

The Legacy of Learning

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Once again it is an exciting and anticipatory pleasure for Sister Samuelson and me to welcome each of you to a new school year. I am confident we will have a special and enlightening series of devotional and forum assemblies this semester that will complement, supplement, and, we hope, enrich what will also be a very productive period in your classrooms, laboratories, and libraries. We look forward to being with you each Tuesday at this same time and hope that you will regularly attend and bring your friends and associates with you. As I have said before, a large part of what constitutes the unique “BYU experience” is found in these gatherings where the Spirit has been invited and where we have the opportunity to discuss and consider things of ultimate worth and importance that are not afforded to the academic community on almost any other campus.

In this wonderful year of anniversaries and celebration concerning the events of the birth of the Prophet Joseph, the organization of the Church, and other milestones special to us, I would like to spend our precious moments this morning in continuing to reflect on the legacy of learning that we enjoy, largely influenced by the example and efforts of living prophets from Joseph Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley.

It is both comforting and encouraging to note that even the Lord, Jesus Christ, and prophets of every age, including our own, have over the course of their lives “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). They have provided for us not only the philosophical and doctrinal basis but also the personal examples of the principles of eternal progression that occur in our lives “line upon line, precept upon precept” (D&C 98:12, 128:21). I firmly believe that each of us also enjoys the privilege and has the responsibility of similarly growing, developing, learning, and contributing in our own spheres and within the unique opportunities and circumstances that are afforded us.

Although it is unlikely that I need to remind this group that learning is both exhilarating and plain hard work, I will do so because this combination is often overlooked by those who would emphasize one dimension or the other. Particularly at the Testing Center, for example, it is tempting to think of the drudgery and demands of preparing to succeed in course

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work and to diminish the wonderful excitement that should result from the new insights, facts, and understanding that have occurred during a semester's activities.

Likewise, when we reflect on the magnitude and splendor of the Prophet Joseph's theophany in the Sacred Grove, we may not remember or fully understand that even that most remarkable tutorial was given in the context of considerable effort and contemplation as well as by study and faith. Thus the constant and continuing counsel from the early days of the Restoration that we must "seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118, 109:7, 14) should not surprise us and, in fact, should lead us in every field of inquiry, both temporal and spiritual.

Given the fact that Joseph Smith, especially by today's standards but also by his own admission, was not well educated in a formal sense, it is truly remarkable how he became such an example of lifelong learning "by study and also by faith." In addition to his almost incredible ability to master complicated specific concepts and ideas—such as languages, politics, military strategy, and architecture—he was also a tremendous generalist who in his short 38-year life became a great student of men and things.

Clearly his many revelations came at a time vital to the emerging Church, but also almost always in consequence of a substantial problem or significant question. Some of these questions or problems occurred as the result of external causes or events, but many, particularly spectacular doctrinal insights, were the result of his consistent study, prayer, pondering, and questioning. He considered, as should we, that his revelations were great learning experiences.

He also was regularly questioned, not only by the Latter-day Saints but by many others as well. He felt obliged to help people learn, and he was obviously a very compelling teacher. He was not afraid of questions—nor should we be. In fact, to my knowledge he was one of

the first to use the 20-questions format to teach important principles. In 1838 Joseph published 20 questions with his answers to them. He did this, as he reported, "to save [him]self the trouble of repeating the same a thousand times over and over again" (HC 3:30; *Teachings*, 121).

We don't have time to consider all 20 questions and his answers, but I will mention a few because I believe they tell us so much about him and his thought, his humor, his forthrightness, his love of learning, his confidence in his mission, and his desire to share the truths of the Restoration.

First — "Do you believe the Bible?"

[Answer] *If we do, we are the only people under heaven that does, for there are none of the religious sects of the day that do. . . .*

Fifth — "Do you believe Joseph Smith, Jun., to be a Prophet?"

[Answer] *Yes, and every other man who has the testimony of Jesus. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. [Revelation 19:10]. . . .*

Eighth — "Can they [the Mormons] raise the dead?"

[Answer] *No, nor can any other people that now lives, or ever did live. But God can raise the dead, through man as an instrument. . . .*

Tenth — "Was not Joseph Smith a money digger?"

[Answer] *Yes, but it was never a very profitable job for him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it.*

Eleventh — "Did not Joseph Smith steal his wife?"

[Answer] *Ask her, she was of age, she can answer for herself. . . .*

Sixteenth — "If the Mormon doctrine is true, what has become of all those who died since the days of the Apostles?"

[Answer] *All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the Gospel, and being administered unto by an inspired man in the flesh, must have it hereafter, before they can be finally judged. . . .*

Eighteenth—“Is there anything in the Bible which licenses you to believe in revelation now-a-days?”

[Answer] *Is there anything that does not authorize us to believe so? If there is, we have, as yet, not been able to find it.*

Nineteenth—“Is not the canon of the Scriptures full?”

[Answer] *If it is, there is a great defect in the book, or else it would have said so.*

And now, for the last question in the series. This is among the most oft quoted of any of Joseph’s statements because it is so fundamental to our beliefs and the understanding of them:

Twentieth—“What are the fundamental principles of your religion?”

[Answer] *The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. But in connection with these, we believe in the gift of the Holy Ghost, the power of faith, the enjoyment of the spiritual gifts according to the will of God, the restoration of the house of Israel, and the final triumph of truth. [HC 3:28–30; Teachings, 119–21]*

As you see, Joseph was not put off by questions. He was also very clear about what things are basic and fundamental. He understood the difference between what he really knew and those things he did not know. He also never considered himself nor anyone else, except the Savior, to be a finished product. He once said the following in describing himself, but I am sure he would not be offended if fellow disciples were also to apply this analogy to themselves:

I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when

some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty. [HC 5:401; Teachings, 304]

Likewise, while he was most often modest and careful, he was willing to be absolutely clear on the things of most importance that he learned and that he taught. He said, “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught” (HC 6:366; Teachings, 368).

Joseph Smith was most impressive to some of the men hardest to impress. Elder B. H. Roberts was one such man. Listen to these editorial comments by Elder Roberts in the introduction of volume 2 of the *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*:

The value of the educational movement in the Church by the establishment of a school for the Elders in Kirtland, cannot be fully appreciated even yet. It stands as a direct contradiction to the oft-repeated charges that Mormonism seeks to thrive through the ignorance of its devotees.

B. H. Roberts supported this assertion by referencing some Restoration scriptures that I will share in a moment. He then continued:

I know of nothing that lies outside this boundless field of research into which the Elders of the Church especially were invited—nay, commanded, to enter. It comprehends the whole possible sphere of human investigation; and furnishes all necessary contradiction to the theory that the Church at any time contemplated an ignorant ministry. By intelligence, not stupidity; by knowledge, not ignorance, has the

Church from the very beginning hoped to succeed in her mission. [HC 2:xxiv]

Elder Roberts held that the Prophet Joseph, under the direction of the Lord, was primarily responsible for the beginning of the educational emphasis and movement within the newly restored Church.

Joseph encouraged continual learning and the acquisition not only of knowledge but also of wisdom. His doctrine was expansive rather than restrictive. These revelatory words, referred to by Elder Roberts, are now well known to us and repeated often, especially at BYU: “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Likewise, from the same section, consider this counsel to students, faculty, and all of us:

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;

Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. [D&C 88:78–79]

In these brief verses are encompassed not only our complete BYU curriculum but also all that we are likely to encounter during our entire mortal lives. In my judgment Joseph Smith was not concerned with parsing too finely those things that we should study as long as they are “anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” because he affirmed that “we seek after these things” (Articles of Faith 1:13).

As we all know, Joseph did not live personally to see the Rocky Mountains in mortality; thus BYU came after his time. As grateful as we are and must be to Brigham Young and our other early and current leaders for the establishment and continued support of this great university, we must never forget that it was Joseph Smith who prophesied that the Latter-day Saints would come to these valleys and “become a mighty people” (HC 5:85). In my judgment, our progress as both individuals and as an institution in educational achievement is an important criterion in the fulfillment of that prophecy. While we have made some impressive progress, I am convinced that our best is ahead of us and yet to come.

I would not be surprised to learn in some future time that Joseph not only saw our day but also what we at BYU will and must yet become as we progress along the eternal continuum of the legacy of learning. “Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!” and who, under the direction of the Father and the Son, established the foundation for all that we consider basic in our individual and collective efforts to be ever learning and, more important, ever more wise and more faithful (“Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 27).

What a wonderful bequest! And what a remarkable blessing to live at this time with our most fortunate circumstances that bring us the privilege of being at BYU. We have the opportunity to continue the vital process of expanding our understanding and acquiring knowledge and wisdom. Through Joseph we better understand that

whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. [D&C 130:18–19]

I am grateful to verbalize with gratitude and certitude my convictions concerning the mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith, which includes our legacy of learning. I also bear witness of our current prophet-leader, Gordon B. Hinckley, who is an outspoken advocate

for learning and also for Brigham Young University. Our Father in Heaven and the Savior Jesus Christ do live and direct Their servants in this work, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

