

Some Thoughts about Butterflies, Replenishment, Environmentalism, and Ownership

REX E. LEE

Today I want to talk to you about the ownership of BYU. Who owns BYU, and what does this ownership mean? What are the privileges of ownership, and what are its responsibilities?

If you look at it just from a dollars-and-cents standpoint, by far the largest financial interest in this university is held by the faithful tithe payers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their interests, and the interests of the Church in general, are represented by our policy-making body, the members of the board of trustees, the majority of whom we also sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. Similarly large stakeholders are those of us who devote our full-time efforts and energy to the policies that our trustees formulate: the faculty, staff, and administrators.

But the trustees, the tithe payers, and the professionals who serve BYU full-time are not its only owners. The principal theme I want to develop with you today is that every one of you also has an important ownership interest in Brigham Young University. You acquired your shares of stock the moment you made the decision to enroll here as students. It is an ownership that will last as long as you live. And in the case of many of you, it will endure beyond

the time of your mortal deaths—for years, decades, and, for some, even centuries.

Now, lest you become completely carried away with this newly discovered and exalted status, let me point out that some of the rights of ownership are not yours to exercise. For example, even by majority vote you could not cut tuition in half, or eliminate the general education requirements, or replace the president, or prohibit broccoli or Y Sparkle from being served in the Cougareat, or declare that 90 percent of the parking spaces are to be reserved exclusively for student use. In short, you are not absolute owners, but you do have an important ownership interest. Your relationship to this university is more than that of consumer to supplier, and even more than learner to teacher. I submit that it occupies a broader spectrum of interests than is true of the relationship of student to university in any other school, and what you will get out of that relationship depends in large part on your understanding the nature of your ownership interest.

Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 15 September 1992.

Let me review, therefore, some of the great benefits, including financial benefits, that each of us who has had the good fortune to be a student at BYU enjoys because of our shareholder status.

As is the case with other owners, the worth of your interest is tied directly to the value of BYU's stock. Over thirty years ago, when I was about to receive my BYU degree, I began applying to law schools. Without exception, they were very good law schools. It was at that time that the value of a BYU degree and a BYU education were first brought home to me in ways that were not only pleasing, but actually put money in my pocket. My classmates, who were also applying to professional schools or other graduate programs, had the same experience. We were in demand, and a major contributing factor was our BYU diploma. The only change in that circumstance from then to now is that things have gotten better as our university and its diplomas have increased in quality, visibility, and prestige. I believe that in many quarters, the fact that we incorporate values as an integral part of our total learning process contributes positively to the worth of those diplomas.

There is another finite benefit that each of you enjoys, and this one is even more measurable in dollars and cents. Every time you register, each of you receives an automatic scholarship. The amount of that scholarship is a little more than twice the amount of the tuition you pay. For those of you who receive what we officially call a scholarship, the amount is even greater. But whatever the amount, it is true today, as it has been for decades, that for every one of us who has been admitted to study at BYU, about 70 percent of the cost of our education is paid by direct appropriations from the Church—from tithing donations made by faithful members throughout the world. I believe it is a good investment for the Church to make, both in terms of its impact on individual lives and also

in preparing and developing the future membership and leadership of the Church.

And so as owners you enjoy some very substantial, and tangible, benefits. There are also some corresponding responsibilities of ownership. The first of those that I want to discuss relates directly to these built-in scholarships that each of you receives, amounting to almost \$5,000 a year for each one of you. One of the mainstays of our doctrine and of our historical tradition ties back to helping others who come after us, just as we have been helped by those who have gone before. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund, which permitted many of the early Saints to come to Zion, is a very relevant example: Those whose journey west was made possible by the fund participated in replenishing it after they arrived. A similar example is provided by another practice of our pioneer forebears, who planted crops in Winter Quarters and other places along the Mormon Trail to be harvested by later companies who would in turn do their own planting for those who followed them. Those examples and many others represent a pattern and practice whose merits are extolled throughout the scriptures, from the Savior's teaching about loving our neighbor as ourselves to King Benjamin's classic observation that when we are in the service of our fellow beings, we are only in the service of our God. Over the past two or three years the officers of our Alumni Association have taken the lead in emphasizing that this general concept—flowing from the Perpetual Emigrating Fund and other historical Mormon practices—is also relevant to BYU students and alumni of today. The word that they have chosen to use is *replenishment*. I hope we will add both the word and the concept to our vocabulary and to our perspective. As Elder Robert L. Simpson often quoted: "We have all drunk from wells we did not dig, and warmed ourselves by fires we did not build." Having drunk from BYU's well, we have a lifelong opportunity and obligation for the continuing quality of the well itself.

So what does this mean in terms of what you ought to be doing now and what you should be thinking of doing in the future?

Fourteen years ago at a forum assembly, Professor Clayne Pope, now one of our associate academic vice presidents, observed that a basic principle of economics teaches that while nothing matters very much, everything in fact matters some. It is one of those things that has stuck with me, and I have thought about it a lot since I heard him say it.

I am reminded also of the view of Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist who teaches that it is impossible to make long-range weather predictions because there are so many variables. He contends, for example, that a Brazilian butterfly beating its wings in Brazil has an effect on air movements that, together with other currents, affect the weather in Texas. Accordingly, he asserts that in order to accurately predict long-range Texas weather conditions, one would need to measure, among other things, each flap of a butterfly wing weeks in advance. What is the practical significance of this? Professor Paul Carrington, one of the nation's leading scholars, suggests as follows:

Lorenz does not of course imply that butterflies or men and women should despair of being useful. His observation should be taken as encouragement to men and women, and to any butterflies that read, to do what they can and not what they cannot.

Now let's bring that down to us. As participants in BYU's ongoing learning process, there are things that you can do. Each of you can make a difference. The flapping of your individual wings makes a difference. Financial replenishment over the long run is one example of what I am talking about. But beyond that, to whatever extent you are a better student, learning more, and strengthening your testimony during your years here, BYU will be a better institution, and all of its owners will be better off because of your individual effort.

Another difference you can make is in preserving and enhancing our environmental quality. I am not talking here about air contamination (though if some of you can find a way to get along without a car, that would certainly help). Rather, the environment of which I speak now is the intellectual, moral, and spiritual environment that is so much a part of our school and so essential to its uniqueness and its strength. This place really is different. We are different in part because the range of values we pursue here is broader than at other colleges and universities. But we are also different from many other schools because we really care about such things as honesty, morality, modesty, and a clean, healthy, attractive physical appearance. Those kinds of values—regarded as none of anyone else's business at most universities—lie right at the core of what a BYU education is all about. The contribution that each of you as an owner can make to those environmental qualities is one of the most important reasons that each student should have an interest in implementing and strengthening the Honor Code and the Dress and Grooming Standards, particularly those provisions that relate to honesty and morality.

In recent decades, the people of the United States of America have invested enormous amounts of effort and attention, and literally hundreds of billions of dollars, in the preservation and enhancement of our physical environment. And properly so. At BYU we believe in environmental enhancement of the traditional sort, and we, too, have invested large amounts of time and money toward that end. But we are also environmentalists in a broader sense. We are concerned about our total campus environment, including the cleanliness and appearance of not only our buildings and grounds, but of our people as well. Our Honor Code and Dress and Grooming Standards are key to that environmental effort. So also is every single shareholder. It is *our* honor code, and it will

work only as successfully as we, the BYU owners, are determined to make it work.

Another thing that you can do, consistent with your BYU ownership and your effort to make yourself more valuable, is to make it possible for a larger number of people to have the opportunity for a BYU education. Of all the challenges we face, none causes me quite so much anguish as the ever-increasing number of highly qualified, worthy applicants whom we cannot admit to study here.

For very good reasons, which I not only understand but fully support, the board of trustees has determined that our enrollment cannot continue to grow commensurate with the membership of the Church and should therefore be stabilized at 27,000 students. In case you had not heard, I will tell you that the Church's enrollment has not been frozen. The days are gone forever when any person who wants the unique kind of experience that BYU offers and is willing to abide by our standards can be admitted. According to our projections, the number of qualified, worthy applicants who will not be accepted for admission will just about triple between now and 1998. The increase will be from about 2,200 per year to about 6,600 per year.

Those numbers, all by themselves, are sobering enough. But they convert into a source of acute sorrow when you realize that behind each one of them is a real human being, many of whom have suffered profound disappointments. Of the many letters we receive each year, let me read you parts of just one, which was addressed to our dean of Admissions, Erlend Peterson:

My daughter Jennifer [not her real name, but the one I will use to preserve her anonymity] received her letter from your office denying her application for admittance to BYU. It was hard for me and her mother to watch the tears well up in her eyes knowing that all she had worked so hard for during the last four years had come to naught.

Though unexpressed to us, I know the humiliation she will have to face telling her five other friends, all of whom were accepted to the Y, that she will not be joining them as one of their roommates as they had all planned. . . .

Life is not always fair, and Jennifer will have to deal with this setback like she has on many other occasions. . . . I am just sorry you won't get to know her.

Actually, there is something you can do that will significantly shrink the number of Jennifers to whom we are not able to offer a BYU educational experience. Consider this. The average number of semesters that BYU students currently take to graduate is 11.8. Missionary service does not enter into that calculation—11.8 is the number of semesters actually enrolled. That's almost six years for what we have always referred to as a four-year program. If we could, in fact, get that average back down to four years, from twelve semesters to eight, we would increase by one-third the number of students whom we could admit—who could have a BYU education—and all without any change in the enrollment ceiling. That would mean that thousands more of the people who desire to be here could come.

The reasons that it takes an average of six years instead of four to obtain a BYU degree are multiple and complex. Some of them you have no control over because their solutions lie within the stewardship of the faculty and administration. We are going to do what we can. But several of the factors that contribute to our twelve semester average are within your control, and I urge you to give them some serious attention. Remember the Brazilian butterflies. What you as an individual can do may not be much, but it is something; and when aggregated with what others are doing, the increment can be significant.

When you make your decisions, therefore, on such issues as how many hours to take

each semester, whether to attend spring and summer terms, and whether to change your major for the fifth time, make those decisions not just in light of your own personal, immediate interests. Please take into account also your interests as an owner of BYU itself. Be aware of the Christlike opportunity that is yours to share your blessings with other people who but for your thoughtfulness and consideration might never be able to come here. As long as you occupy your seat in the theater, someone else who would like to see the show cannot get in.

And so concludes my semiannual report to shareholders. Your stock is valuable. It is a growth stock, and it will almost certainly increase in value in the years to come. Unlike other shareholder situations, there are specific, identifiable things that you can do to increase the worth of your ownership interest.

We are so pleased that you are here. Janet and I wish we could get to know each of you personally. We can't, but we look forward to those personal relationships that we can and will have. With you, we also look forward to the excitement, the joys, the frustrations, the learning, and the growth that will be a necessary part of the year that lies before us. I have an optimism that 1992–93 may be the best year BYU has ever had. We have it in our power to make it the best. Certainly we are off to an amazing start. This year's freshman class has shown greater energy, greater enthusiasm, and greater desire to succeed than any in my memory. That we may all capitalize on the head start they have helped to give us is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.