

“Consumed with Conviction”

C. SHANE REESE

I am thrilled to be with you today! Today we acknowledge some incredible accomplishments of faculty colleagues who are representative of so many of you who are equally deserving colleagues. Taking time out of our busy preparations for classes to look around and appreciate the efforts of those who are working beside us is worth taking some time to do on occasion.

In like manner, I feel a strong tug to express my sincere appreciation to those who have worked with conviction to help in preparing for fall semester. Today I want to express appreciation to each of the councils that I have been privileged to be a part of during this year of bumps and twists and turns. Our President’s Council has met multiple times each week and has organized nineteen committees to prepare for our fall semester. In these meetings, colleagues have shown collegiality, warmth, patience, and perseverance. I continue to be humbled to be a part of this group of devoted individuals.

The Advancement Vice President’s Council met nearly as often as the President’s Council, with each member leading out in important ways on one or more of our planning committees in preparation for fall semester. I am grateful for the support, friendship, and collegiality that we have shared as we have juggled the ups and downs of fall semester preparations. I am also grateful for your deans. At each step in our planning, your deans carried much of the water in fall planning, participating on one or more committees to address the needs of the semester and taking the task of working closely with our amazing campus schedulers to create a schedule in world-record pace.

President M. Russell Ballard, the master architect of councils in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, spoke of councils, and with a bit of substitution from me, he said:

We each have large individual responsibilities, but just as important is the responsibility we share with others

C. Shane Reese, BYU academic vice president, delivered this address in the faculty session of university conference on August 24, 2020.

to come together in council in a united effort to solve problems and bless all of our [students]. When we act in a united effort, we create . . . synergism, which is increased effectiveness or achievement as a result of combined action or cooperation, the result of which is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

The ancient moralist Aesop used to illustrate the strength of synergism by holding up one stick and asking for a volunteer among his listeners who thought he could break it. Of course, the volunteer was able to break one stick easily. Then Aesop would put more sticks together until the volunteer was unable to break them. The moral to Aesop's demonstration was simple: Together we generate synergism that makes us much stronger than when we stand alone.¹

I am grateful for the strength and synergy built together with dedicated, wise, and loyal colleagues. While not mentioning them individually by name, they are, to a person, friends, mentors, and fellow disciples of Jesus Christ.

As we have experienced this historic year, we pause today in our furious preparation for the start of a fall semester that is unlike any other fall semester in the history of the university to consider the opportunities we face in the upcoming year. As we “gather” in different places today, I am reminded that we have a unique place in the ecosphere of higher education, with a clear and deliberate alignment with our sponsoring institution, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, coupled with a firm commitment to student-centered teaching and scholarship. In this unique position, we have many advantages over colleagues at other universities.

To name a few, we are generously supported by the board of trustees, which is chaired by the First Presidency of the Church. Among the chairmen of the board are two former presidents of universities, and the executive committee of the board is chaired by a former president of BYU.² To suggest that our leadership understands the issues and demands of modern higher education is an understatement. I continue to be amazed at the wealth and breadth of knowledge our leadership considers in decisions and that they care deeply about our students’ experiences and the importance of

our unique mission, including our faculty and their development. The board’s approval of each faculty hire is a clear indication of the value that the board places on those who are tasked with providing role models and examples of disciples of Jesus Christ in our classrooms.

In our current time of pandemic, I continue to be amazed, humbled, and full of gratitude for the continued generous financial support from our board of trustees and the tithe payers of the Church. We were recently informed that the board of trustees has authorized a guideline salary increase for next year. In a time when many universities are cutting budgets due to COVID-19, including faculty and staff salaries, our board of trustees continues to provide salary increases. Instead of furloughs, we experience raises. Instead of cuts, we experience modest increases. This is an incredible blessing and a generous expression of support by the leaders of the Church. May we pause with gratitude and humility for it. In addition, I continue to be amazed at the yearly Church appropriations to BYU for the purpose of educating Zion, which reach the hundreds of millions of dollars per year. Indeed, we are blessed.

We are experiencing unprecedented challenges as a university due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If the state of the world over time was represented as a smooth function with some ups and some downs, 2020 would be a discontinuity—a blip in the curve. Although the students arriving in 2020 are like the students who arrived on campus after my first university conference—anxious, enthusiastic, and full of life—the students returning this fall have a different set of anxieties, and their enthusiasm and zeal for life present both opportunities and risks as we begin a new semester. Some will return to campus with fear and trepidation about the state of the world and will need reassurance and comfort. Others will return to campus with a sense of impenetrability and fearlessness, and they may need to be reminded of the importance of protecting others. One of our opportunities and challenges as a faculty will be to model, encourage, and support responsible behavior by wearing masks, practicing physical distancing, and making arrangements for students who

become ill. The students gathering in our compact community this fall will, indeed, be like no other generation that has gathered on this campus.

Reminiscing on changes in generations at the BYU commencement exercises in 2018, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland gave a powerful address that provided a vision for the future for the students as they transitioned to a new phase of life. In this stunning address, Elder Holland expressed that he was counting on the graduates to be something more. I believe he was expressing an invitation to our entire campus community that is as pressing for us as faculty and as a university community today as it was for the graduates in 2018. He said:

You leave BYU to enter a political, social, and economic world your parents never knew and your grandparents could never have dreamed of. Perhaps that is true of each succeeding generation in history, but in my old age, I, for one, could not have imagined as a BYU student more than half a century ago the world you now go forth to experience. So much of that world is stunningly beautiful and rewarding. . . .

I do not agree that "the best lack all conviction" because you . . . and a host of good people across the earth like you prove otherwise. I believe you to be the very best, and I am counting on you to be consumed with conviction. . . .

. . . So go out there and light a candle. Be a ray of light. Be your best self and let your character shine. Cherish the gospel of Jesus Christ and live it. The world needs you, and surely your Father in Heaven needs you if His blessed purposes for His children are to prevail. You have entered to learn. Now go forth to serve and strengthen. If correcting all the world's ills seems a daunting task, so be it. Go out there and be undaunted. If we cannot look to you to change the world, tell me to whom we should look. . . .

Congratulations on your very significant achievement. . . . May the sun always be at full noon for you, banishing every shadow that might otherwise mar your happiness. I express our pride in you and wish you Godspeed for the exciting journey you now undertake.³

That he saw so much promise, hope, and optimism for the future of each individual graduate brings me such comfort. I see that same promise,

hope, and optimism for each faculty member as we begin this remarkably unusual fall semester. Elder Holland expressed that despite stark differences between the state of the world in times past and the state of the world right now, there is reason for us to take courage in the unique mission of BYU and the students it attracts. Has the need for laser focus ever been more needful than at this time—this pandemic-stricken time? Our world is so fundamentally different than it was even a year ago.

But did you hear the invitation that Elder Holland gave to you and me? After a stern rebuke of the poet William Butler Yeats, when Elder Holland said that he does not believe that "the best lack all conviction,"⁴ Elder Holland issued this fervent invitation: "I am counting on you to be consumed with conviction." As we begin the 2020 school year with all of its uncertainty and newness, may I invite us as faculty to be great and to be *consumed with conviction*.

My first job out of grad school was at Los Alamos National Laboratory, working on the Stockpile Stewardship Program in the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. It was intellectually stimulating work with many high-profile visitors to the lab. Some of my early projects involved coordination with Department of Energy (DOE) political appointees who were at the lab to learn about the science that was being conducted there. The most compelling aspect of the visits was that our funding at Los Alamos was dependent on congressional priorities and budgets, so these visits felt important, with high stakes.

About two years into my appointment at Los Alamos, we hosted a technical advisor to the DOE undersecretary of the National Nuclear Security Administration. As we made our presentation of high-quality work that represented years of combined work by our group and hours and hours of preparation, it became clear that our high-ranking and powerfully influential guest was not going to take back a positive report. I was crushed to know that the politics of the situation were going to win the day.

As we were leaving our meeting and returning to our offices, I was expressing my disappointment to my group leader and mentor, Sallie Keller. Sallie

has continued to be an important influence in my career. I still remember what she told me: “Bury yourself in doing good science, and the rest will take care of itself.” She had invested her entire career in science, and because she had consumed herself with it, her conviction for the science would overwhelm all the ancillary aspects of the job.

After one eventful year as academic vice president, I have seen in our faculty at BYU a level of conviction and dedication similar to what my mentor at Los Alamos taught me. One key difference is that the conviction of our faculty is so multidimensional. Where she was laser focused on science, our faculty have multiple foci that make our experience richer and more fulfilling. In my experience, I have seen faculty demonstrate their conviction in four different aspects of their BYU experience: (1) they have conviction for the gospel of Jesus Christ, (2) they have conviction for the education of students, (3) they have conviction for contributing to their disciplines, and (4) they have conviction for making our campus a welcoming place for all. It is about these four convictions that I want to address my remarks today.

Conviction for the Gospel of Jesus Christ

We are all familiar with the instruction from President Brigham Young to Karl G. Maeser that nothing should be taught on this campus without the influence of the Holy Ghost. He said, “You ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God. That is all. God bless you. Good-bye.”⁵ The first aim of a BYU education is, for us, as faculty, to provide an education for our students that is “spiritually strengthening.”⁶ That spiritually strengthening influence is guided by the Holy Ghost. In our aims document, we learn that

the founding charge of BYU is to teach every subject with the Spirit. It is not intended “that all of the faculty should be categorically teaching religion constantly in their classes, but . . . that every . . . teacher in this institution would keep his subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”

This ideal arises from the common purpose of all education at BYU—to build testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷

Our mission statement states:

All students at BYU should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any education is inadequate which does not emphasize that His is the only name given under heaven whereby mankind can be saved. Certainly all relationships within the BYU community should reflect devout love of God and a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of our neighbor.⁸

Some disciplines on campus naturally lend themselves to bathing their subject matter in the light and color of the restored gospel. Others may not. What exactly does it mean to “bathe” our subjects in the light and color of the restored gospel? Recently, a collaboration between colleagues from Religious Education and Life Sciences explored how students in Life Sciences who wrestled with questions about faith and science could bathe scientific questions in the light and color of the restored gospel. It was an excellent example of how the university community can work together to realize the aim of a BYU education to be spiritually strengthening.

Not every faculty member will be able to participate in this way, however. So what are some simple ways that we, as faculty, can contribute to “strengthening faith in the Savior and testimony of his restored gospel” and lay claim on the “privilege of the entire faculty of the institution, whatever one’s home department or college”?⁹ May I humbly suggest some simple ways.

How we conduct our lives. Our example has a powerful effect on strengthening faith in the Savior. As a student here at BYU, I watched intently the examples of faculty members and was grateful for the models of faithfulness and integrity shown by my professors.

Sharing impressions from devotionals with students. It will be easier to share impressions from the devotionals as you watch or attend them. When you take advantage of the opportunity to watch or attend devotionals and forums and use small windows of time in class to allow students to share impressions, you will strengthen faith in those students.

Praying at the opening of class to invite the Spirit. This is something that has been a part of my BYU

teaching experience in each of my classes. I sometimes have students pray in mission languages. I have students fill out a card to share their willingness. I remember one student who had indicated on her card that she was willing to pray. She was shy and timid, and I remember vividly her fervent prayer: "Please help Dr. Reese make sense today!" I hope that prayer was answered.

These are mere suggestions for how we might make efforts to increase the spiritual strength of our students. You will be led to better ways of educating the whole person. We are entitled to the Lord's help in our work as faculty. As we are consumed with conviction for the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will receive His help. We will be directed in ways that we might appropriately, organically, and meaningfully strengthen the faith of the students we teach.

Conviction for Teaching

At no other time in my nearly twenty years at BYU has the faculty's conviction for teaching been on display nor been as truly remarkable as it was at the end of winter semester 2020. On March 11, 2020, the university made a significant decision to take all courses from standard delivery to remote delivery—in a period of three days! Because you are so consumed with conviction for your students and their learning, you responded so magnificently.

Without precedent, as our students faced a new reality of an empty campus with the announcement of all remote delivery, each of you took on the Herculean task of trading in your whiteboard markers and personal interactions for tools of technology and distanced instruction. When those students "returned" after those three unexpected spring break days, they saw on their computer screens a faculty member who might have been a world away while they were in their dorm rooms, their home bedrooms, or a vacant basement food storage room. What the students did *not* see was the fact that on the other end of that communication link was a faculty member who had turned their office into a virtual studio. They did not see the faculty members who were so brilliantly consumed with conviction for their students' learning

that they eked out the remote delivery by adding in demonstrations and illustrations to bring the content to life. The students who only saw a Zoom screen did not have the benefit of seeing how consumed you all were with conviction for their education that you found a way to accomplish this task while simultaneously juggling the demands of your own personal lives, which were also being dramatically impacted by the circumstances of the pandemic.

One of my favorite images of the move from our regular way of teaching to all remote delivery was the now-familiar image of professor of dance Nathan Balser. Professor Balser actively demonstrated a dance maneuver in his kitchen. The conviction for his teaching emanated from his facial expression. In actuality, Professor Balser was teaching while he was also attending to his children. So many of you demonstrated in powerful and meaningful ways your conviction for our primary mission of educating young people, both in your home and at BYU.

In reviewing the winter semester and all the preparations for fall semester, I am humbled to count myself among the faculty at Brigham Young University. You were all the frontline warriors tasked with the seemingly impossible, and you responded with grace, skill, and incredible gifts. I am grateful to each and every one of you. You have demonstrated so well and so clearly that you are consumed with conviction for the education of our students.

Conviction for Scholarship

Modern higher education is nearly synonymous with what may be called by a variety of terms, including writing to the academy, research, scholarship, or creative works. In fact, faculty colleagues at other institutions, particularly Carnegie-classified R1 institutions, are clearly consumed with conviction for their scholarship. So how do we at BYU respond to the pull toward a conviction for scholarship, with all its value and benefit for society, its forwarding of our scholarly disciplines, as well as its promise for academic fame and recognition? As has often been asserted on campus, BYU is primarily an undergraduate

teaching university, which places us in a unique category. President Kevin J Worthen spoke of this when he said:

I believe that on these two issues—the compatibility of faith and learning and the compatibility of teaching and research—we at BYU are in the messy middle. We are clearly in the thinly populated middle position on these two matters because we reject both the dichotomy between faith and education as well as that between teaching and research. And our position is certainly messy in some ways as we find ourselves straddling two divides that most believe are slipping further and further apart. But being in this precarious position should be reason for hope and not despair, for being in the messy middle on these two issues makes us unique in ways that may allow us to achieve our prophetically declared destiny. As Brené Brown observed in a different context, “The middle is messy, but it’s also where the magic happens.”¹⁰

Our partners in education in Zion—BYU–Idaho, BYU–Hawaii, and Ensign College—have a clear mission and focus on teaching without the significant commitment to high-quality scholarship. Ours is a different, but related, mission. President Worthen has described it as a one-of-a-kind mission. If we are to be consumed with conviction for our scholarship, we might realistically consider that with limited resources, there are several competing interests. For example, our clear charge to be student centric in our teaching and scholarship will require careful consideration of what research topics will produce scholarship that is simultaneously student centric and high quality.

As a resolution to this tension between student centeredness and high-quality scholarship, perhaps it is our *motivation* for scholarship that makes it student centered and something for which we can be consumed with conviction. Understanding the benefit for our students of pursuing research as a model for students in uncovering new knowledge and answering life’s most perplexing questions will help us navigate the myriad of possible research topics. The pursuit of scholarship provides a unique opportunity for faculty to quite literally provide an example and model of how to

meet “personal challenge and change [and] will also bring strength to others in the tasks of home and family life, social relationships, civic duty, and service to mankind.”¹¹

Perhaps not every project will fit neatly within the framework of modeling for students, but I invite faculty in all disciplines to seek ways to model for students the process of discovering and obtaining answers to questions through serious inquiry and scholarship. In many cases the students can be included directly as participants. I am confident that as we incorporate students in being consumed with our conviction to scholarship, we will realize the vision of President Dallin H. Oaks: “Inherent in being the University of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the reality that this great goal will not be attained in exactly the same way that other universities have achieved their greatness.”¹²

When our scholarship is viewed through the student-centered lens of modeling the discovery process for our students, either through direct involvement (as in mentoring) or simply by sharing with them the exhilaration of the process, we will naturally be driven to pursue scholarship of higher quality. Our commitment to scholarship and the process of discovery will show our students how to walk the path of being consumed with conviction and how to use that same process to find answers in their own lives.

Conviction for Belonging

As faculty at BYU, we are consumed with conviction for Jesus Christ, for our students and their experience, and for our scholarship. Today I want to invite our entire university community—but most especially you, our faculty—to be consumed with conviction for all in our campus community, specifically for our campus communities of color, to feel a sense of belonging at BYU. I want to share a bit of background as context for this invitation.

In February a panel discussion was held on campus in which several Black students and alumni were invited to share their experience with being Black and being an immigrant. During that event, several hurtful and overtly racist comments and questions were anonymously posted

and projected to a chat screen, visible to all in attendance. These racist expressions left the participants on the panel feeling hurt, confused, and excluded from belonging to our BYU community. To be specific—and it pains me to have to recount these—some examples included, “What is the percentage of African Americans on food stamps?” and “Why don’t we have a white history month?” These questions were racist and wrong at the time they were posted, and these questions are racist and wrong now.

In response to this dreadful experience, in February of this year President Worthen attended an event called Perspectives, sponsored by our Multicultural Student Services, that celebrates Black History Month. At the event, President Worthen shared an apology to our Black students who were hurt by these truly awful questions and comments. He said:

Thank you, Ron. The first thing I want to do is just thank those who have organized this event. I have attended enough to know that a lot of thought and work and sweat and probably prayers have gone into the preparation of each of the performances this evening. As I have attended the last few years, Perspectives has become one of my favorite events on campus. The messages you will hear this evening, with their passion and their energy, will be clear, evident, and powerful. I want to thank Tendela Naomi Louise Tellas, who personally delivered an invitation to attend on behalf of the group, and I am grateful to her and to all of them for the preparation here.

But I do want to just say a couple of things about events that have occurred in the recent week. I am grateful, first off, for your patience as I have worked to understand fully the facts and the effects of some inappropriate, unfortunate, racist, and discriminatory actions that occurred at another event here on campus a week ago. It was unacceptable. The incident affected all the students at BYU, but it particularly affected our Black students here at BYU because the racist comments, concerns, and questions were directed at them. I am sorry that they experienced such pain, and I am sorry that that kind of incident occurred on this campus. I hope that it won’t happen again.

Now, what do we do? I have asked academic vice president Shane Reese and assistant to the president for

student success and inclusion Vern Heperi to work with others to help us understand how we can have a more welcoming and understanding community and campus and environment for all of our students. I am not going to list everything that they have planned, but just know there are plans, among other things—and I emphasize “among other things.” Academic Vice President Reese will work with others to make sure that faculty members, as they prepare and address particular topics, are fully prepared, fully supported, and ready to go. He and others will work with the faculty and others to help us better understand how we can address sensitive and important topics on our campus in a way that will stretch us out of our comfort zone but ultimately give way for greater inclusion for all of our students.

Among other things, Vern Heperi and the Office for Student Success and Inclusion will help us assess the current climate on campus with regard to diversity and inclusion and other related issues. They will also work to help us identify and eliminate equity gaps among the various student populations here on campus so that all of the students who come here, regardless of their background, will be able to take full advantage and fully benefit from the extraordinary and amazing education that is available at BYU. We will enlist the aid of others on campus, including the faculty and deans, and I just want to give a shout-out to Dean Ben Ogles of the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences. He did an extraordinary job this past week with the students and faculty of that college to help them as they worked through the events of this past week.

Now, there is no quick, easy fix or solution to the challenges we face. It won’t be resolved tonight. It can be part of it, but it won’t happen just tonight. It will take a sustained effort by all of us if we are to reach the point, as the program says tonight, in which there truly are “no more strangers” among us. But we can do that, and we can do it in a way that is unique because of BYU and because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So thank you again for being here. This is part of that process. But thanks again—even more thanks to the participants here who have spent their time so they can now share their messages and talents with us. May we who are watching these presentations be changed, moved, and uplifted as a result of their sharing their gifts with us. Thank you very much, and enjoy the program.¹³

As part of his conviction to belonging at BYU, President Worthen tasked me with helping our faculty understand how they might assist in creating an environment and culture at BYU that engenders belonging for our students of color—our Black, indigenous, and people of color, or BIPOC. As part of that assignment, President Worthen recently asked me to form a committee of members of the broader university community, including faculty members, administrative and staff employees, and athletic professionals, to further understand the experiences of our BYU campus BIPOC communities. In his initial charge to the committee, President Worthen described the formation and work of this committee as historic.

Recognizing the historic nature of its work, the committee rightly saw its first task as establishing a firm foundation for the work ahead by penning a statement of purpose. The governing principle for the work of the committee was a charge jointly issued by President Russell M. Nelson in conjunction with leaders of the NAACP, who invited educational institutions “to review processes, [policies], and organizational attitudes regarding racism and root them out.”¹⁴ In response to this charge, the committee’s mission statement asserts that rooting out racism

begins with understanding and living the two greatest commandments given to us by the Master Healer, Jesus Christ: to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves (see Matthew 22:35–39). In this spirit of love, [the committee] will address racism, promote equity, and enhance belonging at BYU by:

- *Listening to our beloved Black BYU community to understand how racism has frustrated, and continues to frustrate their experiences at BYU;*
- *Inviting the input of all of our beloved Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) at BYU as well as those committed to ridding BYU of racism through the establishment of racial equity and belonging;*
- *Conducting a thorough quantitative and qualitative review of how processes, policies, practices, procedures, operations, and attitudes impact our BIPOC communities at BYU;*

- *Identifying the issues that negatively impact the prosperity of our BIPOC communities at BYU;*
- *Drawing on the expertise of individual faculty and administrators within BYU to understand both the subtle and overt ways that racism may impact individual thought and interactions, organizational units, processes, policies, practices, procedures, and operations;*
- *Creating, prioritizing, and presenting a comprehensive set of recommendations that will assist BYU to advance racial understanding, enhance equity, and promote belonging, and that will have a significant and enduring positive impact on the prosperity of our BIPOC communities at BYU.*¹⁵

I am grateful to my colleagues on the committee, who include law faculty members Michalyn Steele and Carl Hernandez III; sociology faculty member Ryan Gabriel; director of the College of Family, Home, and Social Science’s Committee on Diversity, Collaboration, and Inclusion, Lita Little Giddins; director of Multicultural Student Services, Moises Aguirre; track and field assistant coach Stephani Perkins; assistant to the president and director of the Office of Student Success and Inclusion, Vern Heperi; and, from University Communications, Jon McBride. They have brought expertise, energy, and an incredible willingness to collaborate. Their passion for change and their desire to improve the experience of our BIPOC communities on campus is inspiring. I am humbled by each committee member being so consumed with conviction in assisting in rooting out racism at BYU so that every member of our BYU community “might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”¹⁶

The committee is actively meeting to consider recommendations that we will make to President Worthen by Thanksgiving. We have established a portal through which all in the campus community can express experiences, ideas, and concerns. As part of the committee’s commitment to listening, we have heard from students, present and former, who have not felt like they were welcomed or belonged at BYU. It has been, at times, simultaneously difficult and enlightening for me to hear and understand some of the painful experiences of

our students, faculty, and staff of color on campus. The connection between having life and having it more abundantly and our understanding of the second major educational goal of BYU—that “arts, letters, and sciences provide the core of . . . an education, which will help students think clearly, communicate effectively, understand important ideas in their own cultural tradition as well as that of others, and establish clear standards of intellectual integrity”¹⁷—is sometimes not experienced by our students of color. I am confident that the recommendations that will be prepared by the committee will contribute to meaningful changes so that we can make BYU a place of belonging for all—in particular, for our campus community of color.

In the meantime, may I humbly suggest that there are some small but meaningful actions we can take to make all in our campus community feel like they belong. President Nelson shared three powerful suggestions for how we might accomplish the task of belonging when he said:

We need to foster our faith in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

We need to foster a fundamental respect for the human dignity of every human soul, regardless of their color, creed, or cause.

And we need to work tirelessly to build bridges of understanding rather than creating walls of segregation.¹⁸

As further evidence of the need for belonging, in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, an article entitled “Mere Belonging: The Power of Social Connections” discusses the benefits of minimal social connectedness on performance motivation. The details of the study are fascinating, and this randomized control trial found that a person who felt even basic social connectedness felt more confident and motivated to complete a task.¹⁹ In other words, relatively simple acts of kindness that express “I am connected to you” can yield measurable effects on a person’s desire to succeed.

Perhaps this is the scientific explanation of exactly what our students had in mind with their

project called Check Your Blindspot.²⁰ I want to show you just one of the portions of this student-led project. [A video was shown.²¹]

The basic need for social connectedness can be fulfilled with small and simple means. It can start with a smile and a wave. How different would the experience of the students in the video have been if just one student had smiled and pulled out a chair and said, “Come sit here”?

May I invite you as faculty to make a personal conviction to create a sense of belonging in your sphere of influence? How do we begin? It might be in your classroom, where your examples are more inclusive of Black, indigenous, and people of color. It might be taking the opportunity to visit with a student who feels isolated and alone. It might be that as you make your way from your office to class, you deliberately focus on a warm smile and greeting for one new person each day. This is something that every faculty member can do. If we are consumed with conviction for making our campus a place of belonging, we will take steps in the long journey to root out racism from BYU.

I am humbled to be counted among you, the faculty at BYU. I am frequently in awe of your commitment to the university and its mission. Welcome back to a new semester. I am grateful you are here, now, at BYU. I see in you people who are *consumed with conviction*. Thank you, and I pray the Lord’s choicest blessings for you as you begin this new semester, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. M. Russell Ballard, “Strength in Counsel,” *Ensign*, November 1993.
2. President Dallin H. Oaks: former president of BYU; President Henry B. Eyring: former president of BYU–Idaho; Elder Jeffrey R. Holland: former president of BYU.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Banishing All Shadows,” BYU commencement address, 26 April 2018; emphasis in original; quoting William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1921), stanza 1.
4. William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1921):

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

5. Brigham Young, quoted in Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography by His Son* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928), 79.
6. *The Aims of a BYU Education* (1 March 1995).
7. *Aims of BYU*; quoting Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, 11.
8. *The Mission of Brigham Young University* (4 November 1981).
9. Church Educational System, "Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Education in Institutions of Higher Education," unpublished document, 12 June 2019.
10. Kevin J Worthen, "BYU: A Unique Kind of Education," BYU university conference address, 28 August 2017; quoting Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way*

We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead (New York: Random House, 2017), 28.

11. *Mission of BYU*.
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