

Beware the Dragons

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Greetings! And welcome to fall semester 2012. This assembly is a wonderful sight, and I always enjoy greeting Brigham Young University students at the beginning of a new school year. You bring your talents, goals, experiences, and perceptions from your homes—some merely a few blocks away from campus and others in faraway places across the globe. Your classmates come from all fifty states, the District of Columbia, six territories, and 106 countries. Your desire to learn in an environment of faith will afford you many opportunities to teach and support each other as you become classmates, roommates, neighbors, leaders, listeners, mentors, and friends. Discover the world and all its wonders from each other. Contribute in as many positive ways as you can during your time here. When you leave, take all you have experienced and go forth into the world prepared to bless others with your acquired spiritual and temporal knowledge.

One learns about so many varied aspects of life from different cultures and countries as well as their inhabitants. Mankind has always been filled with curiosity concerning unfamiliar peoples and territories. I can recall watching in awe as Neil Armstrong took his first steps on the moon over forty-three years

ago. Recently we witnessed a rover landing millions of miles away on Mars—a planet that has continually fueled the imaginations of science-fiction writers as well as serious scientists. Now we await the pictures it will send to earth to show what the Red Planet looks like and possibly find the answer to the question, “Could there be life or some form of intelligence on Mars?”

We are all fascinated by stories about the unknown and the dangers it may hold. Men and women throughout history have sought—often at peril to their lives—to explore mysterious and strange lands and places of which they had little or no information. These individuals would marvel at the use of a GPS, Google Earth, and MapQuest today.

Historically, cartographers used their skills and limited knowledge to produce maps of their time period. These maps were not necessarily very accurate but were archaic prototypes of those we use today. Found among myths and legends are stories of medieval European mapmakers placing the phrase

Sharon G. Samuelson, wife of BYU President Cecil O. Samuelson, delivered this devotional address on 4 September 2012.

“Here Be Dragons” on the edges or other locations of their maps to indicate unknown, strange, and/or dangerous areas—in other words, the end of the known world. Areas beyond their geographical knowledge contained the warning “Here Be Dragons.”

Dragons, sea serpents, and other mythical and frightening creatures were placed on later maps to warn people of areas to be avoided or entered into at their own risk. Sometimes the phrase might be included and written in Latin or English.

Why most often dragons? A dragon is a fearsome creature that appears in folklore in most countries. Haven’t you all grown up with stories of brave and courageous knights fighting dragons to save the hapless princesses or dragons prowling the earth destroying villages and cities? I would surmise that some of your childhood nightmares included fire-breathing dragons chasing you through dense forests. Even though you have met timid, reluctant, and huggable dragons, such as Puff in children’s literature and movies, the fearful ones are those you probably remember the most and would want to give a wide berth to at all costs.

Today you are making decisions and choosing courses to take on the many maps and pathways presented to you. We read in the scriptures that Isaiah declared, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20; see also 2 Nephi 15:20). Our society seems to exemplify what is described in this scripture. The paths your lives take today have areas that could be marked by the phrase “Here Be Dragons” as a warning that you should and must avoid them. A firm testimony of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is so necessary to maintain the proper perspectives and withstand the buffetings of the adversary that can and often will bombard you from all directions.

What are some of the “dragons” that can have harmful effects if you venture into their

territories of influence? The early explorers often lacked the insight and knowledge about what they would find in the areas marked by dragons, but you young people have knowledge they didn’t. You are warned by loved ones as well as by prophets and other leaders concerning what may await you in these lairs. Let me just mention some dragons I believe are tempting forces of destruction for each of you.

The Internet and social and other media can be dragons if they are not used properly. Speaking to a group of BYU–Hawaii students, Elder M. Russell Ballard gave this warning:

Now some of these tools—like any tool in an unpracticed or undisciplined hand—can be dangerous. The Internet can be used to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and can just as easily be used to market the filth and sleaze of pornography. Computer applications like iTunes can be used to download uplifting and stirring music or the worst kind of antisocial lyrics full of profanity. Social networks on the Web can be used to expand healthy friendships as easily as they can be used by predators trying to trap the unwary. That is no different from how people choose to use television or movies or even a library. Satan is always quick to exploit the negative power of new inventions, to spoil and degrade, and to neutralize any effect for good. Make sure that the choices you make in the use of new media are choices that expand your mind, increase your opportunities, and feed your soul.¹

You live in a world of technology and cannot avoid it with all the laptops, iPhones, iPads, iPods, and so forth that you find essential in your lives. I had a friend recently text me that she had just acquired an iPhone and hoped she could figure out how to use it. I sent her a picture of three of our grandchildren playing children’s games on their parents’ iPhones and iPad. I sent her the message “If these youngsters can do it, you can too.” Now when our grandchildren come to visit us, and after we share hellos, hugs, and kisses, they inevitably

ask, “May I use your iPhone?” This is not only our world today, but it is also a glimpse into the future in which there will be inventions you cannot now envision. How will you use technology to bless your lives and also avoid the dragons it can represent? That is for you to decide.

There is also the dragon of immorality. President Thomas S. Monson once stated:

*You live in a world where moral values have, in great measure, been tossed aside, where sin is flagrantly on display, and where temptations to stray from the strait and narrow path surround you. Many are the voices telling you that you are far too provincial or that there is something wrong with **you** if you still believe there is such a thing as immoral behavior.²*

The teachings and admonitions you have received up to this point in your lives are very clear on the importance of acceptable behavior. Beware of being tempted into a dragon’s lair in this area of your life.

In our culture today it seems that the traits of honesty and integrity are often lacking or absent in individuals, governments, politics, businesses, and even athletics. Unfortunately, honor, trustworthiness, and incorruptibility are traits that take a backseat to winning and aspirations of high position and/or wealth. You have the choice to be honest and ethical or not. Remember the thought “Here Be Dragons” when you enter the realm in which choices can lead to a path of dishonesty and a lack of integrity. You have made covenants with your Heavenly Father to be honest. President James E. Faust once taught:

Honesty is a principle, and we have our moral agency to determine how we will apply this principle. We have the agency to make choices, but ultimately we will be accountable for each choice we make. We may deceive others, but there is One we will never deceive. From the Book of Mormon

we learn, “The keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there; and there is none other way save it be by the gate; for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name.” [2 Nephi 9:41]³

My dear friends, be examples of honesty and integrity wherever and in whatever you do. Brigham Young University students are known for being examples of these attributes. Once when my husband had an important decision to make concerning a change in his professional path, he sought the advice of an individual he admired and respected concerning the matter. The counsel received was very short and concise. It was that at all costs he should protect his integrity. Once lost, your integrity and reputation for honesty are very difficult to regain. Steer clear of the dragons that would take them from you.

You are blessed to have the teachings of the gospel to help you shy away from the areas in which dangers and forces of evil can enter and put you in peril of losing your faith and testimony. Sometimes you may think that you can get close to a dragon and escape in time because you are strong enough to fight him when necessary and can easily ignore any temptation he might place before you. Your curiosity and questions about the unknown may lead you to say to yourself, “I can always choose when to stop and turn around. I know I can.” Do not be fooled. The adversary is deceptive and will seek to ensnare you with such thoughts.

There is an oft-told story of three men who applied for the job of driving the coaches for a transportation company. The successful applicant would be driving over high, dangerous and precipitous mountain roads. Asked how well he could drive, the first one replied: “I am a good, experienced driver. I can drive so close to the edge of the precipice that the wide metal tire of the vehicle will skirt the edge and never go off.”

“That is good driving,” said the employer.

The second man boasted, “Oh, I can do better than that. I can drive so accurately that the tire of the vehicle will lap over, half of the tire on the edge of the precipice, and the other half in the air over the edge.”

The employer wondered what the third man could offer, and was surprised and pleased to hear, “Well, sir, I can keep just as far away from the edge as possible.” It is needless to ask which of the men got the job.⁴

You should be like the third driver. Just as he wisely chose to avoid danger, you should too. Hold on to the iron rod—the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is your only way to have sure footings as you make your way on the roadways of life. Releasing your firm grip on the iron rod will surely put you in danger of being entangled in the river of water, the mist of darkness, or the great and spacious building as described by Lehi and Nephi (see 1 Nephi 8). Their dragons, which were not too different from yours in this century, included the temptations of the adversary and the pride, wisdom, and vain imaginations of the world. Do not be fooled and lured by the dragons that will confront you as you make choices and decisions each day. It can be too easy to fall over the edge if you are not diligent in safely shunning it.

If you find that you have indeed fallen over the edge or have become burned by the fires of a dragon, you are blessed with the knowledge that your Savior has given you His gift of the Atonement. It is a message of love, hope, and mercy. He has provided a way for you to overcome any sins or their consequences. If you have entered an area in which you were warned there were dragons, you do have a way to find the correct path out, and that is God’s plan of salvation, which includes repentance and forgiveness. His love for you is boundless and provides a way for you to return to Him.

I have a testimony of the significance of the Atonement and know that the Lord loves each one of you. He desires that you remain unwavering and firm in your testimonies of Him and steadfast and immovable in your choices and behavior. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. M. Russell Ballard, “Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet,” *Ensign*, July 2008, 60.
2. Thomas S. Monson, “May You Have Courage,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 125; emphasis in original.
3. James E. Faust, “Honesty—A Moral Compass,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 42.
4. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 217–18.