

# “We Seek After These Things”

GERRIT W. GONG

**D**ear brothers and sisters, my wife, Susan, and I are grateful to be with each of you today on this special campus.

Don't you love fall and a new school year?

Some here today are freshmen. Welcome. I learned many things as a freshman. For example, as a new freshman, I learned that, while it was not necessarily obvious to me, most people could immediately tell if I was wearing a collared shirt or a collared pajama top (even under a sweater) to class. Similarly, as a new freshman, I learned detergent and bleach are both used to wash clothes but with quite different effects.

Some here today are seniors. Welcome. You are trying to decide which is harder—graduating or knowing what to do after graduating. We know how you feel.

Some here today are preparing for missions with faith and anticipation, and some are returning from missions with spiritual maturity and significant service and testimony. We thank you.

In the rhythm of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, of missions, of seeking a companion who doesn't get transferred, and of graduate studies, there is a wonderful sense of our time and our season.

Don't you love President Russell M. Nelson? In this month's general conference, President Nelson promised:

*If we will do our best to restore the correct name of the Lord's Church, He whose Church this is will pour down His power and blessings upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints, the likes of which we have never seen.*<sup>1</sup>

Across the world, there are only four places where we find in close proximity a house of the Lord, a higher-education campus sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a community of Saints seeking learning “by study and also by faith.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, in every institute, Pathway group, or righteous gathering where two or three come together in His name,<sup>3</sup> we delight in seeking after that which is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy.”<sup>4</sup>

Daily I am grateful for things I learned and experienced at BYU—sometimes years ago. I could not have imagined then, until I have needed them now, how valuable and significant formative BYU lessons and experiences can be.

Here is an example. On a recent flight from Salt Lake City to New York City, my seat assignment was changed at the last moment—in this case, perhaps not without purpose.

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*Gerrit W. Gong, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on October 16, 2018.*

I asked my new seat companion if she was traveling to New York or Milan, the plane's final destination. The question opened a conversation. After explaining she had spent her life as a bilingual, bicultural Italian-English translator, she began quizzing me about Italian art and culture.

As she queried me about Michelangelo, I remembered a BYU humanities class with Professor Todd A. Britsch. I was able to say that in Michelangelo's statue *Pietà*, the same piece of Carrara marble feels alive and lifeless at the same time. Mary is alive with compassion while the body of her son, our Savior, hangs lifeless.

My airplane companion nodded approvingly. We then talked about the Sistine Chapel, where God's vibrant hand touches Adam's limp hand, and about Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece *The Last Supper* in Milan.

Then we talked about Dante. After studying Shakespeare for five years in London, she thought Shakespeare might approximate Dante's genius and accomplishment. What did I think?

I remembered BYU classes on Shakespeare with Professor Arthur Henry King and others, but I diplomatically suggested both Shakespeare and Dante were great literary figures.

Then something unexpected happened. Seemingly out of the blue, this good woman quietly asked, "You want to know how my son died, don't you?"

We had been discussing Italian art and literature—her language of love. I am an amateur in that language, but perhaps because I was willing to try to listen with my heart, she felt she could say, "My son committed suicide. I am going to Italy to make arrangements." She then added, "I feel you are a man of God. God put you here today because I have no one I can talk to about these things."

For the rest of the flight we spoke tenderly about God's plan of happiness, the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, and how families can be together forever. I testified of ordinances and covenants found in the holy house of the Lord and invited her to visit the Manhattan New York Temple or, someday, the Rome Italy Temple.

Thank you, BYU, for teaching general and discipline education and the language of the heart. Such enriches our lives and, in unexpected times and places, allows us to connect with others in ways they understand and value.

As I reflect on things I learned at BYU that bless my life and service today, I imagine a thought experiment. Come with me to the year 2040, and let us look backward from the future.<sup>5</sup> Imagine we are looking back with gratitude on what we learned as students in 2018. The year 2040 is, after all, only twenty-two years from now—about twice the age of some of you here today.

What did we learn in 2018 that we use and value in the year 2040? How did we learn it?

Here are four possible 2040 lessons we began learning as students in 2018.

### **Lesson 1: Learning How to Learn by the Spirit**

The first 2040 lesson we are grateful for learning in 2018 is learning how to learn by the Spirit. Of course, even in 2040 we are still learning to learn by the Spirit, but we began in 2018. Even then it was not too early.

As BYU students in 2018, we are already in "the age of accelerations."<sup>6</sup> All around us, with the reliable predictability of Moore's law, computing speed, power, and storage capacity increase. Relative costs decline. Mobile devices, broadband connectivity, and cloud computing connect everything,<sup>7</sup> everywhere, all the time. Smart sensors and the internet power our global, real-time ecology of distributed information and decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

These technological changes hasten the shift in basic economic production from agriculture (in the nineteenth century) to industry (in the twentieth century) to information and innovation (in the twenty-first century). As anyone looking for a job knows, today's world puts a premium on ability and agility to learn and apply new things in new ways. Those who can generate scalable intellectual property are rewarded for constantly learning how to shape the future architecture of goods and services.

In the midst of fast-paced technological and global changes, in 2018 we began to learn how to learn by the Spirit by doing small and simple things. We began by going to class, by choosing friends and environments that encouraged our best learning, and by learning facts, skills, and attitudes.

### *Going to Class*

As the saying goes, “You have to be present to win.” Put another way, you have to be present to learn. In person or online, through lecture or discussion, in groups large or small—whatever the learning style—as obvious as it may sound, we learn to learn by gathering for instruction. But we really have to be there. Come prepared to learn, interact to edify, and commit to act.<sup>9</sup>

When I was a freshman, I decided I would attend all my BYU classes. I was blessed by doing so. In four years at BYU, I missed fewer classes than I have fingers and thumb on one hand.

### *Choosing Friends and Environments That Encourage Our Best Learning*

Faculty, staff, libraries, classrooms, and laboratories are each important, but so is the time we spend with and what we learn from fellow students, friends, and roommates—much of which, as we know, is not in a classroom.

I remember a road trip with friends during a BYU break. As we were preparing, I was delegated to take our collected funds and buy a box of copies of the Book of Mormon at the BYU Bookstore.

I asked, “What will we do with a whole box of copies of the Book of Mormon?”

My friends said, “We will write our testimonies in each book and share them as we travel.”

And that is what we did. Choose your friends and associates well so you learn by the Spirit things you always want to remember.

### *Learning Facts, Skills, and Attitudes*

The Greek biographer Plutarch said, “The mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting.”<sup>10</sup>

We do need relevant facts—the tinder for the lighting of fires. Elder Neal A. Maxwell liked to quote the Frenchman La Rochefoucauld: “There goes another beautiful theory about to be murdered by a brutal gang of facts.”<sup>11</sup>

But another wise Frenchman, author of *The Little Prince*, cautioned us not to be fixated on narrow facts. In *The Little Prince*, the cosmic businessman is concerned with self-important “matters of consequence!” He has no time for dreaming or even to see the stars because he is so obsessed with counting.<sup>12</sup>

We began learning in 2018 how to navigate what some called “a VUCA world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.”<sup>13</sup> For us in 2040, we are grateful our time at BYU was “a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting,”<sup>14</sup> where we learned relevant facts, skills, attitudes, and dreams that matter—by the Spirit of God.

In an increasingly VUCA world, our first 2040 lesson is learning how to learn by the Spirit. We say with confidence, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair.”<sup>15</sup> By the Spirit, “we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: . . . which . . . are eternal.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Lesson 2: Learning How Best to Prepare for Eternity**

A second 2040 lesson we are grateful we began learning at BYU in 2018 is how to choose and decide in time how best to prepare for eternity. As students in 2018, “adulting” is already challenging—but it is only a beginning to the challenges and joys we will be juggling in 2040!

As students in 2018, we understand limited time, energy, and opportunity require wise decisions among good, better, and best choices.<sup>17</sup> As President Dallin H. Oaks taught, “We have to forego some good things in order to choose others that are better or best because they develop faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and strengthen our families.”<sup>18</sup> Such perspective helps so the urgent does not drive out the important.

In 2018 we are delighted to learn from our own decisions. We are learning that the battle to get

up in the morning is won or lost the night before. We are learning that personal and roommate prayers, having some meals together, putting a copy of the *Ensign* in a visible place, going to the holy temple—and all other regular holy habits—change our hearts and our living environments.

Attending BYU devotionals and forums is a decision not to let school get in the way of education.<sup>19</sup> Serving in our ward helps us learn from those around us and from the Holy Ghost how to love God and minister. Coincidentally, in such sociability, because we are learning to see others through spiritual eyes,<sup>20</sup> we make wonderful friends and, in some cases, find our eternal companion.

On occasion, our Heavenly Father helps us understand how time and eternity can come together in futures we cannot see. In our hearts and minds, the Holy Ghost tells us things we need to but would not otherwise know.<sup>21</sup> In inspiring, protecting, and guiding us, the Holy Ghost fulfills the promise that “all things work together for good to them that love God.”<sup>22</sup>

In 2018 we began discovering we wanted not only to live a balanced life but also to strive for a consecrated, sacramental life. Of course we must be wise and not “run faster than [we have] strength.”<sup>23</sup> And sometimes we must “be still and know that [God is] God.”<sup>24</sup> But with planning, increasing capacity, and consecrated effort, we are discovering something miraculous. This world is not simply one of finite sticks and stones. In the Lord’s times and seasons, this world can also be one of limitless loaves and fishes.<sup>25</sup>

In a loaves and fishes world, faith, compassion, and blessings are unlimited. So are God’s grace and capacity to embrace, magnify, and heal, just as our patriarchal blessings promise. When we sacrifice and consecrate our relatively meager offering of a few loaves and fishes, the Lord can take what we give and greatly magnify it to bless others.<sup>26</sup>

In 2018, preparing for 2040, we also began learning perfection is in Christ<sup>27</sup>—not in ourselves or in the perfectionism of the world. When we do our best, we can trust in our Heavenly Father’s approbation.

### **Lesson 3: Learning Our Global Experience Can Contribute to Every Nation, Kindred, and Tongue**

A third 2040 lesson we note with gratitude is that the understanding we have gained from our various experiences can contribute to the global experience we have with every nation, kindred, and tongue.

In 2040 we travel for work, information, and adventure to every country and continent. Some immersive interactions with the world are in person, and some are in virtual or augmented reality. In any case, we are grateful BYU encouraged us in 2018 to see the world as our campus, where we can contribute and serve.

In different places with diverse people, I gratefully glimpse how, as we have been taught by President Nelson, “only the comprehension of the true Fatherhood of God can bring full appreciation of the true brotherhood of men and the true sisterhood of women.”<sup>28</sup>

As you know better than anyone, BYU students come from fifty states and more than 100 countries. On campus, sixty-two languages are taught and 126 languages are spoken. Sixty-five percent of BYU students speak a second language.<sup>29</sup> Now, in 2040, including with everywhere, all-the-time connectivity, we are bound even more closely to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.<sup>30</sup>

Part of our 2040 expertise is discipline and language. We have learned to speak in the nuance of specific disciplines across cultures, time zones, work flows, and values. We have continued to build on our 2018 experiences with missions, classes, campus associations, internships, and externships to connect to our globalized world of 2040. Paradoxically, in 2040, even with 24/7 transborder flows of capital, ideas, and people, we are respectful of sovereign entities and cultures protective of their traditions and values.

### **Lesson 4: Learning That We Have Been Spiritually Strengthened While We Were at BYU**

Our fourth and final 2040 lesson we are grateful for learning in 2018 is that we have been spiritually strengthened at BYU.

In 2018, BYU president Kevin J. Worthen taught us: “I hope we inspire our students to learn. And I hope that learning leads to inspiration.”<sup>31</sup>

At BYU in 2018, we know that the half-life of information is getting shorter and shorter and that facts, information, knowledge, wisdom, and revelation represent a kind of hierarchy of value.

The poet T. S. Eliot put it this way:

*All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to God.  
Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.*<sup>32</sup>

In 2018 we began learning that, as R. G. Collingwood and others have said, a discipline is ultimately the history of that discipline—be it a field of philosophy, humanities, engineering, or so on.<sup>33</sup>

This means there are ebbs and flows and intellectual fads and fashions in fields of inquiry. With the advantage of 2040 hindsight, we are grateful our BYU education gave us perspective and understanding to know we can address some questions and issues now, while other issues or questions may require resolution over time with additional understanding, experience, or information.

In this context, we place highest value on divine inspiration, revelation, and truth. As the scriptures tell us, “truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.”<sup>34</sup> It is fitting that He who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, knows the truths that make us free.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, we know we can trust God. Each connected element and promise in this verse is significant:

*Search diligently, pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for your good, if ye walk uprightly and remember the covenant wherewith ye have covenanted one with another.*<sup>36</sup>

We began learning this verse is true because the Person making its promise knows how all things shall work together and knows what is for our good.

Finally, wisdom and judgment invite us to cherish Christlike attributes. Of many Christlike characteristics we treasure in 2040, we love the relationships between humility and excellence and between humor and faith.

As students in 2018, we began learning from President Henry B. Eyring that our identity as a child of God allows us “to pursue educational excellence while avoiding pride.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as President Eyring taught:

*The way to humility is also the doorway to educational excellence. The best antidote I know for pride also can produce in us the characteristics that lead to excellence in learning.*<sup>38</sup>

In 2018 we also glimpsed an intriguing relationship between humor and faith.

Christian writer Reinhold Niebuhr said:

*The intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence. . . . Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life.*<sup>39</sup>

Niebuhr also said:

*Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer. Laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religion; and the echoes of it should resound in the sanctuary; but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humour is fulfilled by faith.*<sup>40</sup>

So excellence and humility, faith and humor—all are elements of character we associate with the spiritual strengthening we experienced as BYU students in 2018.

### Conclusion

For me, looking backward from the future is a remembrance of things to come. It is an invitation to prepare now for a future that will be here tomorrow.

May we learn how to learn by the Spirit; may we choose and decide in time how best to prepare for eternity; may we offer global experience and training to contribute to every nation, kindred, and tongue; and may we seek and rejoice in spiritual strengthening.

In doing so, may we become in 2018 “students of faith, intellect, and character who have the skills and the desire to continue learning and to serve others throughout [our] lives.”<sup>41</sup> May your BYU education truly “be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service,”<sup>42</sup> as you prepare for 2040 and beyond.

We can begin today. It may be as simple as deciding to go to class or finding new ways to learn how to learn with the Spirit with humility, excellence, faith, and humor.

At the center of all that matters is the reality that God is our Eternal Father and Jesus is the Christ, whose Atonement blesses us in time and eternity.

The Father and the Son did come to the Prophet Joseph Smith, reopening the heavens in restoration and revelation that continues today in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, led by our Savior Jesus Christ through His prophet, President Russell M. Nelson.

The Book of Mormon is another testament of Jesus Christ and is, with the other scriptures, the holy word of God.

As I gratefully shared with the grieving woman flying to Milan, I also now testify: “Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.”<sup>43</sup>

“We seek after these things.”<sup>44</sup> I know and testify they are true. In the sacred and holy name of our Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Correct Name of the Church,” *Ensign*, November 2018.

2. D&C 88:118. These four places are Brigham Young University, Brigham Young University–Idaho, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, and LDS Business College.

3. See Matthew 18:20.

4. Articles of Faith 1:13.

5. See Bob Johansen, *The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything* (Oakland, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 15–26.

6. Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 27.

7. See Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late*, 36–84.

8. See Johansen, *The New Leadership Literacies*, 53.

9. See David A. Bednar, in Jason Swensen, “Elder Bednar: Learn, Teach, Hasten the Work in the Lord’s Way,” *Church News*, 11 July 2014, [lds.org/church/news/elder-bednar-learn-teach-hasten-the-work-the-lords-way?lang=eng](https://www.lds.org/church/news/elder-bednar-learn-teach-hasten-the-work-the-lords-way?lang=eng).

10. Plutarch, “On Listening,” *Moralia*, excerpted in *Plutarch: Essays*, trans. Robin Waterfield (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 50.

11. Attributed to François VI, Duc de La Rochefoucauld; quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “Speaking Today: The Prohibitive Costs of a Value-Free Society,” *Ensign*, October 1978. See also Thomas Henry Huxley, 14 September 1870, in *Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1870), 11: “The great tragedy of Science—the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact.”

12. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (1943), chapter 7.

13. Johansen, *The New Leadership Literacies*, 2.

14. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).

15. 2 Corinthians 4:8.

16. 2 Corinthians 4:18.

17. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Good, Better, Best,” *Ensign*, November 2007.

18. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best."
19. See Grant Allen, in Edward Clodd, *Grant Allen: A Memoir* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), 53, 108.
20. See 1 Samuel 16:7.
21. See D&C 8:2; Alma 26:22; 1 Corinthians 2:10–11.
22. Romans 8:28; see also D&C 90:24; 98:3; 105:40.
23. Mosiah 4:27.
24. D&C 101:16.
25. See Matthew 14:15–21; 15:32–38.
26. See, for example, Gerrit W. Gong, "And Jesus Said unto Them: I Am the Bread of Life," An Evening with a General Authority, 17 February 2017, Church of Jesus Christ, Broadcasts, lds.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2017/02/and-jesus-said-unto-them-i-am-the-bread-of-life?lang=eng.
27. See Moroni 10:32; see also D&C 76:69.
28. Russell M. Nelson, in "President Nelson Remarks at Worldwide Priesthood Celebration" (Be One celebration, 1 June 2018), Church of Jesus Christ Newsroom, mormonnewsroom.org/article/president-nelson-remarks-worldwide-priesthood-celebration.
29. "Facts and Figures," *BYU News*, 2018, news.byu.edu/byu-numbers.
30. See D&C 88:78–79.
31. Kevin J Worthen, "Inspiring Learning," BYU university conference address, 22 August 2016.
32. T. S. Eliot, *The Rock* (1934), I.
33. See W. H. Walsh, "R. G. Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *Philosophy* 22, no. 82 (July 1947): 153–60, jstor.org/stable/3748042.
34. D&C 93:24.
35. See John 8:32.
36. D&C 90:24.
37. Henry B. Eyring, "A Child of God," BYU devotional address, 21 October 1997.
38. Eyring, "Child of God." President Eyring also specified five characteristics of great learners: they "welcome correction," "keep commitments," "work hard," "help other people," and expect "resistance" and overcome it.
39. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Humour and Faith," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), 49–50.
40. Niebuhr, "Humour and Faith," 49.
41. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
42. The BYU Aims.
43. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (23 September 1995).
44. Articles of Faith 1:13.