

# *A Celebration of Learning*

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**I**t is my great pleasure to welcome you formally to another exciting fall semester. I hope and anticipate that this academic year will be a wonderfully productive and happy experience for all of us. Today I would like to talk with you—in a way possible only at a place like Brigham Young University—about learning. Because of our doctrine, we can understand much about how we may learn, what things we can learn, and why we must always continue to learn.

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared to the world:

*We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. [Articles of Faith 1:9]*

The doctrine of continuing and even continuous revelation is a fundamental and distinctive tenet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In it we find the seeds of the Restoration and also the basis for our understanding concerning the importance of learning. In fact, in the face of obvious differences between revelation from heaven and the kind of learning more common to our university experiences, we also find some

significant commonalities of which we should be constantly aware.

Typically, when we talk of revelation we are thinking of communication coming from God, either directly (as was the case with Joseph Smith and the First Vision) from an angelic minister (such as Moroni and the visitor from beyond the veil to Alma the Younger), or via the Holy Ghost, who speaks directly to our hearts and minds. While it is certainly appropriate to focus on the methods and means of the communication, it is also essential to understand that revelation and inspiration are, in a very real sense, an important source of learning and teaching.

Pause for a moment and think of all the truths Joseph Smith learned in his sacred interview at age 14. While he was a quick learner and demonstratively learned in various ways throughout his entire life, I would posit that this initial experience was perhaps the most intense and productive tutorial he ever experienced. In addition to the doctrinal clarity and understanding that came, he left the grove with

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*Cecil O. Samuelson was BYU president when this devotional address was delivered on 9 September 2008.*

the clear expectation that his life would be forever one of continuous learning and increasing understanding (see JS—H 1:26).

Often at BYU we follow well-developed traditions common throughout the entire academic world. At our commencements we celebrate what has been learned and what has been achieved and give formal recognition to these accomplishments by the conferral of degrees and other honors. There is nothing inappropriate in this unless we mistake these scholarly attainments for end points rather than as advantaged starting positions for further learning. You know these scriptural verses very well:

*The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth.* [D&C 93:36]

*It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.* [D&C 131:6]

*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]

To be true to our restored doctrine then, we must always “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118; see also D&C 109:7).

While it is perfectly appropriate to recognize the joy of accomplishment when we have learned something important, we must always remember that we have so much more to learn. Forgive me as I take a quick trip down my own memory lane as a potential case study of what I mean.

At age 17 I graduated from high school with a record good enough that I began university study on a scholarship. I knew I didn’t know everything but thought I knew quite a bit.

In 1960 I entered military service because at that time it was a necessary prelude to missionary service. I learned to march, fire and clean a weapon, and pass inspection from a sharp-eyed sergeant. After basic training I went to cook and baker school and graduated with an impressive certificate in which the U.S. Army described my experience as “eight weeks of the finest food service training in the world.” I also really learned a lot about the world outside of Utah, in addition to a little about cooking, and thought I was quite knowledgeable and no longer sheltered.

In 1961 I arrived in the mission field and began to understand better that I had much more to learn, even though the pace of learning was perhaps the fastest yet of my still-young life.

In 1964 Sharon and I got married, and my ignorance of many important things became more obvious to me in the face of intense learning of yet another kind. Particularly when our children began to arrive, I became aware of things I had never imagined.

In 1966 I graduated from university with a baccalaureate degree and understood that I had many more years of school ahead if I wanted to meet my ultimate professional learning and educational goals.

In 1970 I was awarded both master’s and medical degrees and was entitled to add, for me, the coveted MD to my signature. I already knew that I still had much to learn over the next few years if I were to be a “real” physician and not one in name only. In the immediate weeks and months of my medical internship and residency training, I began to realize how important it was to know clearly what I did not know. I occasionally saw very bright and knowledgeable people make horrible mistakes that caused harm to patients because they did not understand when to call for help or when to find someone who might better understand the problem of the person they were treating.

In 1973 I received my first faculty appointment. I recall both the exhilaration of finally reaching a long-sought-for goal and the tremendous trepidation that my knowledge and skills did not match my opportunities and responsibilities. In a few years my anxiety waned slightly when I was promoted to associate professor and granted tenure. Still, in my heart of hearts I knew I was interacting with people who were brighter and more informed than was I.

In the early 1980s I achieved the single professional goal I set out to achieve when I decided to pursue an academic career while still a student in medical school. I was promoted to full professor of internal medicine. Shortly thereafter I was appointed dean of the School of Medicine, following an interim season in that role. While I honestly felt qualified in the sense that I had met or exceeded all of the published and expected criteria for this senior rank, I also recognized more than ever that what I knew was only a small part of what was then known in my chosen field of specialty. This was without even considering all that was not known that we and others were attempting to learn through our research efforts.

In 1990 I had the unique opportunity to leave full-time academic work to enter the delivery side of health care and become directly involved in business leadership. I thought I knew something about administration and working with people, particularly doctors and other health professionals, but I had never taken a single course in accounting, business, or finance. It was at that time that I became a BYU student of sorts. I engaged then dean of the Marriott School and now recently retired BYU advancement vice president Fred Skousen to teach me some accounting. I also asked professor and later dean of the Marriott School Ned Hill to teach me something about finance, bonds, and insurance. Don't worry, they didn't give me a BYU degree!

They just taught me a lot that continues to be helpful today.

In 1994 I was unexpectedly called to be a General Authority. While the learning curve was the steepest ever, the tutors of all kinds were also superb. Again, the challenge of knowing what I did not know was tremendous, and the responsibility to learn what I needed to know was immense. With each assignment in this calling, the opportunity to learn has been great and the need to do so was and is immediate. The stark realization came to me then that as I learned more and more, it seemed like I knew less and less.

Years ago, while I was serving as a full-time missionary, Elder Harold B. Lee said the following in general conference:

*It is a wonderful thing for us in our younger years to remember what old age brings. Chauncey Depew, who as a United States Congressman on his ninetieth birthday was asked about his philosophy of life. He replied that when he was a young man his greatest ambition had been to display his intelligence, but the older he grew the greater was his anxiety to conceal his ignorance. It was indeed the beginning of learning when as Moses said, after the great and soul-stirring revelation of the personality of God, "Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I had never supposed" (Moses 1:10). That was in the beginning of his wisdom.* [Harold B. Lee, CR, April 1962, 29]

It is useful and also necessary for each of us to ask ourself, if it has already occurred, "When was the beginning of our own wisdom?" If this is still in our future, however, we should ask ourself, "When will the beginning of our wisdom take place?"

Each of your experiences will be unique and quite different from mine in the particulars but will be and should be very similar in the general case. A most important learning opportunity will be ours when we find ourselves in a situation where we understand how

little we really know and how much we yet have to learn if we are truly to become credible disciples of the Father and the Son.

In 2003, perhaps as great a surprise as I have ever experienced occurred for me when I was called as president of Brigham Young University. In some respects, all of the previous challenges to learn paled in significance. One of the blessings—and perhaps also one of the curses—of university life for the president is that on virtually every issue or matter that arises, there are always several people who know more than does the nominal leader. Likewise, almost all at BYU are very willing to teach and to share, and so the opportunities for learning, gaining understanding, and mastering how to learn better are unexcelled. What a blessing to be in an environment where the practice of the doctrine is reflexive, at least with respect to the constant quest for learning.

I recognize the risk of sharing even this much biographical chronology, because it will likely cause each of you to think about how old I am even when it is so obvious already. At each commencement since my arrival at BYU, I have greeted graduates whose parents were students of mine in days of yore. On the other hand, while I enjoy going to Church headquarters regularly for a variety of reasons to meet with the senior Brethren, I take especial and secret delight in recognizing that in those circles I am still one of the younger ones. I suppose these reactions could be viewed as something of a paradox: being among the oldest and also being among the youngest.

Let me suggest another paradox, or at least a seeming paradox in the eyes of much of the world. It applies generally to BYU and specifically to our allegiance to both scholarly learning and learning by revelation. Conventional wisdom in the academy broadly is that scholarship and faith are of entirely different species and never the twain shall meet. Revealed understanding—that which has been achieved “by study and also by faith”—teaches us that in fact

these notions and their related endeavors are closely related and even intertwined, although most do not recognize it to be so and many refuse to acknowledge this essential truth.

Our BYU founding namesake and prophet, Brigham Young, often taught of this special relationship. Listen to these words:

*The revelations of the Lord Jesus Christ to the human family is all the learning we can ever possess. Much of this knowledge is obtained from books, which have been written by men who have contemplated deeply on various subjects, and the revelations of Jesus have opened their minds, whether they knew it or acknowledged it or not. [JD 12:116; emphasis added]*

Always the prophet-teacher, Brigham Young had remarkably strong feelings about scholarship, even though he personally, by your standards, had so little formal education. He said:

*It matters not what the subject be, if it tends to improve the mind, exalt the feelings, and enlarge the capacity. The truth that is in all the arts and sciences forms a part of our religion. [JD 1:335]*

Those of you with expertise in education and learning theory will attest to the reality that different people learn in different ways. Some of you students can almost completely assimilate what is taught in a well-crafted lecture, and some learn well only by being able to read from good notes, a laptop computer, or a textbook. Fundamental differences in approaches to knowledge, to understanding, and even to what knowledge is do exist in secular and spiritual spheres as well. While these differences are usually emphasized, their similarities are greater than commonly acknowledged.

In science, to use the term broadly, truth is usually accepted tentatively with the expectation that we are always awaiting the “better answer.” Today’s theory, while perhaps the

best explanation we currently have, will give way to tomorrow's hypothesis, which will incorporate new data not now available.

In the spiritual and sacred sphere, there are absolute truths that are, have been, and will always be (see Jacob 4:13). Our understanding of those things we now know will be improved as we learn more, but the truths themselves do not change. Thus we learn "line upon line, precept upon precept" by revelation (see D&C 98:12). As our understanding improves, however, the fundamental doctrinal truths remain unchanged. The common thread between secular and spiritual learning is not in the content or in the discipline but in the reality that we can and we must continue to learn.

Meanwhile, we must never become like those described by the Apostle Paul who are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). It is

in our continuous learning "by study and also by faith" that we are able to assimilate what we learn in all spheres and come to an understanding of those things we seek that are of the greatest importance (see Articles of Faith 1:13).

These facts of highest rank include that God is truly our Heavenly Father. Jesus Christ, the Firstborn in the spirit world, is literally His Son, our Savior and Redeemer, whose Atonement is real, absolute, and endless. Joseph Smith actually saw and was instructed by the Father and the Son and is the prophet of the Restoration. The Restoration of the gospel itself is real, and its truths—such as the fundamental nature and importance of the family now and forever—have been clarified so that all with truly learning hearts may understand. Thomas S. Monson is our prophet-leader today. Of these things I testify that we must all learn and know. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.