

A Solemn Obligation

CARRI P. JENKINS

Thank you, Dr. Broomhead and members of the University Chorale, for that wonderful rendition of “For All the Saints” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 82). That song is to be sung majestically, which you certainly did. Your words set the tone for my address today. I would like to look at how we as Saints—“faithful, true, and bold”—might increase our efforts to profess our faith.

On a rather cold, rainy day many years ago, I found myself in a meeting over a difficult issue. Waiting outside this meeting was what appeared to be an army of reporters. To say that I was a bit unnerved by their presence is an understatement. I was new to the office of University Communications, having spent 12 years with *BYU Magazine*, and was still trying to adjust to the media scrutiny that accompanies a breaking story.

As the meeting concluded, someone asked the question “Who is going to talk to all of those reporters?”

The person in charge responded, “Carri is.”

And with that, everyone got up and left.

Do you remember how Moses felt when the Lord asked him to represent the Israelites before Pharaoh? In my own small way, I think I caught a glimpse of it on that rainy day. I too wanted to cry out, “O my Lord, I am not

eloquent . . . : but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

But, just as the Lord beckoned Moses to “therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth” (Exodus 4:12), I felt the Lord’s gentle push in response to my hasty prayer. And so I walked out that door confident in the message I needed to deliver, even if I was not confident as the messenger.

I faced the reporters, and all went well until the final question, when they asked if they could interview BYU students about the Honor Code. I knew I could not say no, even though I really wanted to just handpick a few students who I knew would respond in a predictable and positive way.

Instead I responded, “Absolutely. Talk to anyone you like.”

That night as I waited for the 10 o’clock news to air, my heart was racing. I knew what I had said, but what I didn’t know was how the students had responded. I wondered if they would challenge and negate everything I had said.

Carri P. Jenkins was the assistant to the president for University Communications at BYU when this devotional address was given on 8 November 2005.

As I watched the various news reports and those random students—students just like you—talk about their feelings and belief in the Honor Code, my once-racing heart swelled with pride. I realized that while in this instance I had been asked to be the official spokesperson for BYU, the most important spokespersons were you, the students. It was your voices people would remember; it was your voices that turned a rather negative news story into a positive one.

Today I would like to talk about what it means to be a spokesperson—at BYU and in the kingdom of God—a role that each one of us plays. The incident that I described above is not unique; in fact, it happens on an almost daily basis. Perhaps you saw this recent story in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, written by Shinika Sykes and Todd Hollingshead: “BYU Students Proud of ‘Stone Cold Sober’ Rank.”

In Shinika and Todd’s story, you will notice that my comment, shown here on the screen in yellow, is quite buried, but your comments, shown in blue, carry the story. Anthony Strike, one of the students quoted, sums up things when he says, “Students here don’t have to worry about their lifestyle choices being challenged by their peers. I am proud to go to a school that gets that ranking” (in Shinika A. Sykes and Todd Hollingshead, “BYU Students Proud of ‘Stone Cold Sober’ Rank,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 24 August 2005, B3).

Now, I ask you, who is the spokesperson in this article? As a student, aren’t you far more interested in hearing comments from your fellow students than in hearing from me?

There is a common theory in public relations that the most important source—or spokesperson—is the source closest to you. We are far less likely to believe a company’s official spokesperson than we are a trusted brother—or even a cousin twice removed—who works for that same company, even if this individual just started his or her job two days ago and washes the windows.

Although there can be obvious and even detrimental errors in this mode of thinking, we all succumb to it. As students, faculty, and staff at BYU who hold dear the principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we must accept that for someone—and perhaps for a great many—we are their closest source to BYU and to the Church. Their opinions rest on our words and on our actions.

William Shakespeare reminded us that we are all players on the world’s stage (see *As You Like It*, act 2, scene 7, lines 139–40). Yet at times we don’t realize that the curtain has been drawn open and eyes are focused on us. We are not aware that the plot, based on our own deeds, has turned. We are not aware that our fellow actors are taking their cues from us and that the critics in the audience are frantically writing. After all, we may say, I have just a bit part.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said:

Think of the remarkable age in which we live. Think of the economic and educational, scientific and spiritual blessings we have that no other era or people in the history of the world have ever had, and then consider the responsibility we have to live worthily in our moment in time.

We are making our appearance on the stage of mortality in the greatest dispensation of the gospel ever given to mankind, and we need to make the most of it. [Jeffrey R. Holland, “Terror, Triumph, and a Wedding Feast,” fireside at BYU, 12 September 2004, 4; emphasis in original]

President Gordon B. Hinckley related how he was once asked:

“If you do not use the cross, what is the symbol of your religion?”

I replied that the lives of our people must become the most meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, the symbol of our worship. . . .

As [Christ’s] followers, we cannot do a mean or shoddy or ungracious thing without tarnishing

His image. Nor can we do a good and gracious and generous act without burnishing more brightly the symbol of Him whose name we have taken upon ourselves. And so our lives must become a meaningful expression, the symbol of our declaration of our testimony of the Living Christ, the Eternal Son of the Living God. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Symbol of Our Faith," *Ensign*, April 2005, 3, 4]

Recognizing that we all serve as spokespersons, in one way or another, I would like to share with you six principles that guide me in my work. These basic and simple principles are a combination of public relations theory, sound professional advice from leaders in the industry, common sense, and answers to my own personal prayers.

Number one: *Do not be afraid.*

I have a little ritual that I sometimes do before rather intimidating interviews: I snap my fingers and breathe into my hands. Before an interview with ESPN last August, I unconsciously started this ritual.

"What are you *doing*?" asked my co-worker.

"I'm proving that I'm not afraid," I said, knowing that if, as has been rumored, reporters can smell fear, they can certainly feel it in a cold handshake.

The truth is that fear is a natural reaction when we are called upon to leave our comfort zone. For many of us, standing up and speaking out is not easy. Look at Esther of the Old Testament, who was called upon to serve as a spokesperson for her people. Was she afraid? Most definitely. Did she not call upon her people to fast and pray for her in what was the most difficult assignment of her life? And yet, in that process, did she not glean the strength she needed to somehow say, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16)?

Few of us will ever face such a risk. However, we do face the possibility of ridicule, humiliation, dishonor, and even withdrawal of friendship. Yet, more often than not, when we

act appropriately and put our faith in the Lord, our result is the same as Esther's.

A student, Dixie Kolditz, reinforced this lesson for me when she refused to back down during a very aggressive interview. A filmmaker had asked to interview BYU students about their beliefs in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The producer and his crew were charming, and I was looking forward to the interviews with the three students selected. Dixie, a young convert from South Africa, was to be their final interviewee.

As the camera started rolling, however, the reporter's charm quickly turned to hostility. Our two returned missionaries did just fine, fending off every question with solid answers. But Dixie had just come into the Church; she had no such experience with this manner of questioning. And I felt responsible for her vulnerability.

"Dixie," I said, "you don't have to do this. In fact, you shouldn't do this."

"No," she said. "I should."

With that she proved to be a powerful interviewee, basing her comments on the 13 Articles of Faith—principles she had not only memorized but understood on a deep and personal level.

Looking at Esther and Dixie during their individual moments in the spotlight, one would see them each as fearless and, without question, bold and confident. What gave these women—who I am quite sure also suffered from freezing hands—their self-assurance? As Esther entered the king's court, knowing she was breaking all protocol—even the law—what calmed her nerves? Esther herself gave us the answer. Her answer is my second principle: *Seek and recognize the Lord's support.*

Go, [Esther said,] gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go

in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. [Esther 4:16]

Esther’s mettle—or, some would say, her self-confidence—was far more than a strong personality: it was the direct result of putting her trust, faith, and reliance in the Lord.

A short time before his 24th birthday, President Heber J. Grant accepted a call from President John Taylor to preside over the Tooele Stake. He said the appointment came as a great surprise to him, and he had many feelings of inadequacy, particularly in the area of public speaking. About his first speaking assignment, he said:

I remember preaching and telling everything I could think of, and some of it over twice, and [I] ran out of ideas in seven minutes and a half by the watch. . . .

The next Sunday I did not do any better. I ran out of ideas in six or seven minutes. The next Sunday I did the same.

This continued. There are no accounts to indicate whether the Saints in Tooele were really that disappointed, but obviously President Grant felt great distress. Then, in the little town of Vernon, he later recounted:

I got up to make my little speech of five, six or seven minutes, and I talked for forty-five minutes, with as much freedom and as much of the Spirit of the Lord as I have ever enjoyed in preaching the gospel, during the forty years that have passed since then. I could not restrain the tears of gratitude which I shed that night, as I knelt down and thanked God for the rich outpouring of his Holy Spirit.

Heber J. Grant’s story, however, does not end there; you need to hear about the next Sunday. He explained:

I went to Grantsville, the largest ward in the Tooele stake of Zion, and I approached the Lord with much

the same attitude as Oliver Cowdery when he told the Lord, “I want to translate.” . . . But, failing, he was later told, he did not study it out, and he did not pray about it, and he did not do his share. I told the Lord I would like to talk again to the Saints [as I had done in Vernon]. I got up and talked for five minutes, and I sweat as freely, I believe, as if I had been dipped in a creek, and I ran out of ideas completely. I made as complete a “fizzle,” so to speak, of my talk, as a mortal could make. [Heber J. Grant, “Significant Counsel to the Young People of the Church,” *Improvement Era*, August 1921, 870–71; see also Preston Nibley, *The Presidents of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 224–26]

President Grant later wrote of his humble prayers that followed that meeting. He wrote:

I asked God to forgive me for not remembering that men can not preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ with power, with force, and with inspiration only as they are blessed with power which comes from God. [Grant, “Significant Counsel,” 871–72; see also Nibley, *Presidents*, 226]

Looking back at this incident probably wasn’t easy for President Grant. I think he shared his shame and pain over the “fizzle” of that talk for only one reason: to help us learn that even a young man who was worthy at 24 to serve as a stake president can fall victim to his own pride. We have been promised that the Lord will give us the strength we need if we humble ourselves before Him.

The Apostle James counseled:

God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. . . .

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. [James 4:6, 10]

There is another lesson President Grant so vividly illustrates in his story, and this is my third principle: *Do your share; prepare yourself.*

The number-one rule any spokesperson will give you is never walk into an interview unprepared. It is far better to admit your ignorance than to stumble around saying nothing or, worse yet, saying something incorrect. The problem, for me and for you, is that reporters—and people in general—rarely ask a question and then allow us a few days or even hours to prepare an answer. For this reason, our preparation must come before the questioning begins.

During the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, the lifetime of preparation our students had done paid off in immense proportions. In this small, three-week window of opportunity, BYU students interacted with journalists from around the world, sipping kiwi lemonade with them at family home evenings, sitting in advanced language classes, and training with them in our athletic facilities. Many of these journalists spoke little or no English and relied on the translation abilities of our students. Over and over again we watched the amazed faces of these international journalists as they interviewed students in their native tongues.

U.S. media outlets were also impressed by our students. On Presidents' Day 2002, a holiday for BYU, I got a call at home from David Lamb of the *Los Angeles Times*. He was at T.G.I. Fridays in Provo and asked if I would mind answering a few questions about BYU. It was his first day away from the hubbub of official Olympic activity, and his editor had given him permission to do two stories on cities outside of Salt Lake. He had chosen Wendover and Provo. He made it clear that his story was not about BYU and that he only wanted a paragraph about the university.

I tried to get him to go to our media hosting center, but he refused. As his questioning continued, I finally convinced him to make a trip to campus. There he could obtain a handy media kit that would answer all of his questions—thus, I pointed out, saving him time.

On duty that day were BYU students Chaliese Wouden and Julie Harris, both returned missionaries who between them spoke five languages. David spent two hours on campus: he took a campus tour, watched BYU's hosting video, and talked with students everywhere he went, particularly with Chaliese and Julie. In parting he told one of my co-workers, "This has to be one of the most cosmopolitan universities in the nation."

The story that resulted from that visit ran with three color pictures all featuring BYU students and lauded Provo for its friendliness—"which isn't by accident, darn it." In paragraph after paragraph David described BYU with its clean-cut enrollment that comes from all 50 states and 110 countries. He talked about how many students have lived abroad and how many are fluent in a second language. He applauded the large number of students serving as volunteers for the Olympic Games. He wrote of the Honor Code and quoted Julie as saying, "It's empowering, not restricting."

Although our office prepares for media visitors, it was not the press kits that made David's story so positive. It was the preparation of Julie and Chaliese and all the other students David interviewed who changed his thinking—preparation that could not have happened in the few minutes it took David to drive up the hill to BYU. This story reflects, more than anything else, the personal study and experience of our students who live the gospel of Jesus Christ on a daily basis. I have no doubt that David, as a seasoned journalist, quickly recognized that his interviewees were not just parroting answers prepared for them but were speaking from their souls.

This type of open communication was exactly what we had hoped to see taking place in our media center, knowing that if reporters could talk to "real live" students, they would be far more believing of what we had to say. Students like Julie and Chaliese were encouraged to share their experiences and

insights. In so doing, we asked only that they be cautious not to overstep the bounds of their authority. All of us, in serving as spokespersons, have boundaries.

Do not go beyond the bounds of your own knowledge, understanding, and authority is my fourth point. Neither Julie nor Chaliese pretended to be the president of BYU or the dean of a certain college; they didn't need to. They simply spoke as students at BYU.

When Aaron was asked to serve as Moses' spokesperson, he set an example for us all. Victor L. Ludlow has explained:

There is no evidence that he ever sought his brother's prophetic office; but neither was he weak and passive when given authority. When he was commanded to speak for Moses to the Pharaoh, he did. He assumed his own responsibility and acted within his own calling. [Victor L. Ludlow, "Aaron," *Ensign*, February 1981, 38]

Aaron's example leads to my fifth point: *Be yourself.*

While I was preparing this talk, an experience I had years ago outside my professional responsibilities returned again and again to my mind. This experience reminded me that I must accept who I am and recognize that, despite my limitations, I can be of service to the Lord.

Several years ago we visited the areas in which my husband served his mission in North Carolina. Our first Sunday was spent in Whiteville, North Carolina. As we approached the brand-new chapel of this branch and the doors of the church house opened, our car was surrounded by my husband's beloved friends. Yet even in the excitement I noticed that one lady did not approach us.

As I went into Relief Society, this woman sat down next to me. Then, when we started to sing the opening song, she leaned in very close. This would not have been a problem, except for the fact that I have a horrible singing voice. So the closer she leaned in, the further I leaned

the opposite way and the softer I sang. Finally I was doing no more than mouthing the words. This whole scenario was repeated during the closing song. Then, when we entered the small chapel for sacrament meeting, this dear woman came and sat right next to me again. She was on one side and my daughter, Lynne, was on the other.

As we started to sing the opening song, Lynne and I carried out a routine we were doing every Sunday. Lynne was just learning to read, and so we would bend our heads low to the songbook and I would point at each word as we sang it. When we did this, my new friend also buried her head in our songbook. I could not imagine what was going on, but I decided to discontinue my lip-synching and to sing! As was typical, every time Lynne would get a word correct, she would beam with pride and I would pat her on the back. My new friend did the same thing, carefully studying the words as I pointed to them and listening to what I was singing. At times she would get a word correct and, just like my daughter, would smile up at me, and I would pat her on the hand. By this time I understood. My friend didn't care what my voice sounded like. All she needed was someone who could read and who cared enough to help her read the words as well. At that moment the Lord didn't need a member of the Tabernacle Choir to sit next to this new convert. I would do.

One of the great ironies in my life right now is that my ward calling, despite what I have just told you, is Primary chorister. Although the Primary children have not yet been able to teach me to sing, they have taught me over and over again what it means to be true to yourself. They are eager to talk about their answered prayers, to recount faith-building stories, to encourage us all to do better, and to share their testimonies. My testimony is strengthened each week by their pure and humble messages. As sons and daughters of God, each one of us has the ability and the obligation to testify and

defend the work of the Lord. I beg you not to lean away or drop your voice in these situations. Rather, without pretense, stand in your own shoes, paying close attention to what is needed around you, and willingly respond. Remember the admonition of James: “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

“Doing” is what I would like to address in my final principle. As spokespeople for this university, which all of us clearly are, we must recognize that *our actions speak louder than our words*. In urging us to be people of integrity, President Samuelson has asked us—faculty, staff, and students—to be familiar with and endorse “behaviorally and philosophically” BYU’s guiding documents, including the Honor Code (Cecil O. Samuelson, “Integrity,” BYU devotional, 14 September 2004, 2).

Each of us, in being here today, has agreed to follow President Samuelson’s admonition. At this point, since we have *already* committed to live the Honor Code, it is now a matter of personal integrity. Because your integrity is valued and respected by those within and without our campus community, a violation of that integrity has the potential to become front-page news.

People often ask me, “Don’t you think it’s unfair that BYU students live in such a fishbowl?”

No, I don’t think it is unfair. I think it is a reality, and I think it is a reality that each of us will live with for the rest of our lives. Wherever you reside, work, and serve, you will be watched, simply because you are an alumnus of Brigham Young University. As a spokesperson for this university, you have tremendous opportunities before you. May you embrace the opportunities that await you as you represent the principles upon which BYU is built.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior said:

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.

Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. [Matthew 5:14–16]

The light spoken of by our Savior shines from you this very moment. It is a light Naomi Schaefer Riley, who is now an editor for the *Wall Street Journal*, felt when she visited our campus the week of September 11, 2001. Naomi came to campus while writing a book on religious universities. BYU was the first she visited. Let me read to you just a few comments from her book, published this year, titled *God on the Quad*:

I began the first formal interviews for this book on September 10, 2001. The next day, two thousand miles from home, I sat on the edge of my hotel bed, looking out over the strip malls to the treeless mountains beyond, wondering more than anything else about how to get home. Home for me is Blue America. I have lived in four states, all in the northeast. I attended two secular colleges and grew up with a sense that religion, while socially beneficial (in that it provided people with a moral compass they might not otherwise have), was not true. In other words, I had already expected to feel distinctly out of place on these campuses. And the events of that Tuesday morning only intensified the feeling.

*Over the next week, the students at Brigham Young tried to welcome me into their lives. While national tragedies tend to bring out the best in many people, the first representatives of the “missionary generation” I encountered could not have made a greater impression upon me. Their kindness and compassion, their civic-mindedness, their understanding and interest in national and international affairs, the quiet comfort they were able to find in their faith, and their ability to relate to this stranger in their midst gave me cause for optimism. [Naomi Schaefer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation**

Are Changing America (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 12]

Since she visited us, Naomi has gone on to be a powerful defender of religious diversity in American higher education. In a *USA Today* article this summer, Naomi wrote:

Schools with strong faith identities with strict behavioral codes—such as the evangelical Wheaton College outside of Chicago, Brigham Young University and the Catholic Thomas Aquinas College near Los Angeles—are not succeeding despite their religious mission, but because of it. [Naomi Schaefer Riley, “Higher, Higher Education,” USA Today, 22 June 2005, A15]

Naomi's positive words are the direct result of her association with you.

Have I convinced you of the power you have as spokespeople for this university and for the Lord's work? Just as Moses, Aaron, and Esther spoke for their people, you serve as a spokesperson for the students and graduates of BYU and all those who believe in the work of this university. In so doing, do not be afraid; seek and recognize the Lord's support;

prepare yourself; however, do not go beyond the bounds of your knowledge, understanding, and authority; be yourself; and never forget that actions speak louder than words.

President Hinckley has counseled us:

We of this generation are the end harvest of all that has gone before. It is not enough to simply be known as a member of this Church. A solemn obligation rests upon us. Let us face it and work at it. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Dawning of a Brighter Day,” Ensign, May 2004, 84]

It is my testimony that you will not be alone as you strive to fulfill President Hinckley's challenge. Our Father in Heaven will guide you, help you, and support you. He does not want you to put your light under a bushel; instead, He wants you to put it on a candlestick where it cannot be hid.

You are His spokesperson, and for that—knowing that my job is shared by 30,000 others—I am indeed grateful. May each of us live our lives in accordance with the assignment and the opportunities before us is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.