

“Who We Are and What God Expects Us to Do”

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

Sister Holland and I are delighted to welcome you back to BYU for a new school year. We especially welcome those who are with us for the first time, whether as freshman, transfer students, or those simply seeking good, solid catastrophic insurance coverage. Welcome one and all. We want you to have the best year ever.

Reminders from the Past

Even as we greet you at the university, however, I am aware that at least one writer believes most of what you need to know was suggested to you more than a dozen years ago. Given the costs of a university education, such an assertion is worth investigating. Consider his argument.

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandbox.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry

when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some, and draw and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap in the afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up, and nobody really knows why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup—they all die. So do we.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: look. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The golden rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if we all had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for

Jeffrey R. Holland was the president of Brigham Young University when this -devotional talk was given on 15 September 1987.

a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations always to put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together. [Robert Fulghum, “We Learned It All in Kindergarten,” Reader’s Digest, October 1987, p. 115]

I admit that is a pretty good beginning-of-the-school-year speech, whether you are five or fifty or a university student at BYU. In fact, maybe *most* of the important things we need to hear in life have long since been said to us—probably many times. The inestimable Samuel Johnson once said that people needed reminding far more than they needed instructing, so my few moments with you this morning will be devoted to reminders largely drawn from the past.

Our Tradition

But preserving our past without compromising the present is often no easy matter—it can put us in a precarious position, something like, well, a fiddler on the roof. In fact, for this morning’s message I wish to invoke Tevye’s help in recounting and reminding very briefly truths taught to most of us since kindergarten and before. Here’s Tevye on “tradition.” When he says “Anatevka,” think “Provo.”

A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy. You may ask, why do we stay up here if it’s so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in a word—tradition!

Because of our traditions, we’ve kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything—how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer

*shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I’ll tell you—I don’t know! But it’s a tradition. Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do. [“Fiddler on the Roof,” in *Great Musicals of the American Theatre*, ed. Stanley Richards, vol. 1 (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1973), p. 393]*

“Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”

Who are we, then, here at BYU? And what does God expect us to do? For one thing, he expects us to remember we are heirs of a gospel dispensation that had among its earliest commandments the challenge to “seek . . . diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, [to] seek . . . out of the best books . . . learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118; see also D&C 88:78). This crucial commandment was inextricably linked with the profound restored truth that taught us we are literally sons and daughters of God and that we can someday become like him. Restored truth taught that God’s glory is his intelligence and that it is to be our glory as well.

That inestimable doctrine, restored to a darkened world more than a century and a half ago, has in that length of time developed into a strong tradition for Latter-day Saints, the earliest of whom labored by day and read books by night in an effort to become more like God “by study and also by faith.”

It is not significant that the central symbol and only tract of their early faith was a book, a written record that would give meaning to all they did and to everything they believed. No one had to tell them the importance of reading; it was a “habit of the heart.” Later they would gather in the upper room of their Ohio temple to study not only theology but also mathematics, philosophy, English grammar, geography, and Hebrew. And on the banks of the Mississippi they would plan Nauvoo, the City Beautiful, their Zion-like city /

state, around two great centers of learning—a temple and a university. Even when driven from their homes, the Saints kept the dream alive. In dugouts and cabins, handcarts and Conestogas, school kept. It was not easy but it was doctrine. “It is impossible. . . to be saved in ignorance,” their prophet-teacher had told them, and “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 131:6, 130:18–19). They believed him. They were as hungry as Erasmus, who said, “When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left [over], I buy [bread]” (in *Distilled Wisdom*, ed. by Alfred Armand Montapert [Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964], p. 39).

“Wherever Mormon settlements have sprung up, the village school has been among the first things thought of and provided for,” said future president of the Church Lorenzo Snow. In those parts of the new Mormon territory where buildings were not available, schoolteachers simply did the best they could. Said Apostle George A. Smith of his experience in southern Utah,

*My wicky-up is a very important establishment, composed of brush, a few slabs and 3 wagons. [It has a] fire in the center and a lot of milking stools, benches and logs placed around, two of which are fashioned with buffalo robes . . . [It was, however, unpleasant] to see my school some of the cold nights in February, scholars standing round my huge camp fire, the wind broken off by the brush and the whole canopy of heaven for covering. Thermometer standing at 7 . . . I would stand with my grammar book, the only one in school, would give out a sentence at a time and pass it around. [Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), p. 15]*

Out of that tradition for learning, that near-unquenchable thirst for knowledge, has come

this university—a far cry from milking stools, buffalo robes, and one text; a far cry from what a century of our pioneer ancestors fought for and dreamed of but for the most part did not live long enough to see.

We owe them something. We who are the beneficiaries of their sacrifice and their faith—we owe them the best effort we can put forward in obtaining a truly edifying and liberating and spirit-soaring education. Work hard this year. Take advantage of every opportunity. Play a lot less and study a lot more. Learn to write and speak well. Make an investment in yourself the way the tithe payers of the Church have made one in you and see that bread cast upon academic waters come back to you and your posterity a hundredfold. Load your handcart full of books and start off for Zion. Take this university forward in the same way your ancestors took it forward—often with nothing more tangible to sustain them than their dreams and their traditions.

“The glory of God.” “Light and truth.” Most of you have heard all of that since kindergarten or before. The question for us now, this year, at BYU, is, “What will we do with this ideal?” Remember Anatevka. “Everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” Tradition!

A Two-Fold Mission

Closely linked with that latter-day pursuit of learning is another tradition at BYU. The first year I came to the university as president I coined a homely Latin phrase, *virtus et veritas*, to define a twofold mission at BYU. I added to the search for *veritas* (truth)—a motto from the Harvards and Yales of the world—a second task, *virtus* (virtue), believing with all my heart that how one lived was the ultimate test of an education, that truth standing undefended or unexercised was unworthy of the investment that had gone into her discovery.

In doing so I knew I had not only the philosophers but also the prophets of God on

my side, past and present. Indeed, a modern First Presidency of the Church said this in a better way than most professional educators would ever say it. Said Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richards:

If men [and we would add women] would be great in goodness, they must be intelligent, for no man can do good unless he knows how; *therefore seek after knowledge, all knowledge, and especially that which is from above, which is wisdom to direct in all things, and if you find any thing that God does not know, you need not learn that thing; but strive to know what God knows, and use that knowledge as God uses it, and then you will be like him; [you] will . . . have charity, love one another, and do each other good continually, and for ever . . .*

But if a man have all knowledge, and does not use it for good, it will prove a curse instead of a blessing as it did to Lucifer, the Son of the Morning. [Millennial Star 14:22, 15 January 1852; emphasis added]

What a striking educational philosophy! It sounds so simple: learn and love, strive to know what God knows, use that knowledge as God uses it, and you will be like him. Strive for education to do each other good continually and forever. But of course that was first taught to you in your kindergarten years. Play fair. Don't hit. Clean up your own mess. Hold hands and stick together. Our education has always carried with it ineluctable moral obligations.

How important is all of this in 1987 as we balance precariously on the BYU roof? Very important, I think. As a nation we are swirling in—and seemingly overwhelmed by—ethical and cultural and political chaos. The moral implications for our society, as severe as any America has faced, are serious partly because they threaten the very *idea* of society so directly. These violations of the commonweal

damage our efforts to live together in trust and reciprocity.

"The United States needs to recover some idealism," read one recent newspaper headline (commentary by George R. Plagenz, Newspaper Enterprise Association).

"Universities are turning out highly skilled barbarians," trumpets a national news magazine (*U.S. News & World Report*, 10 November 1980, p. 57).

We are a "nation without honor," declares a monthly periodical; a "nation of liars," cries another. Even the Pope travels to America to remind us of our lost virtues. And no less an arbiter of national virtue than *Time* magazine runs a cover story on "sleaze, scandals and hypocrisy," documenting the nation's frenzied search for its values, a mad scramble for bearings in a time of stunning moral disarray (*Time*, 25 May 1987, cover). I say stunning because I simply can't quite keep it all straight lately. Was it Gary Hart and Fawn Hall or was it Jessica Hahn and Michael Deaver? Ivan Boesky was trading something—was it arms for hostages or a fake blessing given to Joseph Smith III? And which were the good marines and which were the bad? Were the call girls in the Russian embassy or in the recreational theme park? Was it a PTL boat that landed in Nicaragua? Or have I got Tammy Bakker mixed up with Howard? Forgive me if I seem to grope.

But lest we smile, university students have also contributed their share to the general morass. Consider this from a recent educational quarterly:

Popular literature has painted today's generation of college students as a cynical bunch of money-grubbers, willing to stoop to any level to "get ahead." . . . Sadly enough, . . . students [today do] not cherish or even understand the basic principles of academic honesty.

The evidence, based almost entirely on self-reporting, shows clearly that the levels of [university] cheating are high

*The picture . . . is of a self-centered, competitive, insecure, and cynical generation of students, committed to getting the most out of the present [regardless of the cost to others]. In this context, it is not surprising that colleges and universities are becoming concerned about the ethical standards of their students. [Richard A. Fass, "By Honor Bound: Encouraging Academic Honesty," *Educational Record*, Fall 1986, p.32]*

Becoming concerned? "The ethical standards of their students" is not just a trendy issue at BYU; it is our heritage, our tradition. And it *should* be a tradition at every university. But quite frankly, universities as universities *only* can't do it. As Hitler rose to power and forged the infamy of the Third Reich, Germany had the finest university tradition in all of continental Europe. And most of the truly desperate and severe problems I have referred to in America—whether moral, political, or cultural—have come at the hands of university-trained men and women. (I intentionally use the word "trained" rather than "educated.") No, "full and fair intellectual inquiry" alone won't do it. Academic instruction unmeasured and untempered by integrity, instruction unenlightened by the civilizing forces and moral obligations that go with the truth will simply produce ever more "highly skilled barbarians." And almost any newspaper or nightly news broadcast can show us plenty of those. Remember, "If a man have all knowledge, and does not use it for good, it will prove a curse instead of a blessing as it did to Lucifer, the Son of the Morning."

Of course, the saddest element in all of this for me is not that the world doesn't understand civilizing values or, worse yet, that educationists often don't, but saddest of all is that each year a few of us at BYU don't seem to get it either—even with long-established and

frequently repeated LDS traditions to guide us. The infractions of those very few then often damage the experience and opportunity of the rest of you. You are a remarkable generation in every sense of the word. I salute you and admire you and love you.

A Shared Sense of Responsibility

It goes without saying that at BYU we do bear a special burden because we point out we are different here, because we say we stand for something traditional and spiritually worthwhile. Of course the moment we say that, we are marked women and men—there are multitudes who would love to bring us down. But that's all right; it's just all the more reason for us, after cookie and milk time, to hold hands and stick together.

By the time we come to a university we've had adequate time to consider this shared sense of responsibility we have for life lived together. This bicentennial year of the U.S. Constitution is a good time to consider that earlier pledge from the Declaration of Independence—that democracy rightly lived requires a commitment no less than "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor," as Jefferson finally phrased it. I'd like to think in some modest way that BYU's "gamble" in the twentieth century on the virtue and morality and integrity of young men and women is not unlike America's gamble in the eighteenth. Ben Franklin spoke for all of us at BYU when he said at that fateful signing, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately" (to John Hancock, on signing the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776).

We don't have to quote John Donne at this point to remember that no man is an island. "Ask not for whom the BYU carillon bell tower chimes, it chimes for thee." Everyone who enters this university has, in a rather literal way, entered a covenantal society. When we come to BYU we come to take our position on the roof, with violin in hand, and we

declare to the rest of the world, “Tradition.” *Our* tradition. *BYU* tradition. And that doesn’t just mean ringing the victory bell after a ball game or lighting the Y at Homecoming, as fun and rewarding as those lesser traditions are. Indeed, lighting the Y doesn’t mean one thing, doesn’t justify the electricity it takes to do it, if the meaning behind that mountaintop symbol, “the spirit of the Y,” is not manifest in each of our lives.

In covenantal societies, *everyone* has to help, everyone has to help, everyone is accountable because one theft of a piece of art (or bicycle or backpack), or one abuse of drugs (prescription or otherwise), or one sexual transgression seemingly pursued in darkened secrecy and the light on that hillside Y grows a little dimmer. It isn’t just the flame of education that flickers then; it is the even more serious faltering of covenants that have been compromised.

Tradition? Tradition! A lot of it, dearly earned and even more dearly defended. It’s tough keeping our footing on a slippery roof, but there we are, determined to stay so long as there’s a *BYU*. I am just biased enough to believe it is the best university in all the world for you to attend. That is why we care about your lives, including how you look as well as how you act. Be well groomed and modest as an outward statement of an inner grace. Shorts and miniskirts are not acceptable dress on this campus, and we ask you not to wear them. Please be aware that far more important than (but not unrelated to) outward appearance is the integrity and the disciplined behavior displayed by a citizen voluntarily choosing to live in a rigorously disciplined society. Be true to Christ and your covenants. In an age when culture is about five miles wide and three-sixteenths of an inch deep, I am asking for something deeper. I want an inspiring past, present, and future—in short, a tradition—that will give depth and height and millennia of meaning to your relatively short time at *BYU*. It will only come from our understanding of

the glory of God and our determination to enjoy fully his blessings to us.

Do you remember the seed and the cup from the kindergarten story? “The roots go down and the plant goes up, and nobody really knows why.” At *BYU* I want our roots down and our plants up—and the more visible those stems and branches and blossoms are, the deeper our roots will have to go to sustain them. *Please don’t get caught in shallow soil*, intellectually or spiritually. The Savior taught powerful parables about seeds needing to be planted deeply and houses needing to be built on strong foundations.

I want you to know that I love you and that I care very much about you—about your hopes and your dreams and your future. You—and your experience while attending *BYU*—mean everything in the world to me. Let me close with a *BYU* story. It is a story about our tradition here. The account is nearly one hundred years old, which makes it about the time you were in kindergarten.

Fulfilling a Destiny

Karl G. Maeser was certainly one of the most refined and educated men to join this Church in the first fifty years of its restored existence. Trained in the great classical tradition and distinguished in Saxony for his breadth of learning, he gave up virtually everything he had to enter the waters of baptism. Ostracized in his community and with no way to make a living, he brought his wife and two children to America, serving missions as he came and finally joining the Saints in these valleys of the Rocky Mountains. Once here he gave the rest of his life to the educational efforts of the Church, including fifteen years in abject poverty as the first and greatest principal of the then new and struggling Brigham Young Academy located in Provo, Utah.

In December of 1900, two months before he died, Brother Maeser was brought back to see once more the modest single-building campus

on University Avenue he had built and loved and defended. He was helped up the stairs and into one of the classrooms where all of the students instinctively stood as he entered. Not a word was spoken. He looked at them slowly, then made his way to the chalkboard. With his bold script he wrote four statements on the board, turned, and walked out of the BYA forever, closing as he did so perhaps one of the most distinguished educational lives this university has ever known.

Several years after Brother Maeser's death a proposal was made to construct a memorial building in his name, not downtown on University Avenue but high atop Temple Hill, where a new campus might be built consisting of as many as three or perhaps four buildings someday. The cost would be an astronomical \$100,000, but the Maeser Building would be a symbol of the past, a statement of aspiring tradition, an anchor to the university's future.

In spite of a staggering financial crisis clouding the very future of the university at the time, the faculty and student body took heart that in 1912 the Maeser Building was at least partially complete and the university would give diplomas to its first four-year graduating class. But even as graduation plans were being made, equally urgent plans were underway to sell the remainder of Temple Hill for the development of a new Provo suburb. The university simply had to have the money to survive. Eighteen members were graduating in this first four-year class, but even if the student body tripled in the years ahead, surely there would be more than enough room to accommodate them on the space now occupied by the Maeser, Brimhall, and Grant buildings on our present campus. Yes, the rest of the space on the hill should be sold. The graduation services would conclude with a sales pitch to the community leaders in attendance.

When Alfred Kelly was introduced that morning as the student graduation speaker, he rose and stood absolutely silent for several

moments. Some in the audience thought he had lost the power of speech. Slowly he began to speak, explaining that he had been much concerned over his remarks, that he had written several versions and discarded every one of them.

Then, early one morning, he said, with a feeling of desperation regarding his approaching assignment, he walked north from his downtown apartment to where the partially completed Maeser Building stood (as Horace Cummings would later describe it) as an "air castle" come to earth on Temple Hill. He wanted to gain inspiration from this hope of a new campus, but he felt only grim disappointment. The sky was starting to glow from the morning light, but the darkly silhouetted Maeser Building seemed only a symbol of gloom.

Kelly then turned his eyes to view the valley below that was also still in shadow. The light from the rising sun was just beginning to illuminate the western hills back of Utah Lake with an unusual golden glow. As morning came, the light gradually worked down from the hilltops, moved across the valley floor, and slowly advanced to the spot where Kelly stood.

He said he partially closed his eyes as the light approached and was startled by what he could still see. He stood as if transfixed. In the advancing sunlight everything he saw took on the appearance of people, young people about his age moving toward Temple Hill. He saw hundreds of them, thousands of young people coming into view. He knew they were students, he said, because they carried books in their arms as they came.

Then Temple Hill was bathed in sunlight, and the whole of the present campus was illuminated not with one partially completed building, nor with homes in a modern subdivision, but rather what Kelly described to that graduating class as "temples of learning," large buildings, beautiful buildings, hundreds

of buildings covering the top of that hill and stretching clear to the mouth of Rock Canyon.

The students then entered these temples of learning with their books in hand. As they came out of them, Kelly said their countenances bore smiles of hope and of faith. He observed that they seemed cheerful and very confident. Their walk was light but firm as they again became a part of the sunlight as it moved to the top of Y Mountain, and then they gradually disappeared from view.

Kelly sat down to what was absolutely stone-deaf silence. Not a word was spoken. What about the sales pitch? No one moved or whispered. Then longtime BYU benefactor Jesse Knight jumped to his feet and shouted, “We won’t sell an acre. We won’t sell a single lot.” And he turned to President George Brimhall and pledged several thousand dollars to the future of the university. Soon others stood up and joined in, some offering only a widow’s mite, but all believing in the dream of a Provo schoolboy, all believing the destiny of a *great* university which that day had scarcely begun. (See B. F. Larsen, “Fifty Years Ago,” speech given at a BYU Alumni meeting, 25 May 1962, B.F. Larsen biographical file, BYU Archives, pp. 4–5.)

When you leave here today, consider a campus that now stretches from that newly

renovated Maeser Building to the very mouth of Rock Canyon itself where a special temple of learning (built on BYU property) watches by night and day over this very pleasant valley. Think of the buildings and think of the lives and think of the tradition. It is now your tradition.

Oh, yes. I suppose you are wondering about those four things Karl G. Maeser wrote on that board that day. They are part of the tradition, too.

1. [To love] God is the beginning of all wisdom.

2. This life is one great [homework] assignment . . . in the principles of immortality and eternal life.

3. Man grows only with his higher goals.

4. Never let anything impure enter here.

A fiddler on the roof? It’s a tough assignment, but we are all up there together, defending that inheritance. Welcome to our precarious and beautiful place. I express my love for every one of you and my conviction of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. It is true and gives eternal meaning to our work here. With Tevye I invite you to discover in our BYU tradition of learning and love and purity “who you really are and what God expects you to do,” in the blessed name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thomas S. Monson > Quotes > Quotable Quote. "Remember who you are and what God expects you to become." • Thomas S. Monson. Read more quotes from Thomas S. Monson. Share this quote: Like Quote. Recommend to friends. Friends Who Liked This Quote. To see what your friends thought of this quote, please sign up! Basically, that is what God expects of us. Is that too much for him to ask? Not at all. The apostle John tells us something very reassuring about God's commandments, or requirements. He wrote: "This is what the love of God means, that we observe his commandments; and yet his commandments are not burdensome." 1 John 5:3. For example, who is Jesus Christ, and what role does he play in the outworking of Jehovah's purposes? (Acts 4:12) Who is Satan the Devil? In what ways does he mislead people? This brings us to the second requirement. We must measure up to God's standards for right conduct and accept his truth. What is truth? Does it really matter to God what we believe and what we do? Many people today evidently do not think so. And what does God expect us to do? For one thing, he expects us to remember we are heirs of a gospel dispensation that had among its earliest commandments the challenge to "seek . . . diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, [to] seek . . . out of the best books . . . learning, even by study and also by faith." Sister Holland and I are delighted to welcome you back to BYU for a new school year. Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandbox. These are the things I learned: Share everything.