

Seven Suggestions

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As is always the case at the beginning of a new year, I greet you with great pleasure, optimism, and gratitude for our current circumstances and what lies ahead in this winter semester and beyond. Thanks for being with us and for contributing to all that makes Brigham Young University the special and remarkable institution it is. I hope and expect you share my gratitude for these opportunities and also my positive feelings about what we may learn and experience in these first months of 2011.

Last October, during our annual Parents Weekend here on campus, I had the uplifting experience of meeting many parents and also students with whom I was not previously acquainted. I am always encouraged by the inspirational and touching accounts of what brings people to BYU and how they have been blessed and by our shared enthusiasm for this positively unique place.

One mother expressed gratitude that her student could be here while admitting that the adjustment for her daughter had been more difficult than she had anticipated. This thoughtful mother then asked me how our students might increase their chances and opportunities for satisfaction and success at BYU. She was not critical but was anxious to be as helpful as a mother could be in supporting her

student in all of the adjustments required by coming to BYU.

The poet Henry David Thoreau once said with respect to achieving satisfaction and success, “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (*Walden* [1854], 18, Conclusion). I believe this to be true—especially at BYU.

This morning I thought I might reflect on observations, personal experiences, and productive approaches we have observed in others that could be responsive to these questions and hopes concerning ways to find happy achievement while here. I have decided to focus on the BYU experience with the realization that most of the seven suggestions I advance also apply to life in general. At the outset, I confess no particular magic in the choice of the number seven, as there are many more topics that might be included if we were to stay here together all day. Likewise, my use of alliteration in naming these notions might be helpful in remembering them, but other phrases could be easily substituted.

Cecil O. Samuelson was BYU president when this devotional address was delivered on 4 January 2011.

Here are the seven I have chosen for today:

Self-Awareness
Self-Control
Service
Spirituality
Scriptures
Scholarship
Standards

None should be surprising and all might be self-evident. More can be said than I can express in our minutes together, but perhaps you will fill in the blanks where they are most needed for you. The order today is not important, but the propositions advanced are. All are significant and deserve our attention. While for purposes of this presentation I will discuss the seven suggestions separately, you will quickly notice that, in reality, they are closely related and integrated.

Self-Awareness

All of us need to have a clear awareness of who we are, what we represent, and how we affect and influence others. At BYU virtually all of us understand that we are literally spirit children of our Heavenly Father. This insight should and must color all decisions and choices we make in our lives, including and especially how we treat strangers and others in our families, classes, church groups, and neighborhoods. A favorite poem by the Scottish poet Robert Burns sums up much of importance in our need for self-awareness and the great risks and misunderstanding that can occur in our interactions with others.

Perhaps some of you can relate to Burns' circumstances that led to his poem "To a Louse." He was sitting in church and noticed a louse, a bug, crawl into the carefully styled hair and bonnet of a beautiful young lady seated immediately in front of him in the next pew. While I can understand the Scottish dialect, I can't really speak it, so I will paraphrase just part of

the last stanza. The point he was making was that many in the congregation also apparently saw this bug light on the young woman. She, in turn, became aware of their attention and likely thought it was the result of her beauty, since she did not know of the small visitor crawling toward her head. This then is Burns' observation with my Provo translation:

*Oh, would some Power the gift to give us
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.*

[See "To a Louse" (1786), stanza 8]

An important part of being self-aware is to understand how we influence for good or ill others around us by how we act, speak, and respond.

Self-Control

President David O. McKay, the prophet of my youth, spoke often about the importance of self-mastery, or self-control. Let me share just one example of what he said, because he was speaking to people just like us:

True education does not consist merely in the acquiring of a few facts of science, history, literature or art, but in the development of character. True education awakens a desire to conserve health by keeping the body clean and undefiled. True education trains in self-denial and self-mastery. True education regulates the temper, subdues passion and makes obedience to social laws and moral order a guiding principle of life. It develops reason and inculcates faith in the living God as the eternal loving Father of all. [CR, April 1928, 102]

While President McKay did not live during the time of the Internet, texting, tweeting, reality television, MP3 players, or social networking, the principles he taught are just as vital today as they were in the 20th century. We all know the blessings of appropriate self-control

and the heartache attached to addictions or indiscretions of every kind. Just like King Benjamin, we can't list all the ways we need to practice self-control, but King Benjamin's advice is also absolutely timely:

And finally, I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them.

But this much I can tell you, that if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. And now, O man, remember, and perish not. [Mosiah 4:29–30]

Service

One of things that has impressed me in my BYU years is how much significant service really goes on at and originates from BYU. This includes not only the thousands of students who give so freely of time and talent but also the tremendous examples of faculty, staff, and administrators in ways too numerous to mention individually. Many have learned that service to others is fundamental to our doctrine because of remarkable and meaningful service that has emanated from this university. While our aspiration that everyone who enters our buildings and classrooms would be involved in consequential service as part of the BYU experience has yet to be fully realized, we commend and thank those of you who contribute so much in such substantive ways. Our prophet and board chairman, President Thomas S. Monson, is a most worthy model of reflexive service to others.

In Sister Heidi Swinton's introduction to her wonderful biography of President Monson, entitled *To the Rescue*, she describes him in comparison to the Savior Jesus Christ in terms of the service to others that he renders:

*So it is with President Monson. He too goes to the weary and often forsaken, lays hands on their heads, and, in his singularly recognizable voice, provides inspired counsel. "I firmly believe," he has said many times, "that the sweetest experience in mortality is to know that our Heavenly Father has worked through us to accomplish an objective in the life of another person" — to help make someone whole. [Introduction, *To the Rescue: The Biography of Thomas S. Monson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 4]*

You are all very busy. So is President Monson. Thanks for your service and thanks to President Monson for his inspiring example to all of us about the fundamental responsibility we have to serve.

Spirituality

As I hope it is very clear to everyone in this academic community, we aspire to strengthen your testimonies and spirituality with every bit as much emphasis as we strive to have you experience the thrill of scholarly achievement in your chosen disciplines. It is not uncommon for us to hear that students and faculty at other universities consider themselves to be spiritual but not necessarily religious. At BYU we consider spirituality to be part of our religion and try to have the ministrations of the Holy Ghost in our studies and in our work as one of the first principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, we subscribe without reservation to the statement of the Lord found in the Doctrine and Covenants that we "seek learning, even by study and also by faith." We do this by teaching each other "words of wisdom" and gain this wisdom from the "best books" and other sources available to us (D&C 88:118).

I hope we all remember that one of the fundamental and foundational charges to Karl G. Maeser by President Brigham Young was "not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God" (in Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser*:

A Biography by His Son [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928], 79). Succeeding prophets from the time of Brigham Young to the present with President Monson have emphasized the inclusiveness of this notion in all that we do at BYU. Just as you should not be satisfied with an education that omits essential elements of mastery in your chosen major or emphasis, you should not leave BYU without your testimony being strengthened and your gospel knowledge being greatly enhanced. Thus your religion classes are part of the BYU core, and your experiences in your ward and stake while here add to the preparation the prophets have foreseen as necessary to equip you properly to live the gospel and serve all Heavenly Father’s children effectively and well.

Scriptures

One of the best ways to enhance your spirituality and gospel understanding is by regularly, frequently, and reverently feasting upon the scriptures. Obviously, this entails reading the scriptures intently and thoughtfully, but more is necessary. As the prophet Nephi explained, we should “liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). It is one thing to read the scriptures because we have been asked or charged to do so. It is an entirely different matter to search them to find answers and understanding for our own problems, challenges, and possibilities. Moroni’s general promise concerning how we may know the truth of the Book of Mormon also applies to specific questions or dilemmas. And it is with the pattern of “study and also by faith” previously referenced that answers are gained from the scriptures. All missionaries and serious gospel students remember this promise:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with

real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. [Moroni 10:4–5]

You might be thinking, “I know this.” Why would we be spending our precious time this morning reviewing something we know so well and have perhaps taught to others dozens of times? I will answer this question by sharing another account that you also likely know well. Recall the experience of Oliver Cowdery, who had been the scribe for most of the translation of the Book of Mormon and had had several revelatory experiences himself. He sought the opportunity to translate rather than just fulfill his sacred privilege as scribe to the Prophet Joseph. The Lord promised him the privilege, but the otherwise faithful Oliver didn’t proceed as he should have, and the opportunity to translate was withdrawn. These are the words of the Lord to Oliver, and they can apply to us as well:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. [D&C 9:7–9]

Perhaps you now see why I have considered spirituality and scriptures adjacent to each other. It is because they are in reality inextricably connected. We will now move to the next suggestion, which is also tied directly to these two and to your success at BYU.

Scholarship

As you current students know better than anyone else, Brigham Young University is a very serious academic institution with an outstanding student body, a distinguished and able faculty, and a charge from our board to be the best that we can be. It would be fair to suggest that even though we take faith, testimony, dating and marriage, church activity, and spirituality very seriously, we do not use these as excuses to detract from our standards of excellence in scholarship for students and faculty alike. While we strongly encourage—as I have just done—your active involvement in service, religious observance, and finding an eternal companion, you must never forget that your primary reason for being at BYU is to make the most of the academic opportunities afforded you that will never again be possible in the same way they are now. How well you do in your studies will establish a record and experience you will carry with you and will in large part help determine the possibilities available to you in the future. If you live a balanced life that gives ample space for scholarly pursuits, then you will be successful at BYU and throughout life.

Standards

The concept of high standards is an aspect of everything we do at BYU. Of special note and significant importance is our Honor Code, to which everyone at BYU has subscribed and pledged to follow. Some components of the Honor Code may seem more important than others and certainly are. In the aggregate, it is a representation of not only what the university and its board expect of you but also a reflec-

tion of what you should expect of yourself. Some would wish to devote time and energy to quibbling about a detail here or an emphasis there. In reality, we should be focused on what our own honor and integrity mean to us. In the abstract, very few—if any—in our campus community would advocate for dishonesty, immodesty, disrespect for others, slovenly behaviors or appearances, or other disagreeable attitudes or actions.

Unfortunately, some occasionally feel compelled, or at least licensed, to push the proverbial envelope. Please stay away from the line of deviance. Please recommit to living and acting—even of thinking and feeling—as you have agreed to do in accepting an appointment as part of the BYU community. Your honor is important to us, and it must be to you as well.

As I conclude, let me congratulate so many of you who are living and vibrant examples of these seven suggestions for success at BYU I have mentioned. For those who are struggling with one or more of these ideas, let me encourage you to keep trying and to do your best. As you strive and work, your capacity will increase and your satisfaction will be enhanced with the joy of success in this remarkable adventure at Brigham Young University.

I am grateful to be here with you. I am grateful to know that the hand of heaven rests on this institution with the loving support and guidance of the Lord's living prophets. I sustain them, as you do, and bear testimony of the Father and the Son who make all blessings real and possible for each of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.