

Travel “Light”

GLORIA S. MELÉNDEZ

President Bateman, colleagues, students, friends, and family, I appreciate the privilege that has been extended to me to talk with you for a few minutes this morning. I feel humbled by this assignment and pray that I might share a thought or two with you, especially as university students, that will be of some value and that the Spirit of the Lord might convey to you the feelings of my heart should I be unable to express them adequately.

I would like to thank the Spanish Choir for sharing their talents here today and for the beautiful music they have provided. I would also like to thank all of you who are in attendance, especially my family members, who never fail to support me.

Some of the most valuable programs in which the students in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese participate are those that take them abroad and allow them to learn to appreciate the values of other cultures. I have directed several such programs and am at the present time working with small groups of student interns who are dedicating a semester of their time to teaching literacy in rural Mexico. I am grateful to be able to take part in these programs and witness the growth and development of the students as well as those

with whom they work. I too have grown as a result of this experience.

One of the counsels that we repeat many times to students who are preparing to travel abroad is to “travel light,” and I am aware of the grammatical incorrectness of the phrase. I would appreciate any suggestions as to how to say it better, but, in the meantime, because of my lack of eloquence I have chosen this awkward phrase as the theme of my remarks.

We remind Study Abroad groups time and again that wherever they go they will be responsible for carrying their own luggage. Not only that, but on the journey they will acquire souvenirs and gifts, and they must plan for those extra items. If they want to be able not only to endure to the end but to enjoy the trip along the way, they must look ahead and “travel light.”

That is what I am suggesting today for all of us in our travels, whether they be through the university or through life. I would counsel that we plan ahead right now and repack a few

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items, leaving behind the unnecessary ones that can overload us and make the trip less pleasant than it might be otherwise.

It might be well to examine our mind, heart, body, and soul, just to be sure that we are not carrying excess baggage. I am not advocating light-mindedness but *do* encourage all to travel with a mind uncluttered by such things as unclean thoughts, untruths, and negative attitudes. I meet far too many students who have developed a negative image of themselves or of others, who have forgotten for some reason that we were all created by our Heavenly Father and that he doesn't turn out inferior products—that we are his children and he loves us! I would have you all look in the mirror each morning and remind yourselves who you really are and how precious you are to your Heavenly Father. I often say to my grandchildren, “Have you ever seen an angel?”

They used to say, when they were young and innocent, “No, I've never seen an angel.”

So I'd get out the little compact mirror in my purse and show it to them and say, “Now you have.”

That's what we should think about when we look at ourselves.

Another checkpoint or area of caution for excess baggage of the mind is our focus: if we concentrate not on the riches of the world or success according to public opinion but on *eternal* treasures and success—those souvenirs that are of true value—we will find ourselves considerably unburdened on our journey.

And, while we are at it, let's lighten our hearts. A heart is light when it is focused on the light of Christ. Charity is the backpack that we should carry with us wherever we go. Charity is evidence of a heart that is overflowing with love and respect for family, friends, neighbors, and for all humankind, as well as for God. If we open our hearts to receive the love of God and of others, we are in harmony with natural beauty and truth; we recognize the voice of the Spirit and are able to acknowledge that

presence through testimony and humble prayer. We are thus able to appreciate and express gratitude for the world around us.

We should lighten not only our hearts but also our bodies. I am not referring to physical weight—as I hope that is not a factor—but rather to our acquiring a lighter step as we are buoyed up by the hope offered in the gospel that results from obedience to the commandments of the Lord. A body is light that does not carry the burden of moral sin or uncleanness; it is one that bears the yoke of the Lord. He has admonished us, “Take my yoke upon you . . . : and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29–30).

I would finally like to advocate the unburdening of our souls. If we are to realize our full potential in life, it is vital that the soul not be laden with regrets, mourning, or doubts. I've received a few letters from students, sometimes three or four years after they have graduated, confessing to having used notes or turning in someone else's paper. The letters usually end something like this: “Sister Meléndez, you're going to hate me for this, but I just couldn't carry it around any longer.” Could I possibly hate a student for something like this? Never! But I do suffer with them, and I pray that they have now found peace of mind. Believe me, a grade of 75 percent weighs a lot less than a 95 percent grade that is not earned honestly.

We must learn to accept adversity with faith in the Lord and with hope in the future if our soul is to sing in the knowledge of eternal life. We must look forward to the day in which our spirit will reunite with the Father and rejoice in his eternal presence.

When we participate fully in the covenants we have made with the Lord, we can lay the burdens of our soul on him, grateful for the Atonement and striving to stay on the path that has been signaled for us.

These, then, are some of the areas where we can leave behind some heavy carry-ons for

which we might otherwise have to pay extra tariffs. Another area of concern, however, is *how* to unburden ourselves. Of course, at my age, as you might expect, I have a few suggestions there as well!

We must never lose sight of the oft-mentioned, time-tested, guaranteed, number-one solutions to life's problems—which are prayer and the study of the scriptures. These are both invaluable tools in working toward this promise: “Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (3 Nephi 14:7). The promise is valid now, just as it has always been. God will answer our prayers. He has answered mine in spite of all my weaknesses, and I know he hears me and cares about me.

As for scripture study, I'm sure that you are as aware as I am of its value. We can find answers in the standard works. The Lord has given us these books to help us in our daily lives, and he will direct us and inspire us as we approach them—and him—in that knowledge. They apply to each of us—now, today, and always.

But we can also put forth personal effort to get rid of excess baggage. We can actually purge our minds of unwanted material. If you have negative feelings toward another, for example, release them. Let them dissolve or fly away—just see how it makes you feel, even about yourself. This is not just rhetoric. Dr. Madison Sowell, my esteemed colleague, recently treated the subject of forgiveness with great eloquence and humility, and I personally have experienced its benefits. It isn't even hard to do! Try it; you'll like it!

Mrs. Myrlie Evers-Williams spoke just over a month ago from this pulpit about the damage that hate can do to a person (“Positive Ways of Producing Change Within the System,” forum address delivered at the Marriott Center, 25 February 1997). The person who hates is only corroding his own inner self. The object of the hatred may suffer for a time, but once that

person feels secure in the fact that the prejudice or misunderstanding is not of their making, then only the hater is hurt by those emotions that cannot come from a divine source. Let it go.

President Spencer W. Kimball said:

Why does the Lord ask you to love your enemies and to return good for evil? That you might have the benefit of it. It does not injure him so much when you hate a person . . . , but the hate and the bitterness canker your unforgiving heart. [TSWK, p. 103; emphasis in original]

There is no better way to learn love, tolerance, and respect for others than by living in another culture. Missionaries testify to this every day. Our programs here at BYU that offer opportunities to live in foreign cultures while touring, studying, or serving are outstanding, and I recommend them to anyone who does not fully recognize that truly we are all equal in the sight of the Lord.

Once you have learned to love others, you will also gain new respect for yourself. Self-deprecation is devastating. Whether lack of self-esteem comes from personal failure in a task or from being put down by others, the most important thing to remember is that we are loved unconditionally by our Heavenly Father.

He views your failures much as we as instructors do—not as steps backward but rather as steps forward in the learning process. I have asked my students on more than one occasion not to expect me to remember their grades. Of course, in the past five or six years I have had to ask them not to expect me to remember their *names* either!

Although I seldom forget a face, I now remember the names of my junior high school students from the '70s better than I do my BYU students from a year ago. “Senior citizenship” is like that. At any rate, when I see former students, I see A's shining on their foreheads. I am often surprised when one comments in a surprisingly loving tone that mine was the most

difficult class they ever had and that in fact they got a C! I am always sorry to record a C grade for a class-A person, but it is the teacher's job to record and average *scores*, not character. I hope never to make a student feel that he is less than great as a person, for I do not recall a single one of them over a period of more than 20 years that I did not truly love.

I am not an adherent of the current philosophy that focuses on self-gratification and on blaming others for our shortcomings. I believe in accountability. But I know that if we are going to be able to love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to practice self-respect rather than self-effacement. Although we need to be humbly teachable and open to self-improvement, we must also pause from time to time to take stock of our own strengths. While striving to overcome our weaknesses, we must build on those strengths in order to be able to support and encourage others. This is a serious weakness of my own, and I would that I could help others to avoid it.

I am planning to improve in this area after retirement—along with a long list of other things I plan to improve on after retirement. So I am now hoping for extreme longevity in order to be able to realize all these projects!

We can also rid our minds of excess baggage by focusing on goals. I have often counseled students to follow the career that they truly want. I personally know too many people who are highly successful in a material sense but, although they have tried to come to terms with the situation, are unhappy with a career choice or with the area in which they have chosen to live. Sometimes they are caught in an unbearable marriage or family situation, or they simply seem “lost,” with no direction in their lives.

To them I would say, “Back up.” This is not an easy thing to do, as those who have trouble like I do with parallel parking will testify! But my advice is:

Pursue the field where your heart really lies—perhaps as a hobby or an avocation if you are truly “locked into” a career situation.

Move to where you really want to raise your family.

Get professional help and talk to friends, family, and Church leaders.

And, above all, turn to the Lord for comfort—and for counsel and inspiration.

You *will* find yourself. You'll be surprised at how you will come to the light and at how weightless you will feel when you make a decision based on inspiration. The bottom line is, “Travel light.” No one should go through life carrying the burden of an impossibly unhappy situation. There are solutions.

Raymundo Hernandez Gil, an international student, submitted the following thought, which sounds much better in Spanish:

It is almost impossible to carry my own cross; the secret of lightening it is this: when, forgetting my own cross, with a positive attitude I help others carry theirs. [“Frases para cultivar la excelencia,” unpublished manuscript]

This is a choice we can make that will further help us to be happy in spite of the trials that come to us or the situations in which we find ourselves.

I am thankful for children who lighten my burden, who light up my life, and who have made the right choices. As parents we recognized that they had great potential. We have called their attention to the fact that, with teachers as parents, they had had to live on very little all their lives. Indeed, the only thing that they had enjoyed in abundance was love; everything else was lacking to some degree, and we suggested subtly that they might consider professions that would provide a more comfortable existence for their families. However, happily, they all made their own decisions: three became professional teachers, and all five take every opportunity that is

presented to instruct others—often with no remuneration at all. They are all happy, successful, marvelous parents who are bringing up the world’s most beautiful, talented, and intelligent children in gospel-oriented homes—and I *never* resort to hyperbole!

An important unburdening came into my own life largely as the result of a battle with cancer several years ago. Because of an extremely heavy work schedule, I really didn’t have time to pay much attention to the tumor. On the day that I had surgery I asked that it be done early in the morning under a local anaesthetic (my surgeon was marvelous and did that for me) so that I could teach a class here at 12:00, another at 2:00, and catch a plane at 4:00 to Texas because I had to give a paper at a conference. But, besides all that, the realization that I might be approaching the end of my earthly journey made me take stock of all the wonderful blessings that I had received, principally that I had been able to be with my children through schooling, missions, temple marriages, and other major events in their lives. I had even been able to enjoy several grandchildren. My own father had passed away when I was 10 years old, so I could really appreciate these wonderful gifts from Heavenly Father, and the feelings of regret, fear, anger, or depression that are normal under those circumstances simply were not there. They were washed away in a flood of gratitude that let my spirit say “Thy will be done” and really mean it. Since then, I am able to consider each goal that my children reach, each trial that they overcome, each joy I share with them, and each new baby that arrives in the family an enormous bonus, and I only pray that I might deserve these extra years that I have been granted.

A less personal example might be in order now, regarding this journey through life. Our student interns travel to Mexico with the literacy program that was established in 1992 by our beloved colleague Ted Lyon, who is

currently serving as mission president in Osorno, Chile. These students learn through living in villages without electricity, running water, or sewage systems that the simpler life is, the fuller it becomes. They have seen family togetherness as a necessary element for survival; simple activities that while fulfilling personal, family, and village needs tie whole communities together; and total well-being and contentment without a single CD, a computer, or even a television set. They have watched people cured by herbs and other natural elements, often without the intervention of medical personnel as we know them. They have experienced the relativity of time of day: where a wristwatch is an impediment, where people depend on their own bodies to know when to eat and sleep and on the sun to know when to arise, when to go to class, when to plant, and when to reap. They have seen total dependence on the weather for sustenance, and they have witnessed great faith in God and gratefulness for life itself, for often that is practically all there is!

This is traveling at its lightest in a material sense. These students learn gratitude, humility, and sincerity and experience the giving and receiving of true brotherly love. They all return home with a resolve to travel lighter. I only wish every student could have the opportunity to participate in such a program.

I would like to close with a quote from the Huehuetlatolli, a collection of wise counsels that the Aztec senior citizens would give to the young people at different stages of their lives in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. The following quote, translated from the Aztec by my mentor, Dr. Charles E. Dibble, expresses somewhat how I feel today:

Behold, with this my words come to an end. Guard them with your hearts. Place them in the chambers of your hearts. Inscribe them in your hearts. Not many, not numerous are the words. . . .

Here, in some manner, are just two words worthy of being guarded. . . .

The first word is to enter near to . . . unto our lord . . . the master. . . . Give him all thy heart, thy body. Let thy feet go not astray. . . .

The second word is to live in peace with others. . . . May all people have thy esteem, thy respect. Do not offend one because of something. . . . Show mercy; for our lord is watching thee. . . . Just live; already thou art guided. . . .

*Briefly, this is . . . my duty to you. Perhaps somewhere you will reflect; perhaps you will ignore it. Already you know that I have complied with my duty. [Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 6, trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research, 1969), pp. 91–92]*

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May he help you as you lighten your burdens and your journey becomes more pleasant. And may you know the joy of helping others along the way. I love the Lord and the gospel that he has restored to us through the Prophet Joseph Smith. I love the scriptures that help us to understand the divine will of the Father. I love and support with all my heart the men whom the Lord has chosen to lead us in these latter days. I want my family and friends and my colleagues and students to know that I truly love you, and I wish you happiness and eternal joy through him in whose name I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.