

Strengthening One Another in the Community of Saints

GARY R. HOOPER

It is a pleasure to have an opportunity to talk with you. I have planned my remarks in the spirit of Nephi of old—to speak with “plainness,” that I might be understood (see 2 Nephi 31:2–3).

I also hope my interpretations of situation and scripture are obvious and straightforward. An incident in my own life may explain what I mean.

A few years ago I lived in Blacksburg, Virginia, a university town in the Appalachian plateau area. I went to renew my driver’s license at the Department of Motor Vehicles. As part of the process the clerk asked me to look into a box on the counter to take an eye test. I looked, and she asked me to read what I saw. There were a number of lines of letters and numbers I could read, so I took a bit of time trying to think of where to start. As I hesitated, I heard a bored voice say, “Out loud, please.”

Well, she thought the task was obvious. I was not quick enough to see it so. I hope today to find the right lines to read with you and to explore a topic that we can all see as important, if not obvious.

Let me ask you now to look around and take a quick inventory of those assembled here today. Present are your professors, your Relief

Society presidents, elders quorum presidents, bishops, and other Church leaders. Take a little more time and you can identify those who plan and maintain the buildings and other facilities at BYU and those who serve in the many supporting roles to your academic programs. Most important, you are here with your peers—other students. You will recognize a growing circle of friends, many of whom will become lifelong associates. And the very discerning will perhaps see a person destined to become their husband or wife.

As members of this BYU community we do share many things and have opportunities not only to derive benefit from but to contribute to this shared environment. In reality the BYU community may comprise a number of sub-communities. For example, we have the particular academic groups you belong to—the college, department, and even smaller groups. Also, we have our individual ward and stake organizations with special relevance to our lives. There are probably many other sub-communities you might identify from your own experiences.

Gary R. Hooper was an associate academic vice - president at BYU when this devotional address was given on 8 April 2003.

Today I want to discuss some of the characteristics of our community as it influences our spiritual growth.

It is obvious that we are centered around learning and education at BYU. Our very organization speaks to the academic intentions of the university. However, equally significant to us is our emphasis upon developing character and refining and enlarging our spiritual lives.

Brigham Young University is very direct about its intention to fully integrate academic progress and gospel principles. It has had remarkable success in achieving this goal and stands in contrast to many other universities in both intention and result.

There is a sense in the world that higher education in general may lead to more reliance upon our own human understanding and less reliance upon the Lord—a sort of equation that says “more education equals less religious activity.”

However, clear evidence exists that this equation does not hold for those who participate in the BYU community. In fact, the equation reads just the opposite for us: that is, “more education equals greater religious activity.”

Graduates of institutions of higher education sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are more involved and dedicated to the gospel in their post-university lives than those from nonreligious schools, and there is a strong correlation between added years of education for Church members and greater adherence to gospel principles and practice. (See Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, “Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity,” *Review of Religious Research*, 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 43–58.)

In a lecture included in a small book entitled *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar*, Elder Dallin H. Oaks spoke about the mission of BYU and our roles in the community. He noted, “In addition to our concern with *learning*, Brigham Young University is also concerned with *becoming*, with the *conversion* of students and also of teachers.”

He continued with the reminder that our mission “is not just to enlarge what we *know*, but to change what we *are*” (Dallin H. Oaks, “On Learning and Becoming,” in Henry B. Eyring, ed., *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995], 99, 101; emphasis in original).

In the same collection of lectures, Elder Neal A. Maxwell likened our situation as disciples and scholars to a form of consecration—where the mind and the spirit become one. He said:

*For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously; and, likewise, gospel covenants. For the disciple-scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else could one worship God with all of one’s heart, mind, and strength? (Luke 10:27.) Adoration of God leads to emulation of Him and Jesus: “Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am.” (3 Nephi 27:27; see also 2 Peter 3:11.) [“The Disciple-Scholar,” *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar*, 7; emphasis in original]*

Elder Maxwell then talked of our roles in this environment:

The disciple-scholar also understands what kind of community he or she should help to build. Its citizens openly and genuinely desire to be called God’s people. They are not secret disciples, but bear one another’s burdens, mourn with those that mourn, comfort those in need of comfort, and witness for God at all times, and in all places, and in all things (see Mosiah 18:8–9). Hubris, including intellectual pride, reflects the ways of hell, not of heaven! No wonder a true community of scholars would qualify to be part of a larger community of Saints. [“The Disciple-Scholar,” 7]

Elder Maxwell’s language references the instructions given by Alma the Elder when he

established the Church at the Waters of Mormon. Let me review Alma's words with you, as they are pertinent to our BYU community today:

And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another. [Mosiah 18:21]

Alma further instructed his flock to "walk uprightly before God, imparting to one another both temporally and spiritually according to their needs and their wants" (Mosiah 18:29).

Note that both temporal and spiritual matters were part of the obligations of these early Church members toward one another.

I am reminded also at this point of the Savior's instructions to His disciples near the end of His earthly ministry:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. [John 13:34–35]

When the Savior sat with His apostles at the Last Supper, He spoke frankly to Simon Peter about his responsibilities:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:

But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. [Luke 22:31–32]

Commandments to love and strengthen one another have been repeated over time in our scriptures and are most clearly a necessary part of the community of faith here at BYU.

In a talk at the BYU 2001 Annual University Conference, Elder Henry B. Eyring reflected upon our community as a place where we may move toward such consecration and full accep-

tance of the Atonement. Speaking of evidence that faculty and others help students grow spiritually, he said:

I see it in the eyes of the students. I have seen it especially in the eyes of students who have been trusted with great responsibilities by you. Your remarkable courage to involve students in serious research, in leading service projects, and in caring for the campus has drawn from them sacrifice in time and effort beyond what was true just a few years ago. That is changing them, and it is changing this place.

One of the characteristics of a place where the Savior can come is that there will be no class of people that holds itself above another. Think of how foreign that is to the nature of most university life you have seen. . . .

*. . . Students come poor in what they know about things you have worked years to understand. Yet you have welcomed undergraduates into your worlds as partners. That will give them powerful advantages when they go on to graduate school and to employment. But in the process of giving equal value to their contributions when they give all they have, you have changed this place. In the great day when the Master comes, the people will have "all things common" (Acts 2:44; 4:32) and there will be "no poor among them" (Moses 7:18). If I had not seen what I have seen here, I would not have thought that possible in universities, where rank and status have always been so carefully guarded. [Henry B. Eyring, "A Consecrated Place," BYU Annual University Conference address, 27 August 2001, 2–3; see also adaptation in *BYU Magazine*, spring 2002, 3–4]*

Elder Eyring's words suggest to me a unique and particular way in which our community functions. It is a way we have of faculty and students interacting, centered upon scholarship, that has great potential for realizing simultaneous goals of academic and spiritual growth during your time here at BYU. We speak of such interactions as mentoring.

Mentoring of this nature has been happening at BYU for a long time but recently has become a strong focus in many departments and in a variety of situations in the workplaces of BYU. We have attempted to define and support mentoring in such a fashion as to clearly enhance the learning environment on campus. We have developed a number of principles for mentoring that, if followed, will support our efforts. Two of these principles are particularly pertinent to the topic of strengthening one another spiritually.

The first of these principles states that “students should have access to faculty for sufficient time to allow development of personal and professional relationships.”

A second principle is even more direct. It notes that “students should be provided opportunity and examples for integration of spiritual and secular understanding.”

These principles suggest an important role for mentors. There is an assumption here that our faculty members and others are exemplars and that time spent in their presence has value. In our academic pursuits this assumption is well accepted; in spiritual matters it is equally true, if less obvious.

A number of situations bring students and faculty together in addition to classroom experiences: field trips, study abroad, research and creative activities, social visits in homes, and experiences in student wards. In all cases the mentor may act to teach, to train, and to demonstrate gospel principles by example.

The value of personal relationships and gospel living is further supported by BYU alumni’s responses to specific questions about their spiritual experience in the BYU community.

The BYU Alumni Questionnaire of 1998 Graduates (the most recent available survey) asked past students about ways in which their experiences at BYU affected their lives. The alumni consistently reported significant growth in spiritual matters as a result of interaction with faculty, peers, and other members of the campus community.

One quote from an anonymous respondent seems to sum up these experiences:

The most significant impact BYU had on my life was the presence of good, intelligent people who lived the gospel. When I began studies at BYU I seriously doubted I could live the way I’d been taught all my life. Professors who bore their testimonies, bishops who understood the specific struggles of that age group, roommates who supported me, and eventually a spouse who loved me kept me going on the path my parents had started [me] on. My life at age 26 definitely wouldn’t be the same had I not gone to BYU. [BYU Alumni Questionnaire of 1998 Graduates]

The positive or negative power of such personal examples cannot be overstated as a critical element of spiritual mentoring. In “Jesus, the Perfect Mentor,” an article in the February 2001 *Ensign*, Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed:

Each of us, from time to time, is mentored and has chances to mentor. In my experience, truthful and caring one-liners that occur within such nurturing relationships have a long shelf life! You can probably recount three or four examples of how people have said something—probably a sentence or clause—and you remember it still. It moves and touches you still. Such has been the case with me. . . .

*How wonderful it is (and we have all had these experiences) when we can gather in circles of friendship large or small with shared gospel values. Sharing is like gathering around conversational bonfires that grow warm and bright against the horizon. You will find the memories of these bonfires will achieve a lastingness—not of what you wore or of what the menu was, but rather because of the shared expressions of love and testimony. Especially helpful are the memories of those individuals and friends who are exemplars for you and me by the manner in which they strive so steadily and unapologetically to wear the whole armor of God. [Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus, the Perfect Mentor,” *Ensign*, February 2001, 8, 16]*

I think you can see just how well Elder Maxwell's characterization of mentoring relates to our mentoring principles and our sense of being exemplars and righteous tutors to one another.

There is also much to be learned from the life of the Savior about being examples.

President Spencer W. Kimball spoke of how Jesus served as an example:

Jesus said several times, "Come, follow me." His was a program of "do what I do," rather than "do what I say." His innate brilliance would have permitted him to put on a dazzling display, but that would have left his followers far behind. He walked and worked with those he was to serve. His was not a long-distance leadership. He was not afraid of close friendships; he was not afraid that proximity to him would disappoint his followers. The leaven of true leadership cannot lift others unless we are with and serve those to be led. [Spencer W. Kimball, "Jesus: The Perfect Leader," *Ensign*, August 1979, 5]

The Savior spoke of "doing" and of being "close." Spiritual mentoring is a contact sport and is most effective when we interact openly with one another. Seek out occasions and situations that allow you to get to know your advisors. It is when you know one another well enough to get past the polite, perfunctory, or impersonal conversations that you can begin to feel the spirit of your mentor.

To illustrate the role of such a faculty mentor, I invite you to listen to this short film segment featuring Professor Laura Bridgewater of our Microbiology and Molecular Biology Department.

Dr. Bridgewater hosts a mentoring environment with numerous undergraduates and selected graduate students working together.

Following her remarks is a brief comment from Lara Lee Claus, a student working on a project in English as a second language with Professor Annela Teemant and others.

Dr. Laura Bridgewater:

It's great to be in a place where religion can be tied into everything. You don't have to keep it separate because it's not separate. Religion fills every part of our lives. It fills every part of the field of science I work in. And it has been very uplifting and very spiritually strengthening to be able to just bask in that and enjoy it and to talk to students about it. Students come in and talk to me all the time about things, [about] questions they have: "How does this part of science fit with our religion?" I just enjoy so much talking to them. Sometimes I have answers and sometimes I don't. Like I said before, we don't know everything yet. And sometimes it's just helping them understand that it is okay not to know, and we just have to be humble and admit that we don't know and keep trying to learn what we can.

Lara Lee Claus:

One of the things that I noticed right away when I started working with Dr. Teemant is that anytime we'd have a group meeting or a team-type meeting, she would start with a word of prayer. Actually, anytime I saw her working she would start the workday with a word of prayer. She recognized that the project she was working with was much more than all of us working together. We were really asking for help we needed to be able to do the best that we could do. We were asking for extra assistance from Heavenly Father. That has helped me as I have done my work, asking for help for any kind of project that we are working on.

Dr. Bridgewater's words reflect the attitude and intent of many faculty and others to be of service—to be a strengthening influence.

Lara Lee's reaction to her mentor's use of prayer illustrates the power and the potential of such examples to change lives.

Lest you nod off while I talk about the role of mentors, let me speak directly to you and to your place in the community.

The capacity of peers to influence one another is a very significant matter here. You will often

find yourselves in the mentor role in various situations at BYU. One such example relates to peer encouragement to prospective missionaries.

Many of us have observed the phenomenon of young men and women in their first years here choosing to go on missions. It is clear that those who have been on missions or have made up their minds to serve have a profound positive influence upon others who are considering missions. Decisions to accept mission calls are discussed and celebrated with friends and roommates. It is significant to our discussion that by the time students graduate from BYU, most males (about 95 percent) have served missions and close to 30 percent of female students are also returned missionaries. Although many have planned their missions long before they attend BYU, a significant number make the final decision to serve while they are here because of the influence of their peers.

In our research and creative work environments, experienced students tutor novices in matters of academic disciplines. This same sharing and strengthening between peers is common in spiritual matters as well. The potential of peer-to-peer interactions about spiritual matters is great. As lifelong bonds of friendship and marriage occur, the shared love of the gospel illuminates and empowers us to influence others positively.

I hope we can see from these examples that our immediate thought—that mentor equals professor or other supervisor and mentee equals student—is an oversimplification that does not recognize the fact that we may each be mentor and mentored, depending on the situation. In reality, the relationship between supervisor and student is not a one-way street, particularly in spiritual matters. Both sides must be actively engaged to gain full benefit from the association. It is true that the giver of spiritual insight most often receives back in kind and more abundantly than he or she gave. It seems to me that our mentoring relationship is one of synergy—a situation where the interaction of two forces has a result

that is greater than the sum of the individual efforts and contributions. In our situation the added value comes from the direct intervention and contribution of our Heavenly Father.

A part of this synergy is often the very nature of the shared scholarship. Listen now to two students. First, hear political science major Chris Winters as he talks of his research project that concerned Latter-day Saints in wartime experiences. His mentors were Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright.

After his remarks you will hear from Mike Manookin, who was an undergraduate ORCA scholar here and is now working on a graduate degree in linguistics with Professor Deryle Lonsdale.

Chris Winters:

I think through the research that I've done that I have gained a deeper appreciation for adversity and the roles that we all have to play on this earth. I look at these stories of veterans and I just see the faith that they had in the trials that they went through, and it helps me individually to aspire to that—to aspire to [that faith] no matter what happens. No matter what situation I am put in or come into, I have the choice to react in a positive way and react in a way that is not only going to build my testimony but also build the testimonies of those with whom I am talking.

Mike Manookin:

The more I learn, the more I realize what I don't know and the more I realize why we have to rely on God for understanding—for real understanding and knowledge. But it also gives me an idea of the beauty of nature—the beautiful world and beautiful minds and bodies that God has given us. To try to understand a question as difficult as cognitive modeling, of how the mind is processing language, really makes you think, "Whoa, how could a human being be so complex, so wonderful, and be able to deal with such complex variables with such speed?" To me that is just a wonderful illustration of our brains, the minds that God has made for us.

What I have learned is the Christian principle that we need to learn from one another. We all bring something different to the table. We can all learn different things from each other. It just helped me understand more and more the unique and important aspects that each of us has. We are all unique and important children of God, we all have our unique gifts, and we can all learn from one another. And I think that is really what life is about: learning to be the best that we can be and learning to appreciate other people for the gifts that they have.

Both students speak of growth in the gospel as a result of their research projects and the discussions they had with mentors and peers.

In our mentoring relationships an interesting interplay is also at work between the responsibilities each of us has for working out our own salvation and the roles of others in our spiritual progress.

Mike Manookin commented about individual, unique gifts and communal learning. His words echo those recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants:

And again, verily I say unto you, I would that ye should always remember, and always retain in your minds what those gifts are, that are given unto the church.

For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God.

To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby.

To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful. [D&C 46:10–14; see also 1 Corinthians 12 and Moroni 10]

The gifts mentioned are collectively given “unto the church” and by extrapolation to the community we are discussing. However, each

individual may receive and hold some of the gifts—both for themselves and for others. There is both individual responsibility and group responsibility at work in the community.

Earlier I talked about Alma establishing the Church at the Waters of Mormon. He was motivated and instructed by a strong testimony of the Savior. How did he get this testimony? Years later his son Alma the Younger answered with these words:

Behold, I can tell you — did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believe them?

And according to his faith there was a mighty change wrought in his heart. Behold I say unto you that this is all true. [Alma 5:11–12]

This example points out the principles of gaining from the testimony of others as well as exercising our own faith. Both are needed. It is part of the interplay between individual and group responsibility I identified earlier.

Let me now summarize what we have discussed today. We are an institution that shares a love for the gospel and an active concern for one another. We influence others as examples of gospel living, as mentors and recipients of mentoring. There are those who have found the gospel here and become one with the Church. Decisions have been made about missions, about temple marriage, and about lifelong commitment to righteousness because of the strengthening influence of others.

Students bring much to the community. Not only do they provide insights into the research and creative work of the faculty, but they serve as examples, as teachers, and as loving fellow citizens to strengthen us all and to aid in the continual testimony growth of those who constitute the ongoing BYU community. In Elder Eyring’s words, “You have changed this place.”

My own association with BYU includes student years and these immediate past 11 years of my academic career. I have shared time with you in the classroom and as a bishop. I have attended student presentations and read your proposals for research and creative work. I am enriched in my own testimony from your examples.

I had the benefit of some mentoring in my formative years—some at BYU and some elsewhere by people of good character and wisdom, such as Professor Katherine Esau, a noted plant scientist. I believe our current mentoring emphasis would have been of even

more value to me in my own spiritual growth had it been available then.

In closing, I return to the Savior as our example. To the people of the new world He gave instructions about strengthening one another. He reminded them to look to Him as a model. He said: “Therefore, hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up” (3 Nephi 18:24).

May we enjoy our time together and take full advantage of opportunities to serve and be blessed by others. I bear my testimony of the value of each of us to one another, and I do so in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.