journalists, “As all of you know, we carry on a vast missionary program in the Church. But it is not argumentative. We do not debate. We, in effect, simply say to others, ‘Bring all the good that you have and let us see if we can add to it.’”

We have no worry about the strength of our doctrinal position. We need only explain it—not with vociferous argument, but in a quiet and friendly manner.

I hope that you will take from this university the habit of seeking knowledge and that this habit will never leave you for as long as you live. A truly educated man never ceases to learn. He never ceases to grow. I hope you young women, as you take upon yourselves the burden of rearing families, will never set aside your desire to acquire knowledge. I hope that you will read to your children. They will be blessed and you will be blessed if you do so. I hope that you will even read to your husbands. They need to be read to. I hope that you will read to yourselves.

Will you pardon me if I tell you about my father? When he was about the age that I am now, he was fully retired. But he was active. He lived in a rather simple but comfortable home in a rural area. He had an orchard around him and enjoyed giving away the fruit. The yard of his home included lawns and shrubs and trees. It had a rock wall about two feet high separating one level from another. Whenever the weather was good he would sit on the wall, an old hat on his head to shade his eyes from the summer sun. When we went to visit him I would sit beside him. With a little prompting he would talk of his life—of the time when as a boy he lived in Cove Fort. He would smile as

he told of the time that his brother found a loaded pistol in the telegrapher's office. The boys began fooling around, the pistol fired, and his brother shot my father in the leg.

His father sent to Beaver for the doctor. The doctor arrived hours later and tried to remove the ball with a darning needle. He only made the pain worse. Father, sitting on his wall, would lift his pant leg, feel the flesh of his leg, and say that the ball was still there.

The family moved from Cove Fort to Fillmore, and when Father was in his late teens he came here to Provo and enrolled in the Brigham Young Academy. He was a student of Karl G. Maeser, whom he came to know well. From here he went East to school. He then came back and taught here until the First Presidency of the Church asked him to move to Salt Lake City and preside over the business college, for which the Church had great plans.

He was an educator. He was a successful businessman. He presided over the largest stake in the Church, with more than 15,000 members. He served as a mission president and in many other capacities. And now he was retired, and he sat on his wall. He was a great reader with a wonderful library. He was an excellent speaker and writer. Almost to the time he died, just short of the age of 94, he read and wrote and contemplated the knowledge that had come to him.

I discovered that when he sat on the wall, hours at a time on a warm day, he would reflect on the things he had read from his library.

I think he grew old gracefully and wonderfully. He had his books with the precious treasures they contained of the thoughts of great men and women of all the ages of time. He never ceased to learn. As he sat on the wall he thought deeply of what he had read the night before. He acquired the habit as a student here

under Dr. Maeser. It was part of his BYU experience.

At times I almost envy him: time to read and time to ponder. What a blessing. He reminded me of leaves on the trees. When autumn comes with killing frost, the leaves change their color, and they give off a new beauty until they eventually drop to form a carpet on the ground.

Now, you are young, and why am I telling you of an old man and the wall on which he sat? I am telling you because I think it has a lesson for each of us. We must never cease to learn. We believe in eternal progression and that this life is a part of eternity to be profitably lived until the very end.

Now, my dear young friends, I have talked with you about the BYU experience as I sense it. I have spoken of a few of many things that are a part of it. It has or will become a part of you. You are involved in it. You are going through it. It should—it must—leave an everlasting impression upon you. It is scarcely perceptible most of the time. But it is nonetheless real. It should become an inseparable part of your very nature, something almost intangible but of great substance.

You might have gone to another school and received an excellent education. But you came here, and you were fortunate enough to be accepted. You came because you wanted the BYU experience, although perhaps you could not define it. Having gained it, never lose it. Cultivate it in your lives and hold its very essence until you grow old and gray. Even then you can sit on the wall on a warm summer day and think of the things you are still learning in light of the great experience you had as a young man or a young woman.

God bless you. I leave my love and blessing upon you and my testimony of this great work in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.