

“When upon Life’s Billows”: Take a Friend

BETH VAUGHAN COLE

Thank you, Vice President Rogers, for your kind introduction. The music was beautiful. Brothers and sisters, honored guests, my esteemed colleagues and staff, and my dear, treasured students: welcome. It is an honor to be speaking to you today.

Many of you were present on January 15 of this year when President Henry B. Eyring gave his address about the trials that people face over a lifetime. He named three:

First: We can feel overcome with pain and sorrow at the death of a loved one.

Second: Each of us will struggle against fierce opposition — some of which comes from dealing with our physical needs and some from enemies.

Third: Each of us who live past the age of accountability will feel the need to escape from the effects of sin. [“The Power of Deliverance,” BYU devotional, 15 January 2008]

Every loving parent and every loving adult in this room would like to protect you from the harsh trials that life will present to you, but we know no one who has escaped the difficult vicissitudes of life. We want you to be strong. We want you to know how to manage

any difficulty that might come your way. We want you to be resilient when you are faced with life’s trials. How do we help you develop those qualities? We can’t and shouldn’t make all your choices for you—that will not make you strong. So we give to you what wisdom we have gleaned along our paths through life. My task today is to share with you some of that wisdom.

Over the past 10 years I have been involved in the lives of people who have experienced the death of a loved one. Helping them address the grief and bereavement and adjustments in their lives has been a tender, spiritual, and inspiring experience. As President Eyring noted, we will all have trials. Some of them will be to adjust to the deaths of loved ones in our lives.

David Balk’s research at Kansas State University reports that 25 percent of college students experienced the death of a family member in the past year and that 30 percent experienced the death of a friend in that same time period (see David E. Balk and Laura C.

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Vesta, "Psychological Development During Four Years of Bereavement: A Longitudinal Case Study," *Death Studies* 22, no. 1 [January–February 1998]: 23–41). Mild, moderate, or severe grief can interfere with learning, with interpersonal relationships, and with sleeping, eating, and personal growth. Death is the last taboo of our American society. We can talk about it in the third person, and we can talk about it in movies, textbooks, and literature, but it is still very difficult to talk about it in everyday life. Many people will need a friend or friends during difficult times—they'll need someone they can talk to about the trials they are experiencing.

I have entitled my talk "'When upon Life's Billows': Take a Friend." Many of you are familiar with Johnson Oatman Jr.'s hymn "Count Your Blessings." The first verse is:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings; name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.*
[Hymns, 1985, no. 241]

Friendship is one of the greatest blessings we can have. Our friends provide comfort and counsel. They accept—or at least tolerate—our peculiarities and often laugh spontaneously at our jokes. Most of all, they are really quite forgiving of our imperfections.

A dear friend gave me a bowl decorated with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson. It says, "A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature" ("Friendship," *Essays: First Series* [1841]). In truth, a friend may well be a divine masterpiece. Professionally, I have worked as a college faculty member in psychiatric–mental health nursing. I have studied human relationships and health for decades. Research from the past 30 years on social support and health offers strong evidence for a positive relationship between social support and the outcomes of many

health-related variables. Friendships, along with kinship or family relationships, are the most researched social relationships. Today I want to focus on friendship.

In particular, I want to talk about four aspects of friendship that I hope will offer some assistance to you throughout your life: (1) make friends, (2) make friends with a wide variety of people, (3) make your spouse your friend, and (4) make Christ your friend.

Make Friends

Most of you in this room are young. I hope that you have traversed the rocky road of adolescent friendships and are now ready for mature, reciprocal friendships. Mature relationships are precious. At this time in your lives, developing adult friendships may be complicated by the goal to find "the right one." You are anxious about whether you will ever find your "perfect love," "soul mate," and "lifelong partner." For many of you, one of your goals for your time at BYU is to find a partner. And I am in support of that goal. It will happen for many of you, and it will be a great blessing in your lives.

But in your search for your partner, I hope that you will have time to make friends—good friends, maybe even lifelong friends. You can learn so much from them. Not all friendships become lifelong relationships, but friends can be the connections between all of us. Recently my ward bishop, Robert Merkley, gave one of the most eloquent and spiritual talks I have ever heard about loving one another and about Christ's love for us. He exhorted those listening to learn to truly love their brothers and sisters here on earth. I believe the Savior's teaching that we must love one another was pervasive and unlimited. Yes, our most important relationships will and should be those in our families, but friendships outside of our families can be very important and beautiful as well.

There are scriptures that support the importance of good friendships:

- Exodus 33:11: “And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.”
- 1 Samuel 18:1: “And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”
- Mark 5:19: Christ said to a man whom He had just rid of unclean spirits, “Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.”
- John 11:5: “Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.”
- John 11:11: “These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.”
- John 11:35: When Jesus came to the grave where Lazarus lay, “Jesus wept.”
- John 15:13: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

I believe that Jesus’ friendships were deep, profound, and of great importance to Him.

Friendships take time and attention to develop, although I have observed that the process may not take as much time as you might think. I have seen 15 minutes of honest exchange make deep changes in a life. I know long talks can change lives as well. A friend is kind to you, knows and likes you, and wishes the best for you.

The scriptures talk about loving your neighbor. There may be a difference between a neighbor and a friend, but I don’t think anyone would question that the good Samaritan described in Luke 10:29–37 was truly a friend to the man from Jericho. You know the story: A man from Jericho fell among thieves and was beaten. A priest and a Levite both passed the wounded man, and neither offered help.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. [Luke 10:33–37]

I think there is a very simple test for determining if someone is a good friend. Does your association with that person make you a better person? Does he or she inspire you to be the best that you can be? Does your friendship with that person sustain you during difficult times? Do you desire to make the world a better place for your friend? Do take time to make friends.

Make Friends with a Wide Variety of People

The second point I would like to make is that we should make friends with all different types of people. There is often a great deal of loneliness on a campus this large. While talking to new people may be easy for some, for others it takes an extraordinary effort. Some people are self-conscious and painfully shy. As a mother I was aware of such diversities in my children, who are different from each other in their abilities to make friends. When they were young, two of my children could keep a room of people engaged and entertained, while the other two were quieter in temperament. One ran into the library and hid under a table when asked to read an essay at school. They have all matured now and all have friends, but, most important of all, they are friends to each other.

Even with our similarities, we as humans have many differences. If you are gregarious, take the time to befriend a quieter person—you can learn that quietness and silence are great teachers. If you are on the shy side, make the effort to get to know a few others; someone who is more outgoing could teach you how to speak up and be responsive in a group. Learn from each other.

I have noticed that there are some people who attract a large group of friends. Sometimes they attract more people than they can truly, reasonably spend a lot of time with. Often people who want to be their friend are offended when they do not receive the attention they would like. Don't be offended. Remember: friendships take time and nurturing. There are so many others who would love to have you for a friend and spend time with you. If you take offense that you have been left out or ignored, you will not be ready to see the possibilities for friendships with the people around you.

In *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis wrote:

*It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . Your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. [C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 14–15; emphasis in original]*

Make friends with a wide variety of people.

Make Your Spouse Your Friend

The third issue regarding friendship that I would like to discuss is that of making your

spouse your friend. Some of you may marry someone you have known since you were children together, but most of you will not. You will marry someone you have gotten to know within months, or even a few years, before you marry. While your affection for one another is a good beginning for a strong relationship, it may take more to sustain a lifelong relationship. Hopefully the years will open up a wealth of experiences that you can share. But becoming true friends with each other will take time. Take time to listen to each other's concerns, dreams, and interests; plan things together; and support each other as best you can. Include each other in your everyday lives. Learn to appreciate that your spouse is unique and different from you and seek to understand him or her, even if you disagree. Encourage your spouse to develop his or her talents and interests, but also do things you both enjoy together. Again, remember that it takes time to make and keep a friend.

My husband and I have nearly raised our children, and now we have more time to nurture our relationship. Boy, was I clever! I married an amazing person—he gets better and better as I get to know him. I enjoy talking to him, listening to him, and just being with him. We don't agree on everything, but we do agree on the important things. I wish you well in making your spouse your best friend.

Make Christ Your Friend

The last issue I would like to address about friendship is that precious relationship you have with Christ. Some of you may know the song "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," with words by Joseph M. Scriven and music by Charles C. Converse:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,*

*Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

The song implores us to take our grief, our sorrow, and our burdens to the Lord in prayer. He truly is our friend, and we can take our troubles to Him. He can be the friend we need.

Christ's atoning sacrifice is the essential cornerstone of our lives:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
[John 3:16]

Through His atoning sacrifice we are made whole. It is a very unique and transforming experience to know and understand Christ's gift to us. Does it change you to know Him? What have you done because you know Him?

When I was a little older than most of you students, I moved to Utah from back East. I had made wonderful girlfriends in Boston, and a group of us moved from Boston to the West. (We've stayed in contact—many of us are dear friends today.) One of my friends had taken a position as a schoolteacher in Cokeville, Wyoming, and five of us planned a wonderful outing to visit her there for one day in May. We planned to go horseback riding in the afternoon, stay overnight, and return to Salt Lake the next day.

We arrived in the late morning, and within a short while we got into our friend's very large Cadillac to drive to the riding stables, which were just over a mountain pass about 45 minutes away. It was cool in the morning, but by the time we left it was warm and pleasant. Some of us were dressed for riding—wearing boots, long pants, and a coat. Others had sneakers and sweaters. The car easily held all six of us.

We began the climb over the pass. As we made a turn, we saw an eagle in the road. It

took off and soared in slow, arcing circles. It was a spectacular sight—a great omen for a wonderful day ahead, right? As we climbed higher, snow started to dot the sides of the road. The road started turning to mush, and it was getting harder to go forward. Even though we were still going up, we thought we must have been getting close to our destination. Eventually the car would go no farther—it was so mired in mud that we could not move it forward or backward. We tried everything we could think to do.

Because we were almost there, we got out and started walking toward the stables. We walked for a couple of hours, and it was hard in the muck and snow. We couldn't see any stables, houses, or any kind of shelter, and it was starting to get cold—it even starting snowing. We knew we needed to get back to the car for safety for the night, so we headed back.

By the time we got there, it was dark. We spent the night in the car. The only food we had was a box of cereal and a few candies, but our spirits were still high. We stayed warm by turning the heater on and off, and we tried to sleep, but, as you can imagine, it did not come easily. We prayed simply and earnestly for help and courage to handle the situation.

As the sun came up the next morning, we still couldn't get the car out. One person was only wearing sneakers, and her feet had become red and blistered from all the walking the previous day. She was unable to walk easily or quickly. Another friend stayed with her in the car while four of us started to walk back in the direction we had come.

We had walked for about an hour or two when we came upon two fishermen. They told us that they could not drive us out to the town from where they were because the roads needed to dry before their jeep could get out. They had been camping and had a campfire and food; they generously prepared a wonderful breakfast for us.

A little later, one of the men took the jeep and went in search of our car. He returned with my other two friends, who had started to walk; they were hobbling as they got out of the car. As these men were feeding my friends, one of them heated a pot of water, and after it was warm he had my friends sit down. He took each of my friends' feet and washed them, putting some salve on their sores and blisters and socks on their feet. The tender comfort and healing efforts of these two men was in similitude of our Savior. I don't know these men. The only piece of information that I remember was that they worked for the *Ogden Standard-Examiner*. A couple of hours later they drove us to my friend's house, and we returned to Salt Lake later that day.

As I recall that day, I don't remember being afraid or even worried very much. Three decades later, I remember vividly not the near tragedy but the beautiful image of true compassion—a compassionate man washing the feet of a stranger.

I am very grateful for my wonderful friends. I ask those of you who know Christ, who believe in Christ, and who have faith in Christ to let His example help you be a friend to others. Make a wide variety of friends. Make your spouse your friend. And, without question, make Christ your friend. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.