

Keeping an Open Mind about Things that Matter

REX E. AND JANET G. LEE

Janet: Let me tell you of an experience that I had on this campus when I was a student. The setting was a beautiful, sunny spring morning in my dorm room. As my roommate and I were getting ready for the day, we were discussing our activities of the previous evening. I had just had my first date with a recently returned missionary who was a little hard for me to figure out. He was different from anyone I had ever dated.

“Would you go out with him again if he asked you?” my roommate inquired. As I was searching for an answer, the phone rang. It was for me, and as I put the receiver to my ear, this is what I heard.

(Rex Lee and Larry Shumway singing)

*I tried so hard, my dear, to show
That you're my every dream,
Yet every time I see your face
It makes me want to scream.*

*You look much better to me, dear,
The further we're apart.
Your liver may be warm,
But you've got a cold, cold heart.*

*You'll never know how much it hurts
To see you sit and cry,
But you could cry much better
If you had another eye.*

*When I see you walk in the room
It makes my eyeballs smart
Why don't you go fall off your broom
And break your cold, cold heart.*

The song ended and no one spoke. In fact, the connection was dead at the other end of the line. I wasn't certain who the “musicians” were, but I thought I recognized an Arizona twang in at least one of the voices. Could that have been my date from the night before? Was this his way of telling me that I was cold and unfriendly? Where in the world did he dig up that song, anyway? Was he trying to say, “I never want to see you again”? What kind of person would call, sing that ridiculous song, and then hang up? Too strange for me,

Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 11 September 1990.

I decided, and gave an emphatic “no” to my roommate’s earlier question.

Rex: She was, of course, dead wrong. Singing that particular song was the highest compliment we could have paid her, and she should have been profoundly flattered. Let me explain why. My duet partner was and is Larry Shumway, now the chairman of our humanities department and then my roommate with whom I had grown up in St. Johns, Arizona. For whatever reason, it was very difficult for us to tell our dates that we liked them. So, for those we really liked, we sang to them over the telephone. We didn’t try to give an explanation because that’s what was hard for us to do. We just sang and then hung up. Nothing more. The words of the song we picked were irrelevant. The significant thing was that we sang. That Homer and Jethro version of “Cold, Cold Heart” was distinctive only in that musically it was the best in our repertoire. Therefore, by singing her that song, we were paying her the highest compliment we could pay. She should have considered herself highly honored.

Janet: Now is that weird or what? I ask everyone of you, especially the women, which conclusion would you have drawn? The one I drew or the explanation you’ve just heard from him?

Rex: We always wondered why we didn’t get more second dates. From time to time we switched brands of deodorant soap, but that didn’t seem to help. And we were always careful to see that our guitars were tuned before we sang. Larry was a music major, so he could do that.

Janet: I just didn’t know what to think. I knew people who were well acquainted with Rex and in whose judgment I had confidence. They told me that his character was flawless, that he had been well liked on campus before his mission, and that he came from a good family. I also knew he was a very successful and respected missionary with a strong testimony. (Someday I’ll tell you how I knew.) But what

I was hearing over the phone did nothing to warm my cold, cold heart!

However, somehow, almost miraculously, I recovered from that spring morning serenade. There was another date and many others through that quarter, and then a summer apart, when through letters we became acquainted with each other’s hearts and souls. We both returned to BYU in the fall and by November were engaged. My mother recently found a letter I wrote home after our engagement that in part read:

“I am very, very much in love and life is wonderful. I find out new things about Rex every day that make me love and respect him more and make me thankful to my Heavenly Father to be here on the earth at this time to meet the perfect husband for me.”

A little mushy, you might say. Well, I was very young, but I could just as easily have said the same thing today. My love and respect for him continue to grow.

What happened to me between the spring and fall of that year? What opened my mind and my heart to see what was really there unclouded by the Homer and Jethro version of “Cold, Cold Heart”? What if I hadn’t stepped back and taken a second look?

Rex: As I look back now, how grateful I am that between that April morning and the following Thanksgiving this beautiful woman—beautiful inside and out—was willing to keep an open mind. At the time I didn’t think of it that way—it was not until years later that she told me of those astoundingly bizarre conclusions she drew from the supreme compliment we paid her. But just think of the impact, the differences on me, my family, and my life—this one and the next—if Janet had closed her mental book on me based on what had happened that April morning.

Now if some of you decide to use this same approach, Larry and I will be happy to give you the words and music to dozens of real musical winners, though I must warn you,

most of them are not quite as lyrically sweet and sensitive as the one we just sang. Chances are, however, the procedures you will use to select the companion with whom you will spend fifty years or more on this planet, and an eternity, will be different. Given the significance of that decision, it is correspondingly important that you make it on the basis of mature judgment and inspiration, after you have gathered the facts and taken into account the considerations that will be useful for that purpose.

Janet: But don't decide on the basis of a corny song, rendered by two tinny voices. (Or more accurately stated, one tinny voice and one music major.) In my case, my heart warmed as I perceived truth—or the “real” Rex Lee. What I had imagined I could see—an insensitive cowboy singing an insulting song—wasn't really there at all. The *mirage* was what I thought I saw, the *truth* was what he really was. Truth is ever present, but it isn't always obvious. Sometimes we have to look for truth. Finding it can be one of life's greatest joys.

The same principle can be applied to the mirror image of that situation. Suppose I had fallen in love with someone who appeared to have all of the qualities I wanted in a husband, someone who for one reason or another promised a wonderful, enchanted life? What if I had become so enamored with this picture that I had closed my eyes to the fact that there were serious flaws in his character? In this reverse scenario wouldn't an open mind also be beneficial?

Now, this is not intended to be a discussion on marriage or on how to select an eternal companion. That talk is for another day. Rather, today's theme concerns making decisions—of any kind—on the basis of truth rather than illusions.

Rex: This time she's right. Choosing your marriage partner is not the only example of the importance of keeping an open mind, though it is certainly an obvious one. Just by the nature

of the way this life is put together, you will face an unusually large number of the big-ticket choices during your college and post-graduate years. It is during these years that you will decide whether to go on a mission, pick your major and your life's work, solidify your values and goals, start your family, and settle in a community. Each of those is a major decision, and each in turn is fed by a hundred smaller ones.

Some of those decisions will directly involve the purpose for which you come here. Particularly for those of you who are freshmen, I hope that you will not make premature judgments about this university, including your classes, your roommates, your bishop, and, generally, the entire distinctive atmosphere that exists here. My own years as a student, both as an undergraduate at BYU and also in law school, underscore the importance of keeping an open mind to such seemingly micromatters as premature judgments about the worth of a class you are taking. I found that so many times what turned out to be very valuable and stimulating classes were those in which, during the early part of the year, I concluded that the teacher was boring, the subject matter borderline nonsense, or both. With the passage of time, those initial impressions often turned out to be wrong.

Janet: I still remember the first upper-division class I took at BYU. On the first day of class I was intimidated by the mature students who surrounded me. It was a small class of only ten or twelve students and therefore required participation by each of us. There was no hope of going unnoticed. To add to my terror, I discovered that the class was taught by the dean of the college. How could I remain in that class? Surely I would have nothing to add to discussions with students who were older, wiser, more experienced, and better informed than I.

My first impulse was to drop the course. I decided to think about it for a few days, to

give myself and the class a try. Within a short time that hour became the highlight of my week. I did a lot of stretching and reaching as I prepared for and participated in the class discussions. I enjoyed being there and looked forward to the challenge that interaction with mature thinkers provided.

What if I had given in to my first inclination and run away from what turned out to be a great experience? I learned so much from that class, but most valuable was what I learned about myself. That class really did change my life because it changed me. I was capable of more than I had realized.

By contrast, I will always regret that I dropped a Shakespeare class. I love Shakespeare, the professor was excellent, and the reading material fascinating. I even had a few friends in the class, and the course worked into my schedule at a convenient time. Then why did I withdraw? I was taking an extra-heavy load that quarter, and I wasn't sure I could get my best grade in that class. I dropped out after the second day without thinking it through very well. Was an A so important to me that I lost sight of what I would learn? Looking back, the understanding and enjoyment gained from that class would have been more beneficial to me than maintaining a higher GPA that quarter. My immediate assessment of the situation was wrong. I didn't stand back long enough to see the bigger picture. Once again, the point is the same: Keep an open mind about things that really matter.

Rex: That principle is equally obvious and equally important as it applies to impressions that we form of other people. Will Rogers' famous statement that he had never met a man he didn't like has become almost a fixture in our American culture. Some have questioned whether, even in the case of its author, that statement could be literally true. There has been speculation, for example, that maybe Will Rogers' circle of acquaintances just wasn't broad enough, and he would have changed

his view if he had known certain people. My own favorite comment on this issue appeared on a badge that said, "Will Rogers never knew me."

But whatever its literal accuracy, the core of our famous American comic/philosopher's best-known statement is unassailable: As we get to know people better and understand them more thoroughly, our tendency to criticize or even dislike them diminishes proportionately. So the obvious conclusion is: Don't make premature negative judgments about anyone, because as you come to know the whole person better, your opinion will almost certainly progress to one that is more charitable. And that kind of progress is, I think, one of the highest manifestations of the second great commandment.

Janet: By committing yourselves to an academic course and selecting Brigham Young University as your vehicle, you must believe that this track will take you where you want to go. All of the equipment you need is here for you to use. There will be maps and road signs along the way in the form of advisors, professors, bishops, friends, and others. We hope that you will find much that is true and good here, that the roadblocks will not be of your own making, and, when they do occur, that you will be able to find the main road again. Sometimes roadblocks occur in our lives when we close our minds to the big picture because of little, insignificant irritants. I know of a student who left school because of problems with her roommates. Students have been known to switch majors because of one class they didn't particularly like. Do we sometimes exclude larger considerations because of petty grievances and groundless fears?

Rex: I've often wondered about some of the implications of this principle as they apply to the Savior's injunction: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). My own view is that it refers not only to bottom-line, ultimate kinds of judgments, but also to forming too

soon opinions that may later turn out to be wrong. And it may apply not only to judging others, but also to premature judgments about ourselves.

There is no conflict, however, between the importance of keeping an open mind and at the same time recognizing that there are some truths, some principles, that are unalterable. There are absolute truths, for as the Old Testament tells us, God is “a God of truth” (Deuteronomy 32:4), and these truths will always remain reliable anchors regardless of all facts and circumstances. These principles include revelation, the reality of the Restoration, sexual morality, Word of Wisdom adherence, and Ten Commandments observance. Our testimony of these principles establishes strong roots that should be continually nourished but need not be periodically reassessed. For much of the world, issues such as should I smoke or drink, and, if so, how much, and should I experiment sexually outside of marriage are questions whose answers are unclear. For us, the answers are very clear because they have come through revelation. And for that same reason, we know the importance of such things as prayer and renewing our covenants each week.

Janet: These are things we do or don’t do because we know as a matter of absolute truth that they are either totally right or totally wrong. They are absolute truths, anchored on revelation itself, and need not be revisited every time the issues arise.

Rex: Finally, we want to urge you to keep an open mind about the coming semester, the coming year, and all your years here. There is no other place on earth where you can enjoy the rich, total educational experience that our university can give you. You need only take advantage of it. Indeed, no other four-year school even tries as we do to integrate matters of reason with matters of faith in the restored gospel into a complete learning whole.

Janet: Most of you either have reached or will reach the point where you understand this and will take advantage of it. As a result your lives will be eternally blessed. Ours certainly were and still are. There are a few people, however, who never really catch the vision of what BYU offers, and the tragedy of that fact is compounded by the ever-increasing number of qualified students who would like to attend BYU but cannot because of our enrollment ceiling. And so we implore you, each of you, to seek out the best that is here. Do not sit back and wait for BYU’s spiritual and intellectual enrichment to take you by surprise. Reach out for it. Like anything worthwhile in life, this will take effort. It will require not only an open mind but also an active mind and spirit and attitude.

Rex: One of your biggest challenges in this respect will be maintaining a sense of identity within a very large community. The key, I am convinced, is your activity within your ward or stake or, if you are not LDS, your local church group. I strongly believe that one of the best barometers by which you can measure whether you are taking advantage of what BYU uniquely offers is your activity in your ward or other congregation. To be sure, that is not all you need. But it is the best way I know to assure against that most common and serious of BYU student afflictions called loneliness. It is also the best way to assure that you won’t become lost while you are here. And it is your bishop—we hope, in many instances, working with your teachers—who will be able to help you catch the vision of what BYU’s unique opportunity to learn by study and also by faith can do for your life. Working with you, they will be able to help you find a spot in that great majority of our student body for whom the BYU experience provides not only the solid education that you would expect at any other fine university, but also the extra dimension that is available here.

Janet: We are so glad that you are here. We wish we could know each of you on a more personal level. A few of you, we will. But for all of you, we want you to know that your success, welfare, and happiness are what we are striving for, working hand-in-hand with faculty members and supporting staff. We look forward to this coming school year and

achieving that end. May we do so with open minds, open hearts, and optimistic spirits.

Rex: And if you ever get terribly discouraged, just call me on the phone, and Larry Shumway and I will sing to you. May the Lord bless you through this year and throughout your lives. This is our prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.