

# *Beethoven's Kiss: On the Odd Reasons for Brigham Young's Excellent University*

LARRY H. PEER

The great Hungarian concert pianist Andor Földes tells the remarkable story of the watershed moment in his rise to world renown. He was 16 years old and already a veteran of years of intense practice and performance. The pianist Emil von Sauer, Franz Liszt's last surviving pupil, came to Budapest and asked young Andor to play for him. Having listened intently to him playing Bach's Toccata in C Major, von Sauer requested another piece. Andor put all his heart and skill into playing Beethoven's "Pathétique" sonata, then continued with Schumann's "Papillons." Finally, after a long pause, von Sauer slowly rose, took the young man's head into his hands, and kissed him on the forehead. "My son," he said tenderly, "when I was your age I became a student of Liszt. He kissed me on the forehead after my first lesson, saying, 'Take good care of this kiss—it comes from Beethoven, who gave it to me after hearing me play.' I have waited for years to pass on this sacred heritage, and now I feel you deserve it." (From Andor Földes, "Beethoven's Kiss," *Reader's Digest*, November 1986, 145.)

Andor Földes rose to the expectation. Beethoven's kiss miraculously lifted him from the high level at which he was performing and put him on a level of real greatness. The incomparable greatness and uniqueness

of Beethoven survives in many ways, but none more personally or more powerfully than through the mentoring of those touched by this kiss symbolic of his greatness and uniqueness.

There is another tradition of incomparable greatness and uniqueness that has been passed on through the touch of masters, and not just masters of artistic and intellectual power but masters of the spirit. Let me describe this particular greatness and uniqueness by referring to and commenting on the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees' mission statement for our institution:

*The mission of [BYU] is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life. That assistance should provide a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting where a commitment to excellence is expected and the full realization of human potential is pursued. . . .*

*To succeed in this mission the university must provide an environment enlightened by living prophets and sustained by those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God. [The Mission of Brigham Young University, 1]*

---

*Larry H. Peer was a BYU professor of comparative literature when this devotional address was given on 2 December 2003.*

The mission statement goes on to say that “in that environment these four major educational goals should prevail.” Let me paraphrase those four goals.

**First**, all teaching and all relationships within the BYU community should reflect devout love of God, be centered on the absolute and revealed truths of the gospel, and be in conformity with the procedures of the Lord’s church. Consider the implications of the fact that the university is an institutional part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and, thus, of the restoration of the gospel.

**Second**, the intellectual integrity that can only come through a broad and intense general education must be the primary academic mission of the institution. General education excellence at the university is its main goal, the primary concern of its faculty and use of faculty time and resources, and, along with testimony building, the litmus test of our right to be called “the Lord’s university.” At a university, pursuing a fine major without pursuing an exceptionally fine general education is a fraud and turns out, in the long run, to be pernicious.

**Third**, in areas where the university judges it can provide *real* excellence, instruction in special fields or “majors” is given, grooming BYU graduates who are at the top in these fields.

**Fourth**, a few graduate programs of genuine consequence will be encouraged to give special opportunity for scholarly research and creative endeavor to faculty and students.

In his famous “second-century” address to the faculty and student body, President Kimball gave a detailed explanation of just what our mission of incomparable greatness and uniqueness is all about (see Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” *Speeches of the Year, 1975* [Provo: BYU, 1976], 244; see also *BYU Studies* 16, no. 4 (summer 1976), 445–57). President Kimball reminded us that the reason for the very existence of this institution is that it become the world’s “educational Everest.” If this were not a heady enough goal,

President Kimball added to it the Lord’s expectation that every graduate of this place have a unique spirit and that we all, faculty and students alike, do brilliantly those things that are done at the few other great universities of the world, and do numerous things *better* than they are done anywhere else. This is, of course, a warning against what we may call the “instead-of syndrome,” where we may erroneously think that because we are unique it is acceptable for us to do some things “instead of” rather than “in addition to” what is expected at the few other great universities. This university is not of the world any more than the Church is of the world, President Kimball reminded us, so that we have no choice but to hold the line as regards gospel values and as regards higher expectations for ourselves. Each of us is to become a *certain kind of person*, then pass on what we have learned and what we have become. And cynical responses to this ideal are not acceptable.

There is, of course, the kiss of great teaching that has been passed on to us at Brigham Young’s excellent university. And there is, for the teacher, the kiss of the superior student’s attitude, discipline, and teachableness. The heritage of this university, from Brothers Dusenberry and Maeser to the present, is its great teachers and superior students—not necessarily its *famous* ones, but its *great* ones in refined intellect and hidden treasures of the spirit. If we look in detail at this heritage, if we scrutinize that kiss of greatness and uniqueness that has passed Brigham Young’s attitude of spiritual and intellectual excellence down to us, what do we find? I propose that we find a *certain kind of mind* linking great teachers to superior students in an unbroken chain from 1875 to 2003. This, in fact, is the odd reason for the existence of our institution: *to create a certain kind of mind that provides a Beethoven’s kiss for those to come*. We may call this “Brigham Young’s Excellent Mind,” and I propose the following as this mind’s four chief characteristics:

## 1. Brigham Young's Excellent Mind Is Self-Reliant

I am reminded of the poet e. e. cummings' advice to his students:

*To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.*  
[From the *Ottawa Hills Spectator*, 26 October 1955, in *e. e. cummings: A Miscellany Revised* (New York: October House, 1965), 335]

To be self-reliant is to find the best self you have and, at the same time, to be non-self-destructive. Therefore a great mind relies on itself *as it is schooled by the Holy Spirit*. President Marion G. Romney used to tell a story about the starving seagulls ("Fable of the Gullible Gull," *Reader's Digest*, October 1950, 32; quoted in Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982, 91). Great flocks of Florida gulls were once starving amid plenty. Fishing was good, but the gulls did not know how to fish. Generations of gulls depended on the shrimp fleet to toss them scraps from the nets, but then the fleet moved. The big birds, once so free, never bothered to learn how to fish for themselves and they never taught their children how to fish. Instead, they led their little ones to the shrimp nets. People tend to be like these gulls. They see nothing wrong with picking scraps from spiritual, emotional, and intellectual shrimp fleets. The point is that "the practice of coveting and receiving unearned benefits has now become . . . fixed in our society. . . . This practice, if universally accepted and implemented in any society, will make slaves of its citizens" (Romney, "Celestial Nature," 91).

Parents make "starving gulls" out of their children by permissiveness, by the way they dole out family resources, and by choosing to avoid conflict rather than do hard teaching. Church members become starving gulls by

becoming financially or emotionally dependent on leaders, neighbors, or family members. BYU students become starving gulls by taking the easy way out of reading and studying; by avoiding intellectual difficulty, particularly by being concerned about grades instead of about hard intellectual development; or by being concerned with appearances rather than with the achievement of deep spirituality.

The development of our minds and hearts depends upon self-reliance, because without this freedom we are in no position to even tell when we are enslaved by false doctrine, mere opinion, or tendentious subjectivism. Both intellectual and spiritual excellence are based upon getting to the frontiers of knowledge and to the edge of our weaknesses so as to explore beyond where one has gone before. Since there is nobody out there, one must rely on oneself in making discoveries and judiciously evaluating the terrain. President Hinckley has reminded us:

*The learning process is endless. We must read, we must observe, we must assimilate, and we must ponder that to which we expose our minds. . . . There is nothing quite as invigorating as being able to evaluate and then solve a difficult problem, to grapple with something that seems almost unsolvable and then find a resolution.* [Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something* (New York: Times Books, 2000), 62]

The Doctrine and Covenants tells us that there is no such thing as a temporal commandment, that all commandments are spiritual (see D&C 29:34–35). This is true of the intellect as well. All true intellection, all trenchant critical thinking, has to do with spirituality. This passage in the Doctrine and Covenants also tells us that we are to be agents unto ourselves: that is, nobody else is to be the agent for the self. One of the things this means is that whenever we get into a situation that threatens our self-reliance, we will find that our intellectual

power and our freedom and our very spirituality are threatened as well.

## 2. Brigham Young's Excellent Mind Is Service-Oriented

There is, of course, nothing really to be gained by self-reliance unless we comply with the eternal nature of things. The eternal nature of things demands that we use our developed gifts to bless the lives of others—to heed the divine dictum to those who *have* to help those who *have not*. If we were to think of Jacob's advice to the Nephites in university terms, we might see that the kind of service that has kissed generations of Brigham Young's excellent students goes something like this: "Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your *learning*, that they may be *rich in learning* like unto you. . . . And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain *intellectual riches*, if ye seek them, and *ye shall seek them with the intent to do good*" (see Jacob 2:17–19).

It might be exaggerated to assert that the *only* reason for an excellent person to seek learning is to serve others, but certainly we do not seek learning to serve mammon, to gain power and authority rather than to help and nurture, and never merely to get a job. The point is that service is not something we endure on this earth so that we may receive a reward. Service—especially that able to be rendered by the intellectually and spiritually competent—must become the very fiber of our being, that which we naturally provide others by the nature of true learning. The intellectually astute know that there is an interdependence between those who have and those who have not. The process of serving exalts the poor and humbles the rich. In the process both are sanctified. The poor in mind, released from the bondage and limitations of intellectual poverty, are enabled as free people to rise to their full potential so that they can provide the kiss of excellence

to others. The rich in mind, by imparting of their gifts and attainments, participate in the eternal principle of giving. Once a person has been made whole, or self-reliant, that person reaches out to serve others and then the cycle of spirituality repeats itself.

Now there is a tendency toward *zeal without service* among the worldly and the naïve. You know that zealots are moralists who feel so confident and comfortable in the superiority and self-centeredness of their particular code that they turn their efforts toward improving the moral scene around them. Religious zealots we know about. It is the *secular* zealots of whom Brigham Young's excellently trained minds need to be most wary. A secular zealot is a person who sees so clearly what is right in terms of the world's assumptions that he or she is driven to convert others, especially the religiously committed, to give the poor benighted masses what they need if the world is to be saved. These are the crusaders par excellence, and, although they can do much good for society, they can easily go to extremes and become obsessed with particular causes for which there is no real transcendent basis. The secular zealot sees public issues as manifestations of the need for reform, based upon both noneternal principles *and* less-than-complete empirical evidence. Causes espoused vary from one time and place to another, but watch for the clues in political and sectarian discourse: an underlying belief formulated without specific evidence but presented as though it were based upon all the facts; a proliferation of the words *should* and *ought*; and an appeal to "secular authority" (as though that weren't a classical contradiction in terms). We know how dangerous a person with a little authority, as they suppose, can be. What is essential in Brigham Young's excellent mind is service undergirded by the transcendent rather than the momentary or the local, by the eternal rather than by media-centered or one-upmanship zealotry.

### 3. Brigham Young's Excellent Mind Is Literate

The essential, indispensable means to education is literacy—not the mere functional literacy of the ability to read and write but the high literacy of precision and range in thinking and expression. Great teachers do not tolerate the least technical flaw in students' expression, and neither do superior students. Here is the reason why. A mutual relationship exists between language and thought. It is a relationship that is often recognized but more often ignored. George Orwell once observed that language "becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, [and] the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts" ("Politics and the English Language," *Horizon* 13, no. 76 [April 1946]: 253; also in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950], 77). This was written before the dominance of television and film, which has given us more reason to ponder his forebodings. It does not require too much effort to see that we are living in a world in which the image on the screen threatens to displace the written word.

Now the image is important and rightly powerful, and our emotional and aesthetic lives would be much poorer without it. But there is a differential limitation and strength between the image and written language. What I mean can be understood as we remember that communication functions by arousal, expression, and statement. The visual image, being denotative, is powerful as a means of arousal. Its expressive potential is less reliable. Its capacity for statement, unaided by language or contextual code, is very low, immeasurably lower than words. Arousal and limited expressiveness is common to all functioning animals, but the ability of words to make statements is distinctively human. I might exaggerate if I were to say that if you cannot write it you do not know it, but I am painfully accurate in say-

ing that the weakening of written language through displacement by the image is a fundamental threat to virtually everything that is distinctively human, especially knowledge and intellect. Reliance on the image is a threat to the extension and development of the human capacity for precision of thought and for the ability to creatively manipulate connotative structures. Sophistication in languages is the fundamental trait of the true intellectual. The mind of Brigham Young's excellent university will be characterized by *genuine literacy, by precision and range in language and thought*. This bears sibling relationship to what Brigham Young meant by "learn everything that the children of men know, and be prepared for the most refined society upon the face of the earth" (JD 16:77).

### 4. Brigham Young's Excellent Mind Is Realistic

By "realistic" I mean that an excellent mind takes things for what they are by nature, without confusing the world's ideas, standards, and definitions of things with eternal verities. Think of this story told by the great Native American actor Iron Eyes Cody.

*Many years ago, Indian braves would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow.*

*I will test myself against that mountain, he thought. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders, and set off to climb the pinnacle.*

*When he reached the top, he stood on the rim of the world. He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride. Then he heard a rustle at his feet. Looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke.*

*"I am about to die," said the snake. "It is too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."*



“No,” said the youth. “I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up you will bite and your bite will kill me.”

“Not so,” said the snake. “I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, I will not harm you.”

The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it down gently. Suddenly the snake coiled, rattled and leaped, biting him on the leg.

“But you promised—” cried the youth.

“You knew what I was when you picked me up,” said the snake as it slithered away. [In Iron Eyes Cody, “But You Promised,” *Reader’s Digest*, June 1989, 131]

There are many contemporary snakes that would trick us into thinking they have a different nature than they really do. Perhaps the snakiest things in the grass of our times are transitory ideas that are taken to be *permanently real*, especially materialist and subjectivist ideas breathlessly propounded in the world today. It is because of this worldly trickery, among other reasons, that, as President Hinckley says, “we cannot afford to stop learning and growing and progressing. We must not rest in our personal development—development that is emotional and spiritual as well as mental. There is so much to learn and so little time in which to learn it” (*Standing for Something*, 62).

One of the matters most clearly revealed through the restoration of the gospel is that this mountain of knowledge of truth, beauty, and goodness partakes of the *real* rather than the *transitory*. A knowledgeable person knows the difference between what is true and what is only transitory opinion. A true intellectual has the knowledge of transcendental facts requisite to distinguish the true nature of ideas, whether they are real or merely opinion. Those who buy into the *momentary* without knowledge of the *permanent* are the true anti-intellectuals of our day, or of any other, and are given to being persuaded by the snakes

of our society. As President Spencer W. Kimball said:

*People entangled in sin [or wrong ideas] are not free. In this university . . . there will be real individual freedom. Freedom from worldly ideologies and concepts unshackles man far more than he knows. It is the truth that sets men free. [The Second Century, 246]*

I am reminded of something Harold Macmillan—British prime minister from 1957 to 1963 and chancellor of Oxford University from 1960 to 1986—is supposed to have said. Recalling a professor’s advice, his words were: “Nothing you learn here at Oxford will be of the slightest possible use to you later, save only this: that if you work hard and intelligently, you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot. And that is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education.”

### Conclusion

As a way of bringing together these thoughts on the fourfold characteristic makeup of the mind we are supposed to be creating at Brigham Young University, I refer to Doctrine and Covenants 88:33. In this passage Heavenly Father makes it clear that it is our responsibility to develop and use our talents. We must do this so that others can see our good works and so that we glorify God (see Matthew 5:16). That is the reason for our Brigham Young University education and, ultimately, the *only* reason for it. It is wise for us to consider that developing talents, intellectual prowess, and spiritual power is antimaterialist and takes backbreaking hard work. Often that hard work involves overcoming our weaknesses so that we can develop strengths (see Ether 12:27).

President Heber J. Grant’s personal motto might serve each of us as well as it did him. Attributed to Emerson, President Grant often

used this quote: “That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing is changed, but that our power to do is increased” (GS, 355). My own sense of this university and our place in it drives me to conclude that it might be right for us all to work harder at the permanent value of celestial education, especially at the testimony-building and general education efforts of the Lord’s university. I quote President Kimball in this regard:

*As the pursuit of excellence continues on this campus . . . we must remember the great lesson taught to Oliver Cowdery, who desired a special outcome—just as we desire a remarkable blessing and outcome for BYU. . . . Oliver Cowdery wished to be able to translate with ease and without real effort. He was reminded that he erred, in that he “took no thought save it was to ask” (D&C 9:7).*

*We must do more than ask the Lord for excellence. Perspiration must precede inspiration; there must be effort before there is excellence. We must do more than pray for these outcomes . . . , though we must surely pray. We must take thought. We must make effort. We must be patient. We must be professional. We must be spiritual. [The Second Century, 253]*

The high and holy mind I have described today understands, just as Brigham Young’s excellent minds always have, exactly what the long-standing motto of this university means. It says, “Enter to learn; go forth to *serve*.” It does not say, “Enter to learn; go forth to *earn*.” Our motives must be purer than they sometimes are. We must be able to provide Brigham Young’s kiss of excellence because we are *expected* to pass it on, and also because it just happens to be the right thing to do. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.