

“Quest for Perfection and Eternal Life”

BRENT W. WEBB

I wish to begin my remarks today with an expression of gratitude to the academic administrators on campus. This year the deans of three of our academic colleges completed their service in the office, and their replacements were appointed following a thorough search process. Associate deans have been invited to serve with these new deans in the college leadership. In addition, twelve department chairs completed their terms this year and, following careful consideration and upon recommendation of their deans, new chairs were appointed this summer. This constitutes a significant fraction of the academic leadership on campus.

As you know, BYU has a rather unique model of rotating academic leadership. At universities elsewhere, appointment as department chair or college dean is usually a career move, and the candidate who seeks the position generally abandons the traditional faculty life of teaching and research. By contrast, at BYU, academic administrators serve for a season (although at times it may seem to them like an eternity). They make difficult decisions they will live with after their administrative appointment ends and they again take an office next to their faculty colleagues in the department.

This model means we are continually training new administrators. Their appointments come with high expectations and little personal tangible benefit. We have no executive salary structure at BYU. Deans and chairs agree to serve—generally without aspiring to the position and most often with hesitation to take on the assignment—motivated by love and loyalty for the university and its mission, their college, their faculty colleagues, and most important, the students. These administrators set a tone for the student experience through direct influence on academic programs; expanding student opportunities; faculty hiring, development, retention, and promotion; and resource distribution—and, it must be candidly acknowledged, more than a little conflict resolution. And despite knowing the enormity of the task, our colleagues accept the invitation to serve anyway.

In April of this year we honored at a retirement dinner forty-one of our faculty colleagues who had completed their professional service here. Remarkably, half of them had served as

Brent W. Webb was academic vice president when this address was delivered at the BYU annual university conference faculty session on 24 August 2015.

academic administrators during their BYU career.

Every seven years our academic and academic support units are reviewed as part of our university assessment process. Two faculty of stature from universities elsewhere are invited to participate in the review of every academic department, reading the self-study and investigating the department's operation in a campus visit. The two external reviewers begin their campus visit with a meeting in my office, where I have the opportunity to acquaint them with BYU and its mission, resource base, governance, and constraints. The external reviewers are astonished when I describe the university's model of rotating academic leadership. In multiple such meetings external reviewers have asked me, "With so little benefit to them personally and professionally, how do you get faculty to serve in these leadership positions?" It is difficult for them to understand when I smile and tell them that BYU faculty are uniformly committed to what we are trying to accomplish here and accept leadership responsibilities out of a deep sense of loyalty to the university. So as I begin my remarks today, I want to publicly and energetically express our thanks for the usually thankless work of the deans, associate deans, and department chairs—those who are now serving and those who have unselfishly served in the past.

Staying on Course

Recently I read the interesting history of the life and accomplishments of Florence May Chadwick. Florence was born in 1918, grew up in San Diego, California, and at an early age developed a passion for swimming—long-distance swimming. At age ten she took fourth place in a two-and-a-half-mile "rough water" ocean swim. The next year she won first in a six-mile rough water swim across the San Diego Bay channel. For the next nineteen years she continued as a competitive long-distance swimmer.

In August 1950, at the age of thirty-one, Florence swam the English Channel from France to England, a distance of about twenty-three miles, in thirteen hours and twenty minutes, breaking the world record set twenty-four years earlier by American swimmer and Olympic champion Gertrude Ederle. One year later Florence swam the reverse route from England to France—reportedly much more difficult because of challenging tides and currents—in sixteen hours and twenty-two minutes, making her the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions.

On July 4, 1952, at the age of thirty-three, Florence Chadwick set out to be the first woman to swim the twenty-one miles between Catalina Island and Palos Verde on the California coast. The water was cold, and ocean predators circled around her repeatedly. Several times her support crew had to use rifles to scare off the sharks. Over the course of the swim a thick fog set in, making it difficult to see. Despite encouragement from her mother and her trainer, who were in one of the support boats, after fifteen hours and fifty-five minutes (approximately sixty thousand strokes into the crossing), Florence felt she couldn't go on and asked to be taken out of the water.

As it turned out, she was only half a mile from land. She told a reporter, "Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land, I know I could have made it."¹ Two months later she tried again. The fog was very dense, but this time she made it, in thirteen hours and forty-seven minutes, breaking the twenty-seven-year-old record by more than two hours. She was the first woman ever to complete the swim. She reportedly stated that she was successful the second time because while she swam, she kept in her mind a mental image of the shoreline.²

This inspiring account underlines the importance of keeping one's mind on the goal in any endeavor. To quote that wisest of sages, Yogi Berra, "If you don't know where you are going, you might end up someplace else."

In the past year President Kevin J Worthen has repeatedly reminded us of our goal:

*The mission of Brigham Young University—founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.*³

President Worthen’s reminders have been invigorating to me and serve to keep us all from getting lost in the fog. The BYU mission statement is what fundamentally distinguishes BYU, at the very least in principle, from very fine universities elsewhere. Our stated mission is ambitious—even audacious. How can a bunch of faculty trained traditionally in physics, dance, biology, and comparative literature assist others at the university in their quest for perfection and eternal life? And a related question is *why*? At the beginning of each new school year it has been my practice to read some of the foundation documents of Brigham Young University—President Jeffrey R. Holland’s “A School in Zion,” President J. Reuben Clark Jr.’s “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” President Spencer W. Kimball’s “Education for Eternity” and “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” and Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s “Discipleship and Scholarship,” to name a few. All have written powerfully about the central place of learning and particularly about *this* place of learning in the kingdom.

President Worthen recently responded to a question regarding the challenges Brigham Young University faces in maintaining its unique focus. He listed two. The first challenge is outside regulation that may make it difficult to achieve our mission. The second is what he called the challenge of Doctrine and Covenants 121:35. Let me share his words:

Verse 34 says, “Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?”

*The first part of verse 35 answers that question: “Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men.” In the academy in particular, there will always be a pull for us to become like others. The prestige lies in doing research that may not be exactly the way we would do it if there were not outside peer pressure. There is pressure to emphasize research more than teaching, to ignore undergraduates. One of the things we need to be constantly concerned about is that our hearts don’t get set so much on the things of this world and aspire to the honors of men that we start to drift internally.*⁴

It is the constant reminder of our mission that will help keep us on course despite the fog. Without this careful mapping of our course, we may find ourselves swimming in circles, so to speak, in the day-to-day responsibilities of faculty life at BYU. Indeed, even extraordinary accomplishment against traditional measures of academic success—analagous to swimming at a world-record pace—will do us little good if we arrive at the wrong finish line.

Learning to Learn

The major educational goals articulated in our mission statement aspire to (1) the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, (2) pursuit of a broad university education, (3) instruction in the special fields of the various disciplines across campus, and (4) scholarly research and creative work.⁵ Clear in these objectives is that *learning* is central to BYU’s reason for being. It would seem, therefore, that learning to learn is vital.

It is about several dimensions of this important charge that I wish to speak today. Learning to learn is important not only for our students—over thirty thousand of whom will arrive next week—but for us. President Worthen has reminded us that the mission of the university is to assist *individuals* in their quest for perfection—not just students, not just visitors to campus, but faculty and staff and

administrative colleagues as well. Indeed, it would seem a bit hypocritical for us to embrace the mission with *only* our students in mind, neglecting our own quest along the way. We, too, must learn and grow and progress.

Even respected colleagues outside our community who are not familiar with Brigham Young University's aspirational mission assert that the bar should be set higher in the delivery of higher education. William Deresiewicz, former university professor at an Ivy League school and now an author, has advocated for a broader university education that has a ring of "the balanced development of the total person"⁶ from our mission statement that is at the core of our work at BYU. Deresiewicz wrote:

*The purpose of college . . . is to turn adolescents into adults. You needn't go to school for that, but if you're going to be there anyway, then that's the most important thing to get accomplished. That is the true education: accept no substitutes. The idea that we should take the first four years of young adulthood and devote them to career preparation alone, neglecting every other part of life, is nothing short of an obscenity. If that's what people had you do, then you were robbed.*⁷

It is both our charge and our opportunity to teach and to model for our students the divine linkage between learning and perfection and to do it in an environment of faith.

Learning Through Trial and Error

New students who come to BYU are among the best in the nation. Indeed, there is nothing average about the average freshman at BYU. With application records that show dizzying schedules, these students have studied, performed on the field and on the stage, worked, and served at levels that are intimidating to those of us who came to the university as students decades ago. But in this BYU environment they will face rigor and challenge unlike what they have navigated before, and it will

demand more independence than ever before in their lives. Now contact with Mom will be reduced to a daily cell phone call (or two or three) and Dad will not be there to put a foot down if needed. Gone are the days of forgiving high school teachers. Students will face less memorization and more demand for critical thinking, and they will have to adjust to fewer sliding deadlines. It is both our charge and our challenge to help them *learn to learn*. For many, BYU will introduce them to their first serious failure, and it may be unsettling. We must help them understand that there is little real growth without stretching and stumbling.

President Worthen counseled the students in his devotional address in January of this year that they should learn to fail successfully. Are we prepared to model this in our own professional lives? Unfortunately, most of us, students and faculty alike, seek to insulate ourselves from failure. The thought of trying something unfamiliar without the certainty of succeeding is often paralyzing. If we are to learn to learn, and teach our students the same, we must be prepared to risk a venture that may not succeed.

Perhaps more than success, what we should be cultivating is resilience. In her research to write *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*, Sarah Lewis interviewed more than 150 professionals in diverse fields who had faced major setbacks. She observed that individuals who have reached a level of professional stature and had a failure hit them would never call the experience a failure. The term *failure*, she points out, does not capture the rebounding energy that can come afterward. She concludes in her work that the opposite of failure is not *success*, which is a word that captures a moment in time. Rather, the opposite of failure is *mastery*, which describes a continuous process.⁸

There is something reminiscent of the plan of salvation in her observations. We grow through trial and error, and in this

environment the students learn what might be termed “academic repentance.” Fearing failure, how many students avoid taking a challenging class that might stretch them because it could hurt their GPA? As faculty we wisely caution them relative to this restrictive thinking but then hesitate to submit our fine scholarly work to a more prestigious journal because we fear what the reviews might be.

Two weeks ago I enjoyed a delightful visit in my office with a former student and his family—one of several visits in the years since he graduated. This student’s name is Alberto Serrano, and I share his story with his permission. This student enrolled in an introductory thermodynamics course I taught thirteen years ago—fall semester 2002. At that time students in the civil engineering program enrolled in the thermodynamics course in the Mechanical Engineering Department as part of their required curriculum. To be quite candid, the civil engineering students had little interest in the course. It was outside their discipline, with little relevance to their focus. While the course was taken at the sophomore level by mechanical engineering students, civil engineering students often left it to their last year to satisfy this requirement. The course is challenging and cumulative, and students who struggle in the beginning often have difficulty all the way through. Like so many of my colleagues on the faculty, I have high expectations for students, and I structure the course so that students take weekly quizzes, complete weekly homework assignments, and take three midterm examinations plus a comprehensive final exam.

It is with this background as context for the course that I describe Alberto Serrano. Alberto enrolled in the thermodynamics class as a civil engineering senior—in the last year of his undergraduate program. He had done very well in his prior course work. He and his fellow civil engineering students sat on the back row, it seemed, daring me to try to interest them in thermodynamics. Alberto did

poorly on the first exam, well below the class average and likely a failing grade. My teaching experience has exposed me to students in this situation who complain, retreat, and surrender for the remainder of the course after such a failure. Alberto came to my office after the first exam and asked how he could better prepare. He did not blame me or the exam, as students are sometimes prone to do. Rather, he took personal responsibility for his own misstep and determined to turn negative to positive.

Like other students who ask how they can improve when they find themselves in the same situation, I made a challenging and demanding suggestion of Alberto. Typically an engineering textbook has dozens of problems at the end of each chapter, and the instructor chooses a small subset of problems to assign as weekly homework to the class. This has been my practice. I told Alberto that if, in addition to the assigned homework, he would work as many of the *unassigned* problems at the end of each chapter in the textbook as he could, I would help him with questions that arose. I told him that while I would not award him extra credit for the unassigned problems he completed, I was confident his understanding of the material and exam scores would improve.

I have made this offer many times to students with few committed takers, so I was not hopeful Alberto would respond. But he did. Right away I began to see Alberto regularly and frequently in my office—multiple times a week. And he came in with sheaves of homework paper. In those visits he first asked questions about the problems assigned as homework and then would move on to the unassigned problems he was working on. He wouldn’t leave my office until all of his questions were answered. He became more engaged in class, asking deeper questions that went beyond the often-asked “Will this be on the exam?”

It is my recollection that Alberto completed every homework problem in every chapter of

the text we covered in class. On the second midterm exam Alberto scored well above the class average. On the third midterm his score was the highest in the class. He ended the semester with a perfect score on the weekly quizzes and a near-perfect score on the assigned homework. Whereas Alberto was on track early in the semester to finish the course with a failing or D grade, he ended the semester with an A-. He *earned* this final grade in every noble sense of the word. Never prior to my experience with Alberto, and never since that semester, have I had a student so diligent and so committed to independent learning—to turning failure into mastery.

Since his graduation, Alberto has invited me to provide letters of recommendation as he has pursued employment opportunities. As you might guess, writing a sterling recommendation for him has come easily to me. His professional accomplishments since he left BYU are reflective of the approach to failure he cultivated as a student.

President Worthen's counsel to students applies both to them and to us:

We will all fail. More than once. Every day. . . .

My plea for you today is to learn how to fail successfully.⁹

Learning Through Correction

Another significant and central dimension to learning to learn is being open to critical feedback and being willing to act on it. Unfortunately it is human nature to take correction so personally as to view it a threat. Defending our position may be warranted, but to dismiss constructive feedback is to pass up an opportunity for improvement. In our faculty role, providing correction seems to come quite naturally, but inviting constructive feedback on our own work is so very intimidating. And we tend to dismiss feedback that originates with those we view as less capable, less experienced, or of lesser stature

or position. I have been impressed with more than one dean who regularly asks what they can do better.

Late in 1823, a few months shy of his eighteenth birthday (the age of our matriculating freshmen, I might add), Joseph Smith was feeling anxious about lapses in his teenage judgment and his weaknesses and mistakes (“follies,” in his words). He went to the Lord in prayer. Verse 29 of his history reads:

In consequence of these things, I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections; when, on the evening of the . . . twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him.¹⁰

I am struck with the thought that this seventeen-year-old prophet-to-be was in a state of acknowledging his weaknesses and was seeking critical feedback when he approached heaven that night. What came of his inviting feedback? It was on this night and the following morning that Joseph entertained the angel Moroni four times, that he was perhaps first introduced to his prophetic charge, that he was first instructed in any detail relative to the Restoration, that the first intimation of priesthood authority and keys came, and that the existence of the Book of Mormon was first made known to him. While Joseph's prayer in the Sacred Grove was and is a singular event in the world's history, it might be argued that it was his solicitation of heaven's corrective feedback that September night three and a half years after the First Vision that triggered the detailed sequence of events in the Restoration. Inviting correction brings blessings—often profound blessings—to those willing to listen. These words from Proverbs hold a powerful promise and seem to underline the important role of correction in learning to learn:

*Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you.*¹¹

Interestingly, in the thirty-one chapters of Proverbs there are more than a dozen admonitions for us to welcome reproof—and a few rather stern warnings to those who bristle under such correction. After all, in the spirit of learning to fail successfully, might not *reprove* be easily translated as *re-prove*, implying another chance after correction?

Let me give a word to department chairs, faculty stewardship committees, and new faculty mentors in this regard: Constructive yet compassionate feedback is necessary to faculty growth and is particularly crucial in the early years of a new faculty member's appointment. "Reproving betimes with sharpness"¹² can mean a gentle but candid conversation relative to teaching, scholarly productivity, collegiality, etc. I am not talking about a scolding, although I must admit I have needed a "professional spanking" from time to time. Nor am I suggesting that criticism replace well-deserved praise. There are few things that cause me to try harder than to have someone elevate me with praise far above what I deserve. What I am suggesting is that progress is possible only where specific areas for improvement are noted. Criticism is best served with kindness. And to all of us faculty who receive critical feedback, let us remember past successes. We have all experienced a brutal peer review of our scholarly work, siphoning the excitement and confidence out of us. After a few days we pick ourselves up off the floor, drag ourselves back to the manuscript, and go to work on a revision. Invariably the revision is stronger. We ask no less than this of our students when faced with critique. They deserve no less from us, who are charged with assisting in the quest for perfection.

Our primary responsibility at the university is the learning of our students. That learning takes place in the classroom, the laboratory, the field, the clinic, the studio, and the office—even the Testing Center. Given the vital role of teaching at BYU in this, our primary charge, it seems acutely important that we seek to assess confidently our effectiveness in this area of stewardship—that we welcome feedback from the students we are seeking to influence. Now, I understand that there are few faculty issues that produce more emotion and debate than student ratings. However, in the spirit of inviting corrective feedback, which we seek to cultivate in our students, let me suggest that student ratings are the students' chance to help us in this our most significant BYU stewardship.

The current student-ratings tool has been used since fall semester 2001. The instrument has twenty-three questions, including two questions related to overall rating of both teacher and course. A single question invites student narrative comments. The current tool has served us well, but over the course of time we have identified deficiencies in the instrument and in the way results have been interpreted. Of particular concern has been our inability to define the bounds in accuracy of the student ratings.

Six years ago my predecessor, John S. Tanner, empaneled a large group of faculty from diverse disciplines across campus to investigate these deficiencies and propose a new ratings tool. Our colleagues on the Student Ratings Task Force have worked long and hard on this assignment, asking fundamental questions about what to measure, whether it can be measured, how to measure it, how confident of the measurements we can be, and a host of other relevant issues. After thorough study and consideration of the related academic literature, they determined that a new instrument would need to feature fewer questions and provide greater opportunity for

student comment. They concluded, further, that a new survey should focus more pointedly on teaching effectiveness and the achievement of the BYU Aims.

My impression is that the Task Force's work has been something of a constitutional-convention experience—conflict and compromise—except that their labor of love has gone on for considerably longer than the convention delegates' blistering summer of 1787. The group has debated the philosophy of student ratings, studied thoroughly the current instrument and ratings histories, scoured the academic literature on student ratings, considered and reconsidered new ratings questions, debated some more, run pilot evaluations in their own classes, investigated the characterization of statistical accuracy of ratings, and debated again. The Task Force first presented its findings and proposed a draft survey tool to the Academic Vice President's Council in April 2014. Over the course of several long meetings, we engaged in some refinements to their draft instrument. The Task Force's work at that point was presented to the deans and to the Faculty Advisory Council. Thereafter a small-scale pilot in about twenty classes, using the proposed survey tool, was approved.

With encouraging results from this pilot, and after further refinements, a broad campus experiment with the new ratings tool was approved for winter semester of this year. While the opportunity to opt-out of participation in the pilot was offered, the vast majority of you used the new tool in your classes. I express gratitude to you for your willingness to engage in the experience. The winter semester pilot included 4,875 sections from 2,141 courses and 2,059 instructors, with more than 85,000 student ratings completed. Roughly 13 percent of the courses surveyed were at the graduate level, with the remainder equally divided between lower- and upper-division undergraduate courses. More than

70 percent of the students responded, up from our historical average of about 65 percent using the current ratings instrument.

Based on the pilot results, the Task Force has concluded that we can assess the student experience and that we can accurately aggregate the questions related to teacher effectiveness and confidently evaluate the students' perception of their achievement of the BYU Aims. The new ratings instrument has only nine questions, with extensive student commentary invited. Further, and perhaps most significantly, for the first time we feel able to identify the statistical error bound in the aggregate ratings, equipping us to avoid inappropriate interpretation of the evaluation data. The ratings instrument and pilot data will be presented to all department chairs early in September, with a similar presentation to the Faculty Advisory Council as soon as we can get on their schedule. With the advantages offered by the new instrument and analysis of the ratings data, it is our hope that we will be in a position to adopt it campuswide this semester.

I recognize that this new student ratings instrument is unlikely to answer all questions about student evaluations. However, it is my hope that we can acknowledge the utility of inviting feedback from our students and that we can recognize the potential for improvement that will come as we respond to that feedback. We are positioned to do this with a faculty-designed instrument whose results we can consider with confidence. I acknowledge with deep gratitude the thoughtful, careful, collaborative, and sometimes painful but always patient work of our colleagues on the Student Ratings Task Force.

In our quest for perfection and eternal life, may the BYU community view corrective feedback as the pathway to improvement that it is intended to be, and may we offer feedback both to students and to our colleagues in that spirit. Let me quote again from Proverbs:

*Poverty and shame shall be to him that refuseth instruction: but he that regardeth reproof shall be honoured.*¹³

Learning Through Scholarship

If we are to assist students in their quest to learn to learn, we faculty must walk the walk. Our mission statement declares:

*Scholarly research and creative endeavor among both faculty and students, including those in selected graduate programs of real consequence, are essential and will be encouraged.*¹⁴

This board-approved declaration emphatically illustrates that faculty learning is a central—essential—part of our work at the university. One might ask, “Why is faculty scholarship so important when the portion of our time spent on scholarly activities could be directed to teaching more students, especially in a time of growing stress on admissions at BYU?” The Lord has made it clear that cultivation of active, thinking, engaged minds is an indispensable part of the quest for perfection. Consider the following revelatory pronouncements:

- “Behold, the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind.”¹⁵
- “Teach ye diligently . . . things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass . . . ; and a knowledge also of countries and kingdoms.”¹⁶
- “It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.”¹⁷
- “The glory of God is intelligence.”¹⁸

I could go on and on citing relevant prophetic references. No doubt our scholarly activity contributes to the body of knowledge in our disciplines. I don’t want to be profane, but it would seem that for us there is

a deeper—an eternal—consequence to our journal manuscripts and our juried artwork. There seems to be an unmistakable connection between the learning process and the quest for perfection and eternal life. We must be scholars willing to invest in the hard work of learning and professing what we learn in our own academic lives. And we must do it “even by study and also by faith.”¹⁹ Who better and where better to model for students and others how this is done than by us at BYU?

Such passion about learning leads to our developing the same appetite we hope for in our students. We come to view our university service as so much more than work. A noted author described it this way: “The more I want to get something done, the less I call it work.”²⁰ I am quick to confess that scholarship *is* work—hard work. Nothing associated with the reach for excellence has ever been easy.

I am reminded of a joke I heard long ago.

An angel appeared at a faculty meeting and told a senior, respected, and accomplished academic that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, heaven would reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, unlimited knowledge, or unspeakable beauty. Without hesitating, the wise faculty member selected unlimited knowledge.

“Done!” said the angel, and he disappeared in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning.

Now all heads turned toward their esteemed colleague, who sat surrounded by a faint halo of light.

After a long silence, one in the group whispered, “Say something.”

Their senior colleague sighed and said, “I should have taken the money.”

There is no shortcut to learning, and knowledge alone can be empty.

Brigham Young stated:

*And when we have lived millions of years in the presence of God and angels . . . , shall we then cease learning? No, or eternity ceases.*²¹

An interesting recent academic publication is relevant here. The paper detailed a psychological study revealing that the more people think they know about a topic, the more likely they are to allege understanding beyond what they know, even to the point of feigning knowledge of false facts and fabricated information. This phenomenon is termed “overclaiming,” and it appears those individuals who believe they already have a high level of knowledge in a particular area are especially vulnerable. The authors of the study warn that

*a tendency to overclaim, especially in self-perceived experts, could have adverse consequences [and] may discourage individuals from educating themselves in precisely those areas in which they consider themselves knowledgeable.*²²

Being the expert on a subject can be exhilarating, with students and colleagues hanging on our every word. However, without a deep commitment to continued learning, we will fall victim to overclaiming, and no one likes a “know-it-all.”

Learning Through Love

Now let me share a thought that has persisted in my mind for some time. Brigham Young University is a concentrated community of consecrated Latter-day Saints. But we are all humans, with human failings and human trials. The mission statement gives us guidance:

*Certainly all relationships within the BYU community should reflect devout love of God and a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of our neighbor.*²³

Our achievement of academic distinction must not come at the expense of civility,

collegiality, or collaboration. Unlike the stark reputation of the cutthroat academy, at BYU we know that knowledge and fundamental Christian goodness are complimentary virtues. Our institutional ranking and individual faculty recognition will rise no higher than the simple way we treat each other. Even with cutting-edge curriculum and world-class research and creative work, “if ye have not charity, ye are nothing.”²⁴ Empathy and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and bearing one another’s burdens is a covenant charge that makes no distinction between family, neighbors, colleagues, staff, or students. I have been impressed with colleagues across campus who have achieved international stature and whose interactions with others exhibit their love of God. At BYU, if we are to achieve our mission, we cannot be casual about how we learn or how we live. This should be our goal: education of the whole person, taught by precept and example.

“A World We Wish to Improve”

Brigham Young University is a unique place. You are a unique faculty. Our students are a unique population. The influence of BYU is difficult to measure, but once in a while an experience gives a glimpse of that influence. I conclude today with one such experience.

A colleague told me of a recent visit to campus by a faculty member of stature from a very fine East Coast university, where he has taught for more than twenty years. The visitor, not of our faith, came to BYU, presented a department lecture, toured the facilities, visited with a handful of faculty who shared his research interests, and interacted with students. At the conclusion of his visit he graciously expressed a positive view of the university and left for home.

Months later the visitor called his BYU host out of the blue and stated that during his visit he had been impressed with the collegiality of the faculty, the depth of questions asked by

students, the department's vision, the university's commitment to undergraduate education, and the quality of both faculty and students. He shared that, during his visit to campus, he had felt something that he couldn't really describe, but in the months that followed that feeling had caused him to think many times about the department and university. Those feelings led him several times to the BYU website, where he navigated to multiple documents detailing our unique identity and focus. He reported having read in its entirety the Academic Freedom Policy and said it was the most coherent and well-thought-out policy he had ever seen. He read the BYU mission statement and The Aims of a BYU Education document and remarked how impressed he was with both documents and the commitment of the university to a balanced focus on spiritual development and traditional academics. He then asked how the department might respond to an application from him for its next faculty position vacancy.

The final sentence in the mission statement declares:

*We believe the earnest pursuit of this institutional mission can have a strong effect on the course of higher education and will greatly enlarge Brigham Young University's influence in a world we wish to improve.*²⁵

Thank you for being a central part of that influence.

I am grateful to be a faculty member at BYU. I am grateful for the university's ambitious mission and to be engaged with you in seeking to achieve it. Finally, I am grateful for my association with you across campus. May we have a productive year—a year of success and influence elevated and shaped by BYU's unique mission to “assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.” May our firm embrace of the mission clear the fog that could cause us to drift from the influence prophets have envisioned.

Notes

1. Florence Chadwick, quoted in Brian Cavanaugh, *Fresh Packet of Sower's Seeds: Third Planting* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1994), 37.
2. Story details taken from “Florence May Chadwick,” *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2004, encyclopedia.com/topic/Florence_May_Chadwick.aspx; also “Florence Chadwick,” Paint It Blue, *Becoming Inspired*, 20 September 2007, paint-it-blue.blogspot.com/2007/09/florence-chadwick.html; see also “Florence Chadwick,” Obituaries, *The Times* (London), 25 March 1995, 17.
3. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1.
4. Kevin J Worthen, “Two Challenges Facing Brigham Young University as a Religiously Affiliated University,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2015): 9.
5. See *Mission and Aims*, 1–2.
6. *Mission and Aims*, 1.
7. William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014), 87.
8. Summarized in Scott Carlson, “Today's Fail-Safe Students,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 61, no. 39 (26 June 2015): 24; see also Sarah Lewis, *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
9. Kevin J Worthen, “Successfully Failing: Pursuing Our Quest for Perfection,” BYU devotional address, 6 January 2015.
10. Joseph Smith—History 1:29.
11. Proverbs 1:23.
12. D&C 121:43.
13. Proverbs 13:18.
14. *Mission and Aims*, 2.
15. D&C 64:34.
16. D&C 88:78–79.
17. D&C 131:6.
18. D&C 93:36.
19. D&C 88:118.

20. Richard Bach, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1977), 40.

21. Brigham Young, *JD* 6:344 (31 July 1859).

22. Stav Atir, Emily Rosenzweig, and David Dunning, "When Knowledge Knows

No Bounds: Self-Perceived Expertise Predicts Claims of Impossible Knowledge," *Psychological Science* 26, no. 8 (August 2015): 1301.

23. *Mission and Aims*, 1–2.

24. Moroni 7:46.

25. *Mission and Aims*, 2.