

Secular and Sacred Individuality

MARK J. ROWE

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you, because I have a hint as to who you are and what you will become. I have also fallen in love with this university, its students, and its mission to balance the sacred and the secular. President Bateman indicated earlier this semester that this balance “is at the core of this institution’s existence” (Merrill J. Bateman, “The Mission of Brigham Young University,” *Addresses Delivered at the 1996 Annual University Conference*, August 26–27, 1996, p. 10).

A student friend recently asked me how I balance the sacred and the secular in my life. Upon reflection, I realize that I often draw parallels from both of those parts of my life and apply them to the other. With this in mind, I wish to address both secular and sacred aspects of our individuality. Secular aspects are from the perspective of my disciplines: nutritional science and molecular biology. Sacred aspects are from the perspective of our spiritually inherited qualities. I will attempt to draw some parallels between the two regarding our vulnerability to both physical and spiritual illnesses.

In his book entitled *The Quark and the Jaguar*, Nobel laureate Murray Gell-Mann contrasts elementary particles with complex systems. He notes that elementary particles such as quarks behave “exactly the same wherever [they occur]

in the universe [and] are rigorously interchangeable with one another. . . . *Elementary particles have no individuality.*” He contrasts this with a personal and rare sighting of a jaguarundi in Belize, and describes his observations of its behavior and personality. He notes: “My experience with *this particular jaguarundi* resonated with my thinking about the whole notion of individuality” (Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and Complex* [New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1994], pp. 7–8; emphasis added).

He had discovered that *this jaguarundi* was altogether individual, not interchangeable with every other one. This one, this time, was curious and casual. He concludes that the more complex the organism, the more potentially individual it is and the less interchangeable it is with every other one of its kind.

I confess that my version of this discovery is pretty mundane. Having been reared on a dairy farm, I learned the hard way that each of our dairy cows was an individual. Each had its own personality, attributes, and descriptive

Mark J. Rowe was chair of the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at Brigham Young University when this devotional was given on 3 December 1996.

name. Some were cantankerous and irritable. Others were docile and gentle. Some were inclined to kick the milk bucket over. Others were more inclined to slap our faces with a wet, dirty tail while we sat on the milking stool in that intimate contact with them. I confess that during those moments my thoughts about their individuality were not as noble as the professor's. Somehow though, I cultivated a fascination with individuality.

Early in my scientific career I used the tools of molecular biology during their infancy. It was then that I came to realize that my intrigue with molecular biology had its roots in a fascination with understanding differences between individuals. It is somehow satisfying to detect a delicate genetic difference and establish an association between that small difference and a large, consequent biological manifestation of the difference. Think of it! Identifying the minutest of differences between the DNA blueprints for two individuals and explaining its expression in some aspect of their lives, their health, their appearance, their personality, or a myriad other elements of their mortality.

I learned how different we are. There are nearly four billion base pairs of genetic information in each human cell. Our biological individuality is partially rooted in the variability of this information. There is an average of one difference in every 2000 of those base pairs. Therefore, in the genetic information encoded in DNA, there could be as many as two million differences between you and the person sitting next to you. If you will turn to your right or left and look carefully, you will see what I mean.

As you have just seen, we are not as easily interchangeable as quarks. We are *very* complex systems, with many blueprint differences that give us biological individuality. Let me illustrate this type of individuality with an example from my fascination with genetic variations.

On occasion I give a presentation called "Fitting into Our Genes" to groups interested in health-related issues. The topic conveys two

important principles. One is that, because of our genetic differences, we each have individual susceptibilities and vulnerabilities to diseases, such as heart disease and cancer. Included in this principle is the corollary that it would seem prudent to make our lifestyle choices "fit into" those genetic vulnerabilities, meaning that we make dietary and exercise choices to reduce vulnerability. The second principle is that this concept is valid with regard to genes that might influence "fitting into our jeans," spelled J-E-A-N-S. If our nutrition choices do not fit into our genetic makeup, we are at increased vulnerability for the many diseases that attend excess weight gain.

My research has examined differences in genes that affect metabolic rate. As a population, we exhibit a wide range of metabolic rates. All of our friends, it *seems*, have high metabolic rates. It seems they can eat anything they want but never gain weight, whereas the rest of us *seemingly* pass the kitchen, smell the aroma, and absorb every calorie from the food by simple proximity. We are incensed at the unfairness of this form of individuality.

When we contemplate the fairness of such genetic differences, it is better to maintain the more eternal perspective taught by Elder Boyd K. Packer in a 1993 general conference:

There are what President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., called "pranks" of nature, which cause a variety of abnormalities, deficiencies, and deformities. However unfair they seem to man's way of reasoning, they somehow suit the purposes of the Lord in the proving of mankind. [Boyd K. Packer, "For Time and All Eternity," *Ensign*, November 1993, p. 21; emphasis added. See also "Our Wives and Our Mothers in the Eternal Plan," address given in general Relief Society conference, 3 October 1946, in *J. Reuben Clark: Selected Papers on Religion, Education, and Youth*, ed. David H. Yarn, Jr. (Provo: BYU Press, 1984), p. 62]

Consistent with my fascination with genetic individuality, my research has illuminated some gene alterations that “prove” us by affecting our metabolic rate. They then contribute to increased vulnerability to weight gain. You might ask, “Why would you study this?” Here’s the first part of the parallel. I study this to contribute to the possibility of fitting into a genetic vulnerability by making what I call “genetically intelligent nutrition choices.” In this case, the purpose is to reduce someone’s vulnerability (because of his genes) to excess weight gain and to avoid the consequent illnesses.

Now the second part of the parallel. In addition to biological and genetic individuality, we know that mankind also possesses spiritual individuality. Our agency allows it. We brought it with us from premortal life. It interacts with our biological and genetic individuality, and this interaction must be factored into any development of our total individuality. This alliance of individualities is God-given. Some portion of it may even be God-inherited if we can imagine a “deity DNA” that works in concert with our human DNA and that allows us the potential to eventually develop God’s attributes in perfection.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell separated the effects of biological from spiritual individuality in the recent general conference:

Our genes, circumstances, and environments matter very much, and they shape us significantly. Yet there remains an inner zone in which we are sovereign, unless we abdicate. In this zone lies the essence of our individuality and our personal accountability. [Neal A. Maxwell, “According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 1996, p. 21; emphasis added]

This statement seems to identify the following: an inner individuality, separate from our genetic and environmental individuality, that contains its essence, where we have the ability

to be sovereign unless we abdicate and for which *we* are accountable.

Perhaps we could ponder some obvious questions. How does one abdicate his or her sovereignty in this inner individuality? How is its essence contained therein? How is it distinct from the shaping influence of genes, circumstances, and environment? How do we improve this inner individuality since we can exercise sovereignty over it? How are we held personally accountable for our use and control of this individuality?

As we ponder these questions, the biological concept of fitting into our genes perhaps has spiritual and eternal parallels that are helpful. These parallels involve fitting into the facets of individuality that we learned in our premortal life, just as we should fit into the biological individuality we have been dealt as part of our mortal proving. Further, the parallels extend to our genetically determined vulnerability for disease and to our learning to make genetically intelligent nutrition choices. These may parallel our lifelong struggle to overcome spiritual vulnerabilities by learning to make what might be called “spiritually intelligent eternal choices.” These choices would be designed to reduce the susceptibilities present in our individual set of spiritual predispositions.

Each of us brought individual talents from our premortal life, talents that we spent eons of time working to develop. Although our Savior achieved perfection in his attributes during his premortal life and became godlike, some of ours are not yet perfected. *We* came into mortality both with some significant talents and godlike attributes and with some that are less than completed. They therefore become vulnerabilities—susceptibilities to certain spiritual illnesses, if you will. Because we know we have the potential to perfect them, these attributes may be thought of as *unfinished* godlike qualities within us, perhaps contained in our inner individuality. Here in mortality we must discover which ones are unfinished, strive to finish

them, and make conscious lifestyle choices that allow us to fit into our spiritual vulnerability by making spiritually intelligent eternal choices. By such a course we will reduce spiritual vulnerability as we go about the business of finishing these attributes.

In science we learn much about the normal from observations of the abnormal. Let me give you an example of such involving an extremely spiritually dysfunctional group which illustrates that unfinished qualities can be vulnerabilities leading to spiritual illness. According to Joseph Smith, in D&C 129, there are three grand keys for detecting the nature of visiting angels and spirits. The central question is really whether it is inherent in the visitor's nature to deceive (see D&C 129:7–8). Let us assume that deceit represents the significantly unfinished quality of honesty. One would think that a devilish spirit who was attempting to appear as an angel of light might be smart enough to refuse to grasp an offered hand. Apparently, his quality of honesty is so unfinished, and its opposite is so entrenched, that he reacts impulsively to try to deceive and is thereby detected.

In contrast, our presence in mortality allows us the opportunity to refine and perfect our unfinished godlike attributes. Fortunately, we are well beyond the fixation of unfinished qualities experienced by the devils. With effort, we may finish them and manifest refined individuality within the righteous qualities. Therefore, by the spiritual equivalent of genetically intelligent nutrition choices we may be engaged in spiritually intelligent eternal choices that address our own identified vulnerabilities.

Many revelations have given us scriptural lists of godlike qualities. They proclaim the completed ideal qualities and beckon us to finish these godlike qualities in our inner individuality. These scriptural beckonings attest both to our potential sovereignty over the development of our inner individuality and to the possibility of eventually perfecting all the

righteous qualities of God. Fulfilling that potential by finishing godlike attributes seems to represent the equivalent of spiritual genes inherited from God.

My favorite list describes not only the finished qualities for which we should strive but also acknowledges the range of related unfinished qualities we now possess. This appeals to me because defining the unfinished aspects of my qualities helps me identify my specific vulnerabilities for spiritual illness. I am then in a better position to make the spiritually intelligent eternal choices necessary to reduce the vulnerability.

In 1991, students here were given the following list by Elder Maxwell, who taught that the following “scriptural virtues are intertwined, interactive, and interdependent”:

We are to be:

1. *Meek and humble— not self-concerned, dismissive, proud, seeking ascendancy. . . .*
2. *Patient— not hectic, hurried, pushy.*
3. *Full of love— not demanding, dominating, manipulative, condescending, or harsh.*
4. *Gentle— not coarse, brusque, and vindictive.*
5. *Easily entreated— not unapproachable, inaccessible, and nonlistening.*
6. *Long-suffering— not impatient, disinterested, curt, easily offended. . . .*
7. *Submissive to God— not resistant to the Spirit, counsel, and life's lessons.*
8. *Temperate (self-restrained)— not egoistic, eager for attention and recognition, or too talkative. . . .*
9. *Merciful— not judgmental and unforgiving. . . .*
10. *Gracious— not tactless, easily irritated, ungenerous.*
11. *Holy— not worldly.*

[Neal A. Maxwell, “In Him All Things Hold Together,” *Brigham Young University 1990–91 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1991), pp. 105–6]

Each range on this list contains individual qualities near both finished and unfinished ends of a spectrum. We are free to, encouraged to, and even obligated to exercise, not abdicate, sovereignty over the development of their finished form within our nature. We should recognize our personal accountability; understand where we, personally, stand; and do all in our power to move to the finished end of the spectrum and thus overcome spiritual vulnerability.

If I were at significant risk because of a genetic predisposition for excess weight or heart disease, I would change my lifestyle and my dietary habits to reduce the risk of developing the disease. Because I know that I am at significant risk for a spiritual disorder because of a less-than-finished godlike quality that I brought to mortality, I can cultivate that personal quality and change my spiritual habits and my lifestyle, thereby reducing vulnerability to the associated spiritual illness.

Two rudimentary examples will illustrate the point. They are closer to everyday reality than detecting deceit in spiritually dysfunctional devils. The first addresses the finished quality of being easily entreated, which means to be approachable and accessible, to accept good counsel, and to have a listening, attentive ear.

Thirty-three years ago a brand-new missionary arrived in my missionary district. He brought with him his guitar. Our mission president, Bruce R. McConkie, suggested that he leave it in the mission home and pick it up in two years. I watched as he struggled briefly with taking another simple step toward finishing the quality of being easily entreated and then watched him take that small step. Five years ago my calling with the 19 BYU stakes involved me in the reorganization of one of them. This same individual, now an experienced priesthood leader, was assigned as part of his training to accompany a member of the Twelve to the reorganization. Again I watched, and this time saw him easily and anxiously glean principle after principle taught by the

member of the Twelve. I appreciated his now-refined quality of being easily entreated. I wondered how crucial each of his small, earlier steps were. I also wondered what spiritual illness might have claimed him had he not learned to fit into that earlier unfinished quality by making spiritually intelligent eternal choices that reduce vulnerability.

A second simple example addresses the finished quality of being temperate, which is defined as being self-restrained and using self-control. At the unfinished end of this particular spectrum resides eagerness for attention and recognition, as well as egoism, defined as seeking the welfare of oneself only and talking too much about oneself.

Fifteen years ago, as a young stake president, I was associated with a priesthood leader who was talented and charismatic and could touch many lives. As time passed, however, it became clear that being temperate was not a refined quality within him. He was at the other end of that spectrum and was egoistic, eager for attention and recognition, and too talkative. As his priesthood leader, I tried to help him fit into patterns that would reduce his vulnerability for the associated spiritual illness. I watched him struggle at length, then finally succumb to a spiritual illness, then lose his marriage, family, friends, testimony, and the gospel. Again, I wondered how crucial each of the early, simple *but untaken* steps were and where he could be now had he understood better his weakness and adjusted his choices to fit into them to reduce his vulnerability.

Can you see both the blessings and vulnerabilities associated with our sovereignty, or its abdication, over the qualities of our inner individuality? As you exercise sovereignty over these qualities, consider the list that should be, in the language of King Benjamin, “kept on” as you make your spiritually intelligent eternal choices. Consider as well as those that should be “put off” because they make you vulnerable to spiritual illness (see Mosiah 3:19).

Now, many times we encounter barriers as we seek to put off the vulnerabilities of unfinished godlike attributes. First, individuality itself should not be used as an excuse for harboring unrighteous qualities. For example, graciousness may be refined and expressed in countless individual ways, and all are far superior to tolerating tactlessness or cultivating curtness within our character simply from a fierce defense of diversity and individuality.

Second, some have an inclination to equate extreme individualism with refined individual qualities. An example I continually encounter because of my discipline intertwines both biological and spiritual principles. A caution against it was taught by President Packer in April conference regarding the principle and promises of the Word of Wisdom:

Young people, learn to use moderation and common sense in matters of health and nutrition, and particularly in medication. Avoid being extreme or fanatical or becoming a faddist.

*For example, the Word of Wisdom counsels us to eat meat sparingly (see D&C 89:12). Lest someone become extreme, we are told in another revelation that “whoso forbiddeth to [eat meat] is not ordained of God” (D&C 49:18). [President Packer’s footnote to the last sentence adds that the revelation was given “to correct some . . . erroneous doctrines. One . . . was not to eat flesh—meat or fish.”] [Boyd K. Packer, “The Word of Wisdom: The Principle and the Promises,” *Ensign*, May 1996, pp. 18–19; emphasis added]*

I realize that there may be appropriate reasons for choosing not to eat meat, and that is acceptable, if knowledgeably done. But too often the reasoning is based on an erroneous interpretation of the Word of Wisdom, and that seems to appeal to our inclination to over-express individualism and equate it with the refinement of qualities. An extreme and erroneous interpretation of the doctrine of the

Church should not be an excuse for extreme individualism.

An additional barrier, at the other extreme, is hiding our individual unfinished qualities in *groups* rather than polishing righteous qualities as individuals. This is fraught with spiritual vulnerabilities. The Savior taught some poignant parables focusing accountability on *individuals*, not on groups in which one might hope that unfinished qualities go unnoticed.

The parable of the gospel net has particular application to the qualities of individuals within the community of the Church (see Matthew 13:47–50). The harvest by the gospel net is large but not completely selective. It includes many different species, individual fish with individual qualities. Only after the fishermen return to shore are the fish submitted to a selective sorting process. Whatever an individual fish’s purpose for coming into the net, being part of that community is necessary but not sufficient. The sorting process is a personal and individual scrutiny, and only those individuals—not groups—who have developed the personal, finished qualities will survive the selective sorting and be saved in the vessels.

I might add for emphasis that the BYU admissions net gathers of many kinds also. It is not the *end* of the sorting process. Both *The Aims of a BYU Education* document as well as deviations from our Honor Code attest to our unfinished qualities. Our progress and growth in both secular and sacred matters while here at BYU is *part* of the sorting process. We have, here, abundant opportunities to develop and be proved in all of the godlike qualities mentioned. This process is certainly not limited to learning patience by standing in long lines.

The Savior also taught the parable of the marriage feast (Matthew 22:1–14), in which the king’s servants gathered “both bad and good” for the wedding feast of his son. Consider Alfred Edersheim’s teachings regarding this parable.

*The "Servants" . . . had fulfilled their commission; they had brought in as many as they found, both bad and good . . . ; and "the wedding was filled with guests." . . . The King entered to see His guests, and among them he descried one who had not on a wedding-garment. . . . As the guests had been travellers . . . , we cannot be mistaken in supposing that such garments were supplied in the palace itself to all those who sought them. . . . If they were to take part in the feast, they must put on a garment suited to the occasion. [Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), p. 429]*

It seems clear that the king will individually examine each guest. This scrutiny will involve their individual qualities and take into account their individual differences. It will determine whether the guests who accepted the invitation were able to overcome the genetic clothes they had arrived in, put off the vulnerabilities within unfinished qualities brought from premortal life, and put on the wedding garment of finished qualities.

An angel of God gave King Benjamin the way to "put off" the individual "natural man." He admonished in essence, "Yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit," and become "a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord," and become "as a child" by developing a list of godlike qualities (see Mosiah 3:19). Partaking of the Atonement is then an individual experience and involves individually finishing godlike qualities. The Savior will, as it were, take time to allow us, individually, to feel the imprints of the nails—but, as the angel told King Benjamin, only if the process is intertwined with individual refinement of a list of godlike qualities.

In fact, the Father is even angry with us when we *fail* to understand this individual nature of the Atonement. It helps me to personalize Alma quoting Zenock: "Thou art angry, O Lord, with [Mark Rowe], because [he] will not understand thy mercies which thou hast

bestowed upon [him] *because of thy Son*" (see Alma 33:16; emphasis added). Elder Russell M. Nelson taught succinctly the importance of understanding the individual significance of the Atonement as we finish godlike qualities through spiritually intelligent choices:

*In a very real way, the atonement of Jesus Christ affects each of our lives and the life of every human being who ever lived. Understanding the significance of His atonement is fundamental to choices we make in all facets of our lives. [Russell M. Nelson, "Standards of the Lord's Standard-Bearers," *Ensign*, August 1991, p. 5]*

If we understand the individual, personal significance of the Atonement, that understanding will be pivotal in making the individual choices necessary to finish godlike qualities, and it will happen in every facet of our lives!

Examine yourselves, discover your individual spiritual vulnerabilities, and learn to avoid them. Consult your spiritual physician, take advantage of the healing of the Atonement available to you. If necessary, do so through his agent.

Blessings will attend our attempts to reduce vulnerabilities to the spiritual illnesses that inhibit advancing, progressing, and becoming like God in all of his character, perfections, and attributes. Elder McConkie's summary of this process is clear and comprehensive as he paraphrased Joseph Smith. It points out the assistance we receive from God as we strive to remove vulnerabilities and become like him through obedience:

In the final and all-comprehensive sense, the sole and only way to find and know God is to keep his commandments. As a result of such a course, knowledge and revelation will come in one way or another until man knows his Maker. The more obedient a person is, the clearer his views become, the nearer he approaches his God, and the

more he comes to know those holy Beings whom to know is eternal life. [Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), p. 18; emphasis added]

The clearer view, which flows from obedience, is essential to successfully finishing the personal, individual qualities that will reduce vulnerability for spiritual illness.

I pray that we may do just that, and I bear testimony of the promise of eternal life with God and of the joy of eternal life with each other as we manifest individuality in our finished, godlike qualities. I am grateful that the atonement of his Son both removes the effects of our unfinished qualities and makes our efforts to finish them bear the fruit of eternal life. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.