

Learning in an Eternal Context

LYNN E. GARNER

I am honored and humbled by the opportunity to speak to you today. I want to discuss some features of the most prominent activity on campus—at least it should be the most prominent—that of learning. Learning has been important to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from the beginning of the Restoration. There have been instructions about learning that have become part of our scriptures. The scriptures even tell us what kinds of things we can expect to learn and ought to learn, and give some indications of why we should learn. I would like to place the activity of learning in an eternal context, where learning gains value and appropriate attitudes about learning are fostered. With an eternal perspective, we can better fulfill our earthly missions.

The Flood of Information

First, let me remark, as did Elder Dallin H. Oaks in our last general conference, that we are inundated in these times with a flood of information. There are more sources of information now than ever before, and they are more easily accessed than ever before. Our challenge is not in finding information but in deciding to which information to give our attention. Without something to guide our choices,

we could spend all our time perusing information without ever gaining any worthwhile knowledge. Without purpose to our learning, we could spend all our time acquiring knowledge and never learn what is important or how to use it. As Elder Oaks said in paraphrasing T. S. Eliot's poem *The Rock*, " 'Wisdom' is 'lost in knowledge' and 'knowledge' is 'lost in information' " (Dallin H. Oaks, "Focus and Priorities," *Ensign*, May 2001, 82–83; see also T. S. Eliot, *The Rock* [1934], I).

By the time adulthood is reached, every person has discovered that there is not enough time to do everything that he or she might be able to do. Similarly, it is now the case that there is not enough time to know everything that one might be able to know. Just as we must decide what to do, we must decide what to know. Our society has not fully discovered that principle and is still trying to handle all the information available without deciding which information to ignore. In many ways, our society is "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7).

Lynn E. Garner was chair of the BYU Department of Mathematics when this -devotional address was given on 5 June 2001.

Knowledge of Greatest Worth

The fact that some information is more important than other information is one of the basic principles taught by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We read in Moses 6 that Adam himself was instructed by the Lord what to teach his children. It is recorded that he was commanded to teach his children the plan of salvation: the gospel of Jesus Christ, the principle of repentance, and the ordinances of baptism by water and by the Spirit. The knowledge of the plan of salvation, we attest, is the most important information that can be known. Why is it the most important? Because without it, says the scripture, “they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (Moses 6:57).

We would classify the plan of salvation as spiritual knowledge, revealed to us by God. By contrast, we can learn many things on our own, outside of revelation per se, which we might classify as secular knowledge. A modern commandment to learn by teaching one another is found in the Doctrine and Covenants. The commandment is placed in the context of preparing to serve in the kingdom of God. It also clearly links spiritual and secular knowledge. We read:

And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;

Of 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; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—

That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling

whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you. [D&C 88:77–80]

I think this scripture is telling us that learning will help us carry out our earthly missions and that we ought to learn diligently in those studies where the grace of God can attend us. This scripture clearly places value on many secular subjects as being worthwhile to study as we prepare to build the kingdom. Some tend to think that whatever subject they wish to study is justified by this scripture. I would urge caution, though, for I think there are subjects in which the Spirit of God will not attend us. Clearly, some studies and choices of occupation better enable us to serve our families and the Church than others.

Once we realize that some information is more important than other information, and that there is more information available to us than we can learn, then it should not be hard for us to decide that we ought to spend our time learning the most important and valuable things. Whatever we learn should lift us, strengthen us, and enable us better to do the work we have to do in this life. Life is too short, as is often said, to spend our time learning trivial or degrading things when there is so much that is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13).

Learning by Faith

Another scripture often quoted has to do with learning by faith:

And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith. [D&C 88:118]

Most of us know what learning by study is, but seeking learning also by faith may not be as clear to us. Remember that to us, “faith” means “faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Articles of Faith 1:4).

Here is a scripture that talks about the kinds of things we might expect to learn and also links learning to the power of the Holy Ghost. The Prophet Joseph wrote:

God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost, that has not been revealed since the world was until now; . . .

A time to come in the which nothing shall be withheld. . . .

All thrones and dominions, principalities and powers, shall be revealed and set forth upon all who have endured valiantly for the gospel of Jesus Christ;

And also, if there be bounds set to the heavens or to the seas, or to the dry land, or to the sun, moon, or stars —

All the times of their revolutions, all the appointed days, months, and years, . . . and all their glories, laws, and set times, shall be revealed in the days of the dispensation of the fulness of times. . . .

How long can rolling waters remain impure? What power shall stay the heavens? As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints. [D&C 121:26, 28–31, 33]

Exciting, isn't it? Especially the part about knowledge "pouring down . . . from heaven" on our heads. It reminds me of the student's dream of having knowledge poured into his head without effort on his part, but I'm sure that's *not* what it means. I think it may also give us some insight about learning under the influence of the Holy Ghost; for one thing, we must have the Holy Ghost with us if it is going to work. We qualify for the companionship of the Holy Ghost when our lives are in order and when we seek it in prayer.

This reminds me of an old *Peanuts* comic strip. Linus has just received his history test back, and he says, "I'm afraid to look at it.

Oh, I hope I got a good grade. Please, please, please, let it be a good grade."

Charlie Brown says to him, "You should have done all that hoping and praying when you were studying for the test."

Linus replies, with a look of disdain, "Hoping and praying should never be confused with studying."

Charles Schultz was right in having Linus say that hoping and praying are no substitute for studying. On the other hand, just as we are urged to pray for the companionship of the Spirit as we study the revealed word, so we should also desire the Spirit to help us as we study secular subjects, for the Spirit can enlighten us, help us understand, quicken our memories, and enable us to distinguish truth and error.

Reasoning

In several places in the scriptures, the Lord says, "Come, let us reason together." He even gives the reason for reasoning in the following passage:

And now come, saith the Lord, by the Spirit, unto the elders of his church, and let us reason together, that ye may understand;

Let us reason even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face.

Now, when a man reasoneth he is understood of man, because he reasoneth as a man; even so will I, the Lord, reason with you that you may understand. [D&C 50:10–12; see also Isaiah 1:18]

The Lord thus places value on reasoning as a means of understanding.

Let me note in passing that our experiences with students in mathematics courses tell us that our society does not place much value on reasoning. Many of the major forces in our society don't want you to reason. They would like you to just do as you are requested without thinking about it. Think of advertising, politics, and special interest groups of all sorts.

Further, society doesn't give us much practice in reasoning as we are growing up. Even in school the emphasis seems too often to be on memorizing and regurgitating rather than on reasoning, and outside of school we spend a lot of time in passive entertainment. To live without reasoning sounds to me more like Lucifer's plan than the plan of happiness.

The Lord gives further light on the relationship of reason and faith in His interaction with Oliver Cowdery and his attempt to translate. Oliver was told that it was not enough just to ask, even in faith, but "you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right" (D&C 9:8). I think this pattern can apply to everything we study: we should do our best to reason it out and then ask the Lord to give us insight by the Spirit. I conclude from what the scriptures say that we are expected to use both reason and faith as we learn.

From what I have observed, Latter-day Saints contrast with many Christians in believing that reason even applies in understanding theological ideas. So much in classical Christianity is labeled as unexplainable mystery that many believers never try to reason things out.

Conflict Between Knowledge and Belief

As we study the gospel and secular subjects, we are going to come to ideas that contradict each other. I remember the rather shocking realization that something I was reading in a textbook couldn't be true. Books were given high regard in the home in which I was raised. From our earliest days my mother read to us—from the scriptures, library books, and stories serialized in the farming magazine. We grew up with a firm foundation in the gospel and with a love of reading and of learning in general. I had come to accept as valid what I read in books that were supposed to be telling the truth. Now here was something being stated as a fact that could not be true if my beliefs were correct.

I am sure this has happened to all of us. We gain knowledge from various sources and discover things that are supposed to be true that contradict each other. To reconcile such conflicts, we try to reason it out and we seek the light of the Spirit. We usually cannot reconcile these ideas until we gain more knowledge: either of our beliefs or of the subject under consideration. Sometimes the process takes years. In fact, many of us have conflicting notions in the recesses of our minds that are still unresolved, but we have faith that someday we will understand.

I don't remember the purported facts that first forced me to reconcile what I was learning with what I believed, but let me give you an example from a course I recently taught on campus. The course was History of Mathematics, and we were studying from one of the best books on the subject that is available today. This author is trying to be quite careful not to speculate on the early history of mathematics—for which there is no record and little evidence—but let me quote a paragraph from his first page:

*It is commonly accepted that mathematics originated with the practical problems of counting and recording numbers. The birth of the idea of number is so hidden behind the veil of countless ages that it is tantalizing to speculate on the remaining evidences of early humans' sense of number. Our remote ancestors of some 20,000 years ago—who were quite as clever as we are—must have felt the need to enumerate their livestock, tally objects for barter, or mark the passage of days. But the evolution of counting, with its spoken number words and written number symbols, was gradual and does not allow any determination of precise dates for its stages. [David M. Burton, *The History of Mathematics: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Boston: WCB McGraw-Hill, 1999), 1]*

There are a couple of ideas in this paragraph that cause me some conflict. First, it is clear in

the rest of the textbook that the author is going to be talking mainly about recorded history; that is, he is going to tell us something about the intellectual history of the race of Adam. But the race of Adam is only about 6,000 years old, according to scriptural history, so either that reference to 20,000 years ago is wrong or he is not talking about the race of Adam. This difficulty is of the same sort as numerous questions that arise—especially in anthropological studies—as to the dating of what appear to be human artifacts. Many of these kinds of questions are still unsettled.

Second, the reference to the gradual development of counting causes me some consternation. We know from scriptural history that the Adamic language was well developed rather than primitive. We read in the book of Moses:

And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration;

And by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled. [Moses 6:5–6]

Reading now parts of the next few verses, we find:

And a genealogy was kept of the children of God. And this was the book of the generations of Adam, saying: In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him. . . .

And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his own image, and called his name Seth.

And the days of Adam, after he had begotten Seth, were eight hundred years, and he begat many sons and daughters;

And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died. [Moses 6:8–12]

The next nine verses then go on to tell the birth dates and life spans of the patriarchs, all the way down to Enoch. From this I conclude that the language of Adam certainly included words for numbers, as well as the ability to count. Moreover, Enoch, in conversation with the Lord, talked about counting and mentioned a rather large number: “And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations” (Moses 7:30). That is, the race of Adam not only knew how to count, but they could discuss counting in the abstract. The upshot of all this, of course, is that the ability of Adam and his posterity to count and to speak and write numbers was fully developed from the beginning. The author’s assertion that number ability developed gradually turns out to be speculation. On the other hand, we should not fault this author for making a statement that is in harmony with the currently accepted worldview; we just have to remember to reason out such statements for ourselves.

Science and Religion

We used to hear a lot about the conflict between science and religion. We seem to hear less about it in recent years, probably because so few in the world care to discuss religion in public. Let me explain just a little about the terms I am going to be using here. First of all, the scientific method is study that relies on observation—not on authority or on doctrine or on other preconceived ideas. That may be a slight oversimplification, but it will do for our purposes here. By “observation,” I mean the use of the senses, often enhanced by instruments of various sorts, to determine what is happening. To describe what is happening, quantification and the language of mathematics is usually used. By “authority,” I mean accepting something because someone says it is true. I do not mean that it is improper to accept someone’s statement on faith, but it is an act

of faith rather than of scientific observation. By “doctrine,” I mean revealed knowledge, which does not come just by observation.

The primary aim of science is to construct explanations—called theories—of how things work and why they work that way. After numerous observations of a natural phenomenon, a theory is constructed that attempts to explain the phenomenon. If some subsequent observation does not conform to the theory, then the theory is modified to accommodate the observation. An observation that does conform to the theory does not prove the theory but merely fails to disprove it. Scientific theories cannot be proved, for to do so would require every possible observation to be made and noted to conform to the theory, and that is clearly impossible. Until some observation contradicts the theory, the theory is accepted as a plausible explanation.

Be on guard, then, when someone teaches a scientific theory as fact. Particularly be on guard when they treat any portion of science in a doctrinaire manner. Be equally on guard when someone allows no scientific evidence whatever to be presented; we regard such people as closed-minded or incapable of reason. So what about scientific theory and revealed knowledge that contradict each other? We have to continue to make observations and continue to study the revealed word and have faith that we will eventually make sense of the situation. After all, we do believe in absolute truth, which means that there is a way that things are; we just do not yet understand how all things are. It is in this context, particularly, that the assistance of the Holy Ghost is valuable; it can help us see how to understand the situation and can alert us to error.

When you consider science more carefully, the stance of science is that we *can* observe the world around us and learn something about it. The underlying premise is that there is order in the universe and that we can discover something about that order by observation.

This has not been proven, though, but is accepted on faith. Stated more succinctly, scientific inquiry is really an act of faith. By extension, then, it is an act of faith anytime we undertake to learn something, for we first believe that there is some order to the question involved and that we *can* learn something about it.

Attitude Toward Secular Knowledge

Putting learning in an eternal context can help us form helpful attitudes about learning in general. For example, the history of this earth is an area in which there are still many questions unanswered. Geologists have constructed a theory by reading the evidence in the earth itself, but the theory still does not explain everything.

We know that we were all present when the Lord announced that an earth would be built on which we might dwell for the furtherance of our individual progression (see Abraham 3:24–26). We therefore undoubtedly watched with interest while the earth was being prepared for the race of Adam. Some, including President Joseph Fielding Smith, believe that we might have had a part in that preparation (see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56], 1:74–75). It is probably the case, then, that we knew before we came to this earth far more about the earth’s history than we will ever discover while here in mortality. The veil of mortality has blocked it from our memory, but there will come a point in our progression at which we will remember the things we knew from our experiences in pre-earth life. I suspect that not only in the matter of the earth’s history but in many areas of secular learning, we have forgotten more in coming here than we will ever be able to learn while in mortality.

“Well, then,” says the weary student, “if I’m going to remember it all at some point, why knock myself out now trying to learn it?”

Beside the immediate application value of knowledge, Joseph Smith taught:

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. [D&C 130:18–19]

So if I study geology and learn all I can, then according to this scripture I will have an advantage in the next world as compared to someone who does not study geology. How can that be if we both eventually remember all we saw in our pre-earth life?

The only conclusion I can reach is that it must not be entirely the knowledge itself that gives us the advantage. I think it is the “diligence and obedience” that does so. If we practice learning while in this life, using self-discipline to be diligent and obedient, then we learn techniques of study, gain strength of character, and will have an increased ability to learn in the next life. These things, not just the knowledge itself, give us the advantage in the world to come.

I therefore believe that, in matters of secular learning, *more important than what we learn is what we go through to learn it.* The effort of learning gives us far more than just the knowledge we sought.

This should also be a comfort to many who labor diligently to learn the principles of, say, science and technology, only to have those ideas become obsolete in a short time. We can look back through the history of science and see how incomplete and inaccurate the theories of our forefathers were as compared to our own enlightened understanding. If you live long enough, you will see that our current understanding is also incomplete. That’s just the way it is with most secular knowledge. But remembering that what we went through

to learn it was also valuable, we don’t have to feel that we wasted our time in learning it.

More particularly, this attitude gives us faith to study secular subjects, knowing that even if the subject changes, we will have gained much by our study. It also gives us patience as we try to reconcile what we are learning with what we believe, because the study required to do so also benefits us in other ways.

Purpose of a University Education

So why are we studying at a university, where much of our aim is to master the learning of the world? Remember that much of what we learn about secular things turns out not to be entirely accurate before long. Sometimes what you need to know and what you have worked so hard to master hardly lasts long enough to get you that first job. An acquaintance of mine who operates a private employment service says that, according to their statistics, a person can expect to have at least four different careers and 11 different jobs in a normal working lifetime. If a major aim of education is to prepare you for a job, how can it happen if the job you will have in 10 years does not yet exist?

I think the major role of a formal education is actually to teach us how to learn. This can be broken into several parts, including

1. to teach us how to communicate,
2. to teach us the skills of learning,
3. to inform us about how much there is to know, and
4. to give us the desire to learn.

First, at the university we refine the skills of oral and written communication, of qualitative and quantitative description, of reasoning, and of making understanding achievable.

Second, we gain practical skills in discovering worthwhile sources of information, gathering information, organizing knowledge into

manageable structures, and preparing to use the knowledge we gain. We strengthen our resolve, our diligence, and our obedience by going through what must be done to gain knowledge. We learn self-discipline, which enables us to do whatever life asks of us.

Third, the university effectively teaches us how much there is to know by requiring us to sample widely in a general education program. Will Durant said, “Education is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance” (“Teachers: The Essence of the Centuries,” *Education, Time*, 13 August 1965, 48). We don’t know how much we don’t know until we know something. As former BYU academic vice president Eliot Butler once said:

*For example, one who has never heard of ancient Greek civilization can have no concept of the extent of his ignorance of that subject. One who knows nothing of calculus cannot begin to appreciate how ignorant he is of the possibilities of reasoning, order, logic, and complex problem-solving offered by that area of mathematics. [Eliot Butler, “Everybody Is Ignorant, Only on Different Subjects,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (spring 1977): 281]*

It is only as we come to know a little that we glimpse the vast extent of what we may yet learn.

Recognition of our relative ignorance also serves to keep us humble. Remember Jacob’s lament: “O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned, they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God” (2 Nephi 9:28). It is this foolishness that leads to so-called intellec-

tual apostasy. Recognizing how little we really know keeps us relying on the Lord.

Fourth, the desire to learn comes from several sources. The general education program whets our appetites for learning by showing us what may be learned. Teacherscholars who are excited about their fields of study catch us up in the excitement of their learning when they share their knowledge and enthusiasm with us. As we continue to study the revealed word and learn the purposes of this life, we come to value learning for its own sake—that is, for the knowledge and experience it gives us—as well as for use in building the kingdom of God.

We are greatly blessed here at BYU to be able to learn in an eternal context. The knowledge of most worth comes first as we learn to place all learning in the context of the gospel of Jesus Christ and seek the gifts of the Spirit as we learn. An appropriate attitude about secular knowledge enables us to learn with diligence and obedience whatever interests us, in harmony with our mortal missions. As we study, we continually seek ways to reconcile secular and revealed knowledge, realizing that we may never learn enough in this life, even with the help of the Spirit, to be able to understand it fully. Even if our secular knowledge turns out to be inaccurate as time goes on, the faith, diligence, and obedience we exerted in learning it still gave us valuable experiences and strengthened us for the work we have to do.

May we ever be grateful to a loving Father in Heaven for having given us the capacity and opportunity to learn, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.