

After the “Y” — What Then?

NOEL L. OWEN

Since I am a relative newcomer to BYU and somewhat unfamiliar with its traditions, when I initially received the invitation to give this devotional address, instinctively the thought went through my mind, “Wow, maybe they think that I haven’t been working hard enough and this is the punishment!” A few moments reflection, however, convinced me that this invitation was an honor, although I can’t help thinking that the punishment is likely to follow the honor if my talk is not satisfactory! In fact, if you will pardon a “pun,” on looking behind me, I feel very much like a man in the *firing* line!

On a serious note, I do consider it both an honor and a privilege to be asked to speak at this devotional. Maybe it takes a person from outside this institution to really appreciate its uniqueness—a university where secular learning and high moral and spiritual values are taught hand in hand. Some people call it the “Lord’s University,” others the “Law School’s University,” but what ever it is called, it is certainly unique! When I show visitors around the campus, they are always impressed by its beauty and cleanliness, and also by the courteous and friendly behavior shown by the students they meet. And several have commented

with interest on the motto seen adorning the west entrance: Enter to learn—go forth to serve.

Building a Sure Foundation

The subject of my remarks today will be related to this motto, since I’d like to focus on our own individual attitudes and on our relationship with the world we face when we leave the “Y.” The great majority of you here today will be familiar with the story of the three little pigs. But for those of you brought up in the electronic age and nourished in Nintendo-based homes, I will briefly summarize the rather sad tale.

Once upon a time, three young pigs set out from their home together to seek their fortunes and to build themselves nice homes with gardens and so on. The first pig bought a load of hay and built his house very quickly. The second pig purchased a supply of timber and built his house out of wood. This house took a little longer to complete, but they were both well established in their homes by the time the third

Noel L. Owen was a professor of chemistry at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 26 June 1990.

pig had finished off his house—which he constructed out of bricks and stones. Now the story continues by introducing a rather wily and hungry wolf who fancied a meal of pork. Having failed to entice the first pig out of his house, he proceeded to blow down the building and then to eat the pig. He repeated this procedure with the second pig, but he did have to exert a little more effort in this case. However, the third little pig’s house was a different proposition and, try as he would, he could not blow it down. The end of this little tale tends to vary somewhat from version to version, but most have the wolf falling down the chimney into a large pot of boiling water. And the third little pig lived happily ever after—apart, of course, from grieving a little because of the untimely demise of his two brothers.

Now I suspect it is possible to extract a moral out of every story, and I’m going to attempt to do that for this tale. The three pigs were quite obviously three quite different individuals with different personalities. But they had several features in common.

1. They all came from the same home or background.
2. They were all given a similar start in life.
3. They all had the same overall goals.
4. They all had their free agency and freedom to choose what they felt was best for them.
5. They all faced the same challenge in life—namely, the wolf!

However, only one succeeded—and that was because he built his home with a firm foundation and with strong durable materials.

Now, before I go any further, I want to say that there is a limit to how far one can relate a fairy story to real life—and I am not implying that BYU students have any characteristics that are commonly associated with any farmyard animals! Far from it—as far as I can see, you are a very good-looking, clean, intelligent group of individuals! However, during your time here at BYU, you will be given very

similar opportunities for personal growth, and you will be exposed to a very similar base of moral behavior and teachings. When you leave the “Y,” you will have your free agency, enabling you to choose and to make decisions. You will probably have the same overall goals of eternal life and a happy family and an enjoyable career, etc. You will undoubtedly experience many different challenges in life. These can take the form, for example, of temptations involving individual behavior or personal tragedies. The temptations you experience will all probably emanate from the same source, and both they and the personal tragedies invariably come at times when they are least expected. How you will fare or succeed in overcoming these challenges will depend very largely *not* on the nature of the challenges, but on what foundations you will have used to build your characters, testimonies, personalities, and lives—foundations that you are now building and auspicing here at BYU and that should be firmly in place before the challenges are met. So I urge you to make the most of your time here: attend the firesides and invited lectures, drink deeply from this marvelous spiritual “cup” that never runs dry! The opportunity to sit and hear a General Authority in person is rare indeed in the mission field.

In the Book of Mormon, Helaman’s advice to his sons is quoted in Helaman 5:12:

And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall.

Remember the last phrase: “they cannot fall.”

This then represents the basic formula for establishing the foundations we need—but what about the day-to-day challenges and practical problems? There will be times when you will feel very alone and insignificant, and the thought of facing the world's millions with their myriad problems will seem just too overwhelming. Thoughts such as "How can I cope with all this when I can't even get dates or good grades in calculus at college?" will appear. I think that mostly everyone feels like that on occasion. The situation reminds me of the *Peanuts* cartoon where Lucy (the amateur psychologist) is giving Charlie Brown some advice for five cents a sitting.

Lucy states: "Life, Charlie Brown, is just like an ocean liner, and people behave like passengers on the upper deck. Some sit in deck chairs looking back on the way they have come, whereas others face forward and look to the future. Which way is your deck chair facing, Charlie Brown?"

Charlie replies, "I don't know—I've never managed to get my deck chair opened!"

I have a lot of sympathy for Charlie Brown when I feel confused about all the things there are to think about and to do!

You and the Lord Together

As a convert LDS scientist living in the mission field, I often felt very much alone and insignificant, but I remember as I read more and more from the Book of Mormon and from books written by Church authorities, my testimony and confidence would strengthen and grow. I also began to relate more to some of the authors and characters of other LDS books. One of my heroes was the late Henry Eyring—whose name is known to virtually all students of chemistry worldwide for his contributions to the theories of chemical reactions. I recall reading in a book written by some of Dr. Eyring's colleagues and past students—and dedicated to the great scientist—a sentence that personally helped me a great deal. It was something

to the effect that, to Henry Eyring, his religious principles and beliefs were so vitally important that wherever he went, he would carry them with him—much as one would an umbrella—and everyone who came in contact with him felt the influence of this aura. That is, they came within his umbrella! He had a strong testimony, and he had the courage to declare openly his strong convictions—and this gave him great security and stability in every environment in which he found himself. I think that the simplest way to gain a strong testimony is to live and to enjoy living the commandments and to read and ponder the scriptures.

Sometimes, however, we may feel faint-hearted because of the sheer numbers of the opposition! We are very much a minority church, except of course here in Utah! However, let me remind you of a dramatic story in the Old Testament.

In Judges, chapter 7, we are told that the Israelites rose against the oppressive yolk of the Midianites under a new leader chosen by God named Gideon. Gideon raised an army of 32,000 and went against the Midianite host of 135,000 soldiers—an enemy with overall numbers of more than four times his own. Then the Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men. If you win with these numbers you will become proud and conceited in your own abilities."

So the Lord told Gideon to ask his people the question "Who is afraid and fearful of this coming battle?" All those who answered in the affirmative were told to return to their homes. Now this left Gideon with a total of 10,000 men. The ratio of Midianite numbers to Israelite numbers was now over 13 to 1.

Then the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many people," and he told him to take them down to a source of water and to separate all those who drank like animals on their knees from those who cupped their hands to their lips to drink. Only 300 men passed this

particular test! By now, Gideon was having to contemplate facing a 135,000-strong Midianite army with 300 brave Israelites who showed remarkable gentility in their drinking habits! The ratio was now up to 450 to 1! However, the Lord was not about to abandon Gideon; instead, he inspired him to use very clever strategies to surround and confuse the large Midianite army by generating enough noise to give the impression of a much larger force. The Midianites fled—pursued by Gideon and his band—and Israel was triumphant. The number ratio was such that no one could doubt they had had divine assistance in their victory.

Just consider the size of this Church and the population of the world in which we now live. A current estimate of the world's population is about 5,000 million, whereas the LDS population is just over 7 million. Now that is a ratio of about 700 to 1—not very different to the one that Gideon had to work with. In these modern times *you* are the equivalent of the 300-strong Israelite army. Don't be daunted by numbers; never underestimate the effect for good that you can have. The example of a righteous family played a large part in our own family's conversion to the restored gospel. So as you face the world when you leave BYU, please remember that however lonely you may occasionally feel, you are not alone as long as you are living in such a way that you have the support of the Lord. There is a sentence in my wife's patriarchal blessing that has comforted her many a time: "Remember, you and the Lord together constitute a majority" !

Alma's advice to his sons is pertinent here:

Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise. [Alma 37:6]

We can all be part, and in fact we should be part, of the "small" means that can bring about

the great things in the overall plan of our Father in Heaven.

Carol Lynn Pearson has expressed her feelings on our role very beautifully.

*Do you know
How many count on you
to steer by this night?
Do you know
How dark the sea
and dim the stars
and strong the wind
out there?
And you would
hide your lighthouse
under a bushel?
Don't you dare!*

Unlike certain chemical reactions that often result in a balanced equilibrium so that the reaction goes one way or another depending on outside forces or influences, our progress through this life is one way only. We are born and we die, and in between we grow and experience life with all its complexities. Since we cannot reverse the passage of time, let's be positive about the journey of life that lies ahead. As regards our own attitudes en route, we only have two real options: our spirituality either grows or diminishes. Merely being static should not be an option, and apathy is a big killer in the Lord's great plan. Remember Jesus was kind to the repentant adulteress. And he had a sympathetic interest in the thief on the cross who wanted to do better. But concerning the man who was not improving himself, the Lord said, "Take the talent from him and give it to him who has ten talents, and cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness, where there shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth." The punishment for neglect is often as severe as it is for opposition or abuse.

When we don't use our arms, we lose the use of our muscles. So it is with our talents and

testimonies in our lives. They need to be nourished and strengthened, and your time here at BYU is a vitally important period in which to do this. The scriptures do not say that our journey and our progress will always be easy. Our Church history is replete with stories that describe in simple and stark detail the sacrifice and suffering the early Saints experienced, and the growth and development of our modern day Church is to a large degree the result of the fact that so many pioneers successfully endured these hardships and benefited from a concomitant spiritual strengthening.

Preparing for the Trail Ahead

I would now like to share with you an exciting adventure story of great personal interest to me that was brought to my attention a few years ago. I want to relate it to the theme of my talk today. I was shown an article in a Shropshire magazine (published in England) written by a man who found an old trunk in the attic of a house in the town of Shrewsbury. In the trunk was a handwritten manuscript. The manuscript represented part of the diary of an old clock-mender (Mr. James Hanny) who had lived near the England/ Wales border and whose hobby was to walk the hills of Wales. This manuscript related how in 1874 this elderly man, then age 73, had visited an old friend of his who had a farm in Wales. The story went on to say how his friend's daughter (aged 18) agreed to take him to see the waterfalls near a small village called Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant. Apparently Mr. Hanny had sustained an ambition to visit the falls (called locally Pistill Rhaeadr) for approximately forty years. Now this area is close to where I was brought up, and I have some knowledge of the country and the terrain. The distance they walked would have been approximately eighteen miles round-trip over some quite rugged hills. Here I quote from the manuscript:

My host, Mr. Humphreys, was the very embodiment of Welsh hospitality, nothing was too much for him and his household to make my stay as comfortable as possible; his charming daughter Rosamond was a most beautiful and talented young lady, and she and I became great friends. She had a deep love for Wales in her heart, which became obvious as she described her lonely walks among the wild and legendary hills, amid the wind-swept heather. . . . Rosamond was very keen to be my guide to the falls, and she promised me a wonderful walk back over the mountains; a walk, she said, I would always remember. They were, indeed, prophetic words.

As you can see, the old clock-mender had quite a graphic turn of phrase! Now, back to the narrative:

On the following day, after an early lunch, we started out. It was a long but interesting walk, and at last we arrived at the beautiful falls. I stood there for some time assimilating a sight that had been denied me for so many years. My companion stood by my side, a smile on her lovely face. She understood and appreciated this happy moment of mine. . . .

Amid the soothing influence of the tumbling waters, we ate the refreshments that Rosamond had thoughtfully brought, until she said that we had stayed longer than we should, and our walk back over the mountains must not be delayed any longer.

They started their return journey, but the day had been too strenuous for the seventy-three-year-old man. Again I quote:

I had completely underestimated my supply of strength for the arduous task ahead. My companion, bursting with the vitality of the young, and with a supply of seemingly inexhaustible energy, was well equipped for the journey, and like myself, had no conception of my limitations. The young do not understand the meaning of weakness in the old; they have never experienced it themselves and cannot conceive it in others.

His story then relates in some detail the path they took, the magnificent scenery, and the frequent stops for rest. Quoting again:

My companion called to say we must hurry on. I must admit I had been glad of the rest. Again we started off, Rose leading the way. My legs were now beginning to ache and I could feel a tightness in my chest. Once, seeing I was having difficulty in catching up with her, she ran back to me.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Oh yes," I lied as cheerfully as I could. "But a little rest would do me good."

A slight troubled frown appeared on her face for a fleeting moment. She smiled. "Of course," she said, "But . . ." She looked up anxiously at the sky where a few black-looking clouds were looming up. "We still have a long way to go. We must not stay long."

Once again we started off, and the going became even more rough and arduous. If I had been a young man, supple of limb and muscle, I would have enjoyed the climb to the full, but the acute pain in my legs betokened the opposite. . . . The darkness deepened rapidly, and all around took on a hue of deep purple. The heavens appeared to be closing down on us. Black clouds began to obliterate the remaining light, until it was difficult to see the ground beneath our feet. . . . In a short time we were soaked to the skin. We dare not stop long; we could never hope to survive a night exposed as we were to the elements. We were already soaked to saturation point. With the helping hand of my companion we practically felt our way in the darkness. After what seemed an interminable time, Rose suddenly stopped, and pulled me back a pace or so. In the gloom I peered closely into her rain-streaked face.

"Is there anything wrong?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Rose replied, hesitatingly. "But I have a strange feeling we are on the wrong track. Stay here a moment."

Carefully she lay on the ground, and as I looked on wonderingly, she crawled forward very slowly. Presently I heard her give a little cry, and following her example, I too, crawled forward until I reached

her side. She put out a restraining hand to stop me venturing further. Picking up a stone she gently threw it forward. There was silence for a few moments, and then I heard the stone falling on rocks far below. I could hear it bounding from crag to crag getting fainter and fainter. We were on the edge of a dangerous cliff! We crawled back to comparative safety; I was now shivering as much with shock as with the cold. I found my companion's hand and pressed it with a gesture of despair. Words failed me. Only one thought ran through my fevered mind. Lost! Lost on a mountain with the night in front of us. Soaked with rain; cold, and already weary to the point of complete exhaustion. What hope was there for us?

Rose's voice broke through my bitter thoughts, and with it, renewed hope. "I think I know where we are," she said. "In the darkness we have strayed from the right road. We must go back to find our bearings."

She led me like a child, and amidst the howling of the wind we carefully retreated from that awful abyss. From that moment I seemed to have lost all sense of direction and time. Numbed with the cold, all my actions were those of an automaton. But for the supporting hand of Rose, I would gladly have been content to lay my weary body on the rocky ground. But somehow that frail figure kept me going. Somehow she managed to support me and we stumbled through the darkness of the night. For what seemed an eternity our passage continued until I fancied I could see little sparks of light that danced in front of my eyes like so many fireflies. My befuddled mind could not comprehend that safety was near at hand. Above the wind I heard Rosamond's voice. "Here," she cried. "We are here. We are coming." The little spots of light came nearer and nearer, and it was with intense relief that at last I realized they were the lights of lanterns. For the rest of the journey we were half-carried to the blessed haven of Brynteg—the home of my friend.

The article then went on to say that as well as the manuscript, there was found in the old trunk a newspaper cutting describing the

wedding at a town called Llanfyllin (in 1883), nine years later, of Rosamond Humphreys, youngest daughter of Mr. Humphreys (Brynteg) to Lewis Owen.

Rosamond Humphreys was my grandmother, whom I never met. She died before I was born, and I suspect my mother never heard about this particular exploit in the hills of Wales, because neither my brother nor I was told anything at all about it!

Now my purpose in relating this story to you, about 116 years later, apart from sharing with you the great joy that discovering this manuscript gave to me, and the pride and closeness I now feel for one of my ancestors, is to emphasize the fact that in this story, Rosamond Humphreys personified the following attributes: (1) bravery or courage; (2) great kindness and compassion, including leading another to safety; (3) faith, with no indulgence in self-despair; and, most important, (4) knowing her way amidst treacherous paths.

During the latter part of their adventure, she was obviously concerned about the lateness of the hour and about their slow progress. She was anxious, yet kind and seemingly very patient, and led him by the hand when he was unable to do more than put one foot in front of the other. Because of her knowledge of the mountains, born of practice and experience, she had faith that they would reach their destination, whereas he could not see the end and

had started to doubt. She knew the path they had to take and the ones they should avoid.

Let me now try to relate these characteristics to us in these days. We will undoubtedly experience considerable challenges in our lives, and we will find others in similar predicaments who are close to despair. We may find ourselves in positions when we may need to guide other people to safety, and our standing as leaders will depend on our own personal preparation and knowledge of the gospel. I can think of no better attributes or foundations for anyone to have as they face the world than:

1. *To know where you are and where you are going.* To be familiar with the path that needs to be traveled.

2. *To have great faith.* To know that God will never abandon you to the adversary.

3. *To show compassion and kindness.*

4. *To be brave.* To be courageous does not exclude fear, but fear is conquered by faith and doing what is right.

May we all base our lives on principles as fundamental as these. They will serve us well as strong foundations in times of trouble and stress. Let us remember that the third little pig of our fable survived because he chose to use materials that provided a strong foundation. And thus let us strive to place ourselves on that "rock which is our Redeemer" where "none shall fall," I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.