

“Walk in the Meekness of My Spirit”

(D&C 19:23)

DAVID A. BEDNAR

Susan and I are delighted to meet with you as a new semester begins at Brigham Young University.

I want to begin my message today by describing two important times of transition in my life that occurred on campuses sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The first transition started in 1970 at BYU. I attended San Leandro High School in the East Bay Area of California from 1967 to 1970. It was a turbulent time, with anti-Vietnam War protests, political assassinations, and social upheaval. The Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco and Telegraph Avenue near the campus of the University of California at Berkeley were two major epicenters of dramatic drug, music, sexual, and cultural revolutions. Only a few Latter-day Saints attended my high school, and my ward had a very small group of youth.

I moved into Helaman Halls in August 1970 and quickly became acquainted with many remarkable LDS young men and young women. That fall semester was a life-changing time for me because of spiritually impactful sacrament meetings and service in my student ward, stimulating academic classes and supportive teachers, and a strong brotherhood that developed with my dorm friends as we played

intramural sports, talked late into the night, and perpetrated typical freshman pranks and practical jokes.

My experience at BYU was “(1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building” (I hope) and a preparation for “(4) lifelong learning and service.”¹ And, most important of all, I met Susan Robinson on this campus after I had returned home from my mission in 1973. She has been the love of my life for almost forty-three years.

The second transition started in 1997. Susan and I moved to Rexburg, Idaho, following an academic career spanning twenty years at three different universities. As I prepared for the fall semester in my new position as the president of then Ricks College, I remember my reaction when my secretary informed me about an annual temple day for staff and faculty at which I was to speak.

I looked at her and asked quizzically, “Can we do that?”

David A. Bednar, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this university conference address on August 28, 2017.

She responded quizzically, “You do know this is a Church school, don’t you?”

Attending a temple session with staff and faculty colleagues was a wonderful new and energizing experience. The overt linking of spiritual enlightenment and intellectual inquiry was thrilling and, of course, had not been a part of my work at the public universities where I was a graduate student and faculty member.

During my years of service in Rexburg, I experienced in powerful ways the spirit of the charge given to Karl G. Maeser by Brigham Young when this university in Provo was founded:

I want you to remember that you ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God.²

Attending the weekly devotionals, praying and using the scriptures in class, and witnessing the deep devotion of faithful and competent staff and faculty members helped me to see with new eyes and to hear with new ears.

My experience at Ricks College, now BYU–Idaho, was “spiritually strengthening, intellectually enlarging, and character building” (I hope) and a preparation for “lifelong learning and service.”³

In these key times of transition in my life, I was blessed to study, learn, work, and grow at institutions of higher education sponsored by the Lord’s restored Church. The Spirit of the Lord was invited and appreciated on these campuses and enabled learning environments that were spiritually stimulating, supportive, and vibrant. The contrast with the other settings where I had studied and worked could not have been more stark.

I provide this personal background as context for my message this morning. My purpose is to affirm and then to build upon President Kevin J. Worthen’s emphasis upon “inspiring learning.”⁴ I earnestly pray for the assistance of the Holy Ghost as I share with you my

thoughts and the feelings of my heart about Brigham Young University.

Inspiring and Experiential Learning

In his university conference message one year ago, President Worthen reiterated the overarching purposes of Brigham Young University. He said:

I hope that what occupies a good portion of our hearts and minds is the role we are to play in assisting our students “in their quest for perfection and eternal life.” The mission statement makes it clear that our primary role in that process is to help our students learn. We are to provide them “a period of intensive learning.” . . .

. . . The mission statement indicates that, above all else, our students should learn “the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” In addition, they should experience learning that is “broad”—learning that enables them to “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.”⁵

He also described the importance of inspiring learning:

Inspiring is both a noun and an adjective. The noun can be defined as the act of inspiring or motivating. In this sense, the term “inspiring learning” describes actions that inspire or motivate students to learn. As an adjective, inspiring is a modifier. In this context, it describes a kind of learning: learning that inspires—or, more precisely, in our setting, learning that leads to inspiration or revelation.

When I use the term “inspiring learning,” I have in mind both meanings of the word inspiring. I hope we inspire our students to learn. And I hope that learning leads to inspiration. When both things happen, inspiring learning occurs, and we can then know we are on the right track to achieve the core goals set forth in our mission statement.⁶

President Worthen then added:

Let me suggest that one way we can enhance the quality of inspiring learning at BYU is to expand both the quantity and quality of the kind of learning that occurs outside the formal classroom—the kind of instruction that many call “experiential learning.” Just like classroom learning, experiential learning can produce the kind of inspiring learning that our mission statement challenges us to provide.⁷

He also stated:

Students cannot learn all they need to learn by memorizing or even discussing principles in a classroom, as exhilarating as that may be. Experience connects theory with application and deepens our understanding of the principles and truths we learn.

And, in my view, experiential learning can be inspiring learning in both senses of that term. It can both inspire students to deeper learning and be the type of learning that leads to inspiration.⁸

The blessings of the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost and the spiritual gift of revelation are central to President Worthen’s inspired emphasis on inspiring and experiential learning. Worthiness to receive revelation and the faith to act upon the revelation we receive are key in these learning processes. And each of us should be drawing closer to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

In our personal lives and in the performance of our university duties, you and I have the responsibility to do nothing that would constrain these heavenly powers from blessing those whom we serve. I am confident the Lord will magnify us individually and institutionally as we strive sincerely to respond to President Worthen’s direction.

The Example of the Prophet Joseph Smith

As I studied President Worthen’s teachings, my mind was drawn to several experiences in the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith. All of Joseph’s learning was inspiring and experiential.

Four years were required for Joseph to learn and comply with the conditions specified by Moroni for obtaining the golden plates and commencing the work of translation. Each annual visit to the Hill Cumorah was a remarkable learning experience with Joseph’s heavenly tutor.

In a matter of weeks in 1828, Joseph and Emma lost their first child and faced the possibility that Emma also might die. At about the same time, Joseph discovered that the manuscript pages given to Martin Harris had been lost. These experiences provide the background for the revelatory rebuke and reassurance we know today as section 3 in the Doctrine and Covenants. This revelation is filled with important lessons for the young Prophet and for us.

These difficult but essential experiences early in Joseph’s ministry were necessary for him to learn the principles and patterns through and by which his prophetic work would be accomplished. And the lessons continued throughout his entire life.

In 1839, as Joseph pleaded in prayer from Liberty Jail for the welfare of the suffering Saints, the Lord instructed, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.”⁹ I believe this scripture describes the ultimate value of experiential learning.

The revelations teach us that “the glory of God is intelligence.”¹⁰ We typically may think the word *intelligence* in this scripture denotes innate cognitive ability or a particular gift for academic work. In this verse, however, one of the meanings of *intelligence* is the application of knowledge for righteous purposes. As President David O. McKay taught:

True education—the education [or learning] for which the Church stands—is the application of knowledge to the development of a noble and Godlike character.¹¹

We are blessed in mortality with endless opportunities to apply what we learn and

know for righteousness—or to increase in intelligence. And learning from experience is one of the primary vehicles provided in the Father’s plan of happiness to accomplish this eternally important outcome. Consequently, we should not equate intelligence exclusively with formal education, academic degrees, or professional success. Some of the most educated people I have ever known had little or no intelligence. And some of the most intelligent people I have ever known had little or no formal education.

The Prophet Joseph Smith is a prime example of an uneducated person who learned from experience and was filled with the light and truth of intelligence.¹²

Learn, Listen, and Walk in Meekness

I hope now to build upon President Worthen’s teachings about inspiring and experiential learning by examining the content and the sequence of important concepts in two related scriptures.

First Verse

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*¹³

This verse contains two instructions from the Savior: (1) take His yoke upon us and (2) learn of Him. He next described Himself as “meek and lowly in heart.” And He promised that as we follow His teachings, we shall find rest unto our souls. *The sequence of concepts in this scripture is yoke, learn, meek, and rest.*

Importantly, the Lord in this sequence first introduced the example of a yoke. A yoke is a wooden beam normally used between a pair of oxen or other animals that enables them to pull together on a load. A yoke places animals side by side so that they can move together to accomplish a task.

Consider the Lord’s uniquely individual invitation to “take my yoke upon you.” We are yoked to and with the Lord Jesus Christ as we

worthily enter into and faithfully honor sacred covenants. The Savior beckons us to rely upon and pull together with Him, even though our best efforts are not equal to and cannot be compared with His. As we trust in and pull our load with Him, the Savior’s Atonement makes possible the greatest experiential learning lessons of our lives because His yoke truly “is easy, and [His] burden is light.”¹⁴

Please remember that the revealer of the sublime sentence “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good”¹⁵ was He who experientially had “descended below all things”¹⁶ and had “trodden the winepress alone.”¹⁷ The Savior’s meekness and perfect walk before all mankind, “even in those times of severe persecutions and abuse which were heaped upon Him by a wicked and adulterous generation,”¹⁸ qualify Him as the perfect teacher from whom we are to learn the lessons of eternity.

Second Verse

*Learn of me, and listen to my words; walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me.*¹⁹

This verse contains three instructions from the Savior: (1) learn of Him, (2) listen to His words, and (3) walk in the meekness of His Spirit. And He promised that as we follow His counsel, we shall have peace in Him. *The sequence of concepts in this scripture is learn, listen, walk in meekness, and peace.*

The sequence of learning and meekness in these two scriptures is important and instructive. Interestingly, meekness is the attribute mentioned in both verses immediately before the promised blessings. And the phrase “walk in the meekness of my Spirit” after the admonition to learn and listen is especially germane to inspiring and experiential learning.

We can only learn of Him as we ever strive to become more like Him and walk in the meekness of His Spirit. I reiterate again that the Holy Ghost and the spiritual gift of

revelation are essential for inspiring and experiential learning. And walking in the meekness of the Lord's Spirit is one of the principal means for seeking these supernal blessings.

Examples of Meekness

Meekness is not weak, timid, or passive. Meekness is the quality of being God-fearing, righteous, teachable, patient in suffering, and willing to follow gospel teachings.²⁰ A meek person is not easily provoked or irritated, pretentious, arrogant, or overbearing. Whereas humility generally denotes acknowledging dependence upon God and receptivity to counsel and correction, a distinguishing characteristic of meekness is a particular willingness to learn both from the Holy Ghost and from other people who may seem less experienced or capable, may not hold prominent positions, or otherwise may not appear to have much to contribute.

Two examples illustrate this unique element of meekness. The first episode involved President Henry B. Eyring. The second episode involved Elder Dallin H. Oaks.

First Episode

I worked extensively with President Eyring during the transformation of Ricks College from a two-year junior college to the university known today as BYU-Idaho. At the time, he was a member of the Twelve and the commissioner of Church education.

Elder Eyring visited the Rexburg campus to assess the progress of the transition. I shared with him a status report on student enrollment projections, physical facilities renovations, construction projects, hiring of new employees, and many other topics. And we devoted considerable time to reviewing the financial resources and timeline necessary for the success of the transition.

During our time together, it became apparent that Elder Eyring and I had differing interpretations of the total resource package that had been approved by the Church Board

of Education for the transition. We worked together to come to a common understanding but were not successful. I then indicated my willingness to do whatever the Brethren directed. But I also explained that fewer resources would necessitate the transition plan and timeline to be scaled back accordingly. We ended our workday together without achieving a final resolution.

Elder Eyring spent the night in our home. When he came to the kitchen for breakfast the next morning, his first statement was, "President, I was rebuked by the Holy Ghost last night." He then indicated that the transition should continue going forward as outlined the previous day and that he had no ongoing concerns about the resources.

He then said to me something I have never forgotten: "President, if you have not been rebuked lately by the Holy Ghost as you are praying, then you need to improve your prayers."

Given his extensive experience in institutions of higher education, his position as a member of the Twelve, and his authority as the commissioner of Church education, he simply could have decided "this is the way it will be." But he did not do that. Elder Eyring learned of and from the Savior, he listened to His words that came by the power of the Holy Ghost, and he then walked in the meekness of the Lord's Spirit. I learned valuable lessons about meekness through this experience with Elder Eyring. Such meekness is essential for inspiring and experiential learning.

Second Episode

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles for thirty-three years. He is both faithful and fearless.

In one of our quorum meetings, Elder Oaks expressed a strong opinion about a course of action that he believed should be pursued. The reasons he articulated were convincing, and his knowledge about the issue was extensive.

His arguments in favor of the action were compelling.

As we counseled together, a less senior member of the Twelve expressed agreement with the basic course of action but registered a reservation about the proposed timing. Now, Elder Oaks is incapable of even having such a thought, but he could have countered the concern with a response such as “I believe I know more about this matter than you do.” But he did not. With no hint of defensiveness or indignation, Elder Oaks asked his quorum member, “Would you please help me understand your reservation about the timing?”

After listening intently to his apostolic associate, Elder Oaks pondered for a moment and then said, “The point made by Elder _____ is valid. I had not considered the timing implications of this action in the way he has, and I am persuaded that the proposal should be reworked based on what we have learned in this discussion.”

Elder Oaks learned of and from the Savior, he listened to His words that came through the voice of a fellow quorum member, and he then walked in the meekness of the Lord’s Spirit. I learned valuable lessons about meekness through this experience with Elder Oaks. Such meekness is essential for inspiring and experiential learning.

I believe knowing something more about Elder Oaks may help you to hear with new ears the counsel he has given on this campus over the past several years. Elder Oaks presently serves on the Church Board of Education and as the chair of the Church Educational System Executive Committee. He is a disciple-scholar and is uniquely qualified and positioned to help this university accomplish its sacred purposes. And Elder Oaks has raised an authoritative and sustaining voice to Elder Worthen’s emphasis upon the fundamental mission of Brigham Young University.

Recently, Elder Oaks has addressed challenging and hard issues in several BYU leadership conferences with the deans,

associate deans, and department chairs. I now reiterate five of those issues:

1. Acknowledging the reality that the mission of Brigham Young University will not be attained in exactly the same way that other universities have achieved their greatness. It will become the great university of the Lord—not in the world’s way but in the Lord’s way. President Worthen spoke pointedly and persuasively on this issue in his message to you this morning.

2. Aligning all aspects of the work performed at BYU even more closely with the purposes of our Heavenly Father.

3. Resisting external pressures that would prevent or impede the attainment of our Church and institutional goals.

4. Encouraging BYU faculty and other employees to offer public, unassigned support of Church policies that are challenged on secular grounds.

5. Inviting serious consideration of and adjustment to the patterns of what and how we measure student learning and faculty research and publication.

Elder Oaks can speak to these challenges in such a direct and clear way precisely because he left his professional and scholarly “nets”²¹ in response to the Lord’s call to serve as a special witness of His name in all the world. He has learned of and from the Savior, he listens to His voice, and he walks in the meekness of His Spirit. I admonish you to review and heed his counsel and instruction.

“Therefore, What?”

During discussions in the Quorum of the Twelve, President Boyd K. Packer often would ask, “Therefore, what?”

I understood his question to mean, “So what spiritually significant difference will this idea, proposal, or course of action make in the lives of Church members? Will it actually bless those whom we serve?”

President Packer was inviting us to consider the value and long-term implications of the matter about which we were counseling. I have found the question “Therefore, what?” to be most helpful in focusing my thinking about an issue and in identifying the things that matter most.

So, you may be asking, “Brother Bednar, what is the ‘therefore, what?’ of your message to us?” My answer to this question has two parts.

First, Brigham Young University will only fulfill its divine mission as all employees on this campus learn of Christ, listen to His words, and walk in the meekness of His Spirit. The Lord’s invitation to walk in meekness is important for every person who interacts with or supports students in any way at BYU. Meekness is central to and essential for inspiring and experiential learning. And it is the unique combination of meekness and academic excellence that will set Brigham Young University apart from all other institutions of higher education.

Walking in meekness will help us to press forward through the messy middle.

Second, each of us should seek continually for heavenly help to avoid and overcome the selfish, negatively competitive, and adulation-seeking pride that is so common in our contemporary world. Personal pride is the greatest obstacle to walking in the meekness of the Lord’s Spirit and twists accomplishment into arrogance, scholarship into intellectual priesthood, and counsel and correction into causes for offense. The instruction from the Lord to Emma Smith in 1830 applies equally to all of us today: “Continue in the spirit of meekness, and beware of pride.”²²

The ultimate answers to the question of “therefore, what?” are individual in nature and will come to our minds and hearts by the power of the Holy Ghost. They likely will be different for each of us. I now pose four questions to help us seek for those individual answers.

1. Is the mission of BYU changing me or am I trying to change the mission of BYU?

2. How does walking in the meekness of the Lord’s Spirit facilitate inspiring and experiential learning?

3. What steps should I take to walk more fully in the meekness of the Lord’s Spirit?

4. What can I do to help students walk more fully in the meekness of the Lord’s Spirit?

Blessing and Testimony

I love you. I appreciate who you are and what you do. And I love Brigham Young University. I thank and commend you for your faithfulness, for your service to the students who come to learn on this campus, for teaching your respective disciplines with professionalism, and for all you do to declare the simple truths of the Lord’s restored gospel and to support His latter-day Church.

I invoke upon you this blessing—that with the help of the Holy Ghost you may develop a strong desire to learn about meekness, that you incrementally and increasingly may become more meek, and that you modestly and confidently will walk in the meekness of the Lord’s Spirit. As you do so, you will find rest unto your souls and you will have peace in Him. And you will be instrumental in helping the students on this campus to be strengthened spiritually, to be enlarged intellectually, to build character, and to be prepared for lifelong learning and service.

I witness that Jesus Christ is the Living Son of the Living God. I know that He lives. I know that He is risen and that He knows and loves us as individuals. Oh, how I yearn to walk with you in the meekness of His Spirit. For this blessing I pray, and of these things I testify, in the sacred name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 5.

2. Brigham Young, quoted in Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography by His Son* (Provo: BYU, 1928), 79.

3. *Mission and Aims*, 5.

4. See Kevin J Worthen, "Inspiring Learning," BYU annual university conference address, 22 August 2016.

5. Worthen, "Inspiring Learning"; quoting from *Mission and Aims*, 1, 2.

6. Worthen, "Inspiring Learning."

7. Worthen, "Inspiring Learning."

8. Worthen, "Inspiring Learning."

9. D&C 122:7.

10. D&C 93:36.

11. David O. McKay, "True Education," The Editor's Page, *Improvement Era* 60, no. 3 (March 1957): 141.

12. See D&C 93:36.

13. Matthew 11:29.

14. Matthew 11:30.

15. D&C 122:7.

16. D&C 88:6.

17. Isaiah 63:3; see also D&C 76:107; 88:106.

18. Joseph Smith, *HC* 2:13; see also *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 53.

19. D&C 19:23.

20. See Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "meek, meekness," scriptures.lds.org.

21. Matthew 4:20.

22. D&C 25:14.