

The Joy of Education and Lifelong Learning

JAMES D. GORDON III

I am happy to be here with you today. I remember when I was a university student. Like some of you, I had trouble deciding what my major should be. First I thought about majoring in economics. That way, if I couldn't get a job after I graduated, at least I would understand why.

Then I thought I might major in physical education. I went down to the gym to lift weights, but the laughter made it difficult to concentrate.

I sampled some classes, but I didn't always do very well. For example, I took a photography class. I just about went crazy trying to take a close-up of the horizon. The teacher in that class gave me an F minus. He said that giving me an F would be unfair to the people who failed normally.

I studied chemistry, but I thought that there were only four elements on the periodic table: earth, air, fire, and water. I thought that fire had three electrons in the outer shell.

I thought about studying math. It has been reported that 60 percent of Americans cannot do basic math. Sixty percent! That's nearly half! But we shouldn't laugh—and most of you didn't, and I appreciate that.

Seek Learning

Seriously, I would like to speak about the joy of education and lifelong learning. Life is a test, and life is also a school. The Lord has invited us to seek learning. He said, "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."² He commanded early Church leaders to "study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people."³

Three reasons why we should learn are to develop personally, to increase our ability to serve others, and to be prepared in all things. Brigham Young said, "Our education should be such as to improve our minds and fit us for increased usefulness; to make us of greater service to the human family."⁴

President Thomas S. Monson taught:

James D. Gordon III¹ was assistant to the president for planning and assessment and a professor of law at BYU when this devotional address was given on 26 March 2013.

*Your talents will expand as you study and learn. You will be able to better assist your families in their learning, and you will have peace of mind in knowing that you have prepared yourself for the eventualities that you may encounter in life.*⁵

Learning helps us to be prepared in all things. The Lord said:

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.*⁶

Being prepared in all things includes being prepared for the world of work so that you can provide for yourself and your family.

It is a great privilege to study at Brigham Young University. You have the opportunity to learn in an environment that is consistent with the principles of the gospel. Being a student here is a position of trust. As you know, the Church pays for much of your education. You have the responsibility to study hard, to obey the Honor Code, and to prepare for future service. Hopefully throughout your life you will look back on your time here with fondness and cherish the memories.

On Pursuing a BYU Education

I would like to offer some advice as you pursue your education here. I hope that I don't sound like Polonius giving advice to Laertes in

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*—especially when I remember what happened to Polonius. I am not referring to the fact that he was killed behind the arras, but rather to the fact that over the centuries he has been portrayed by literally thousands of bad actors.

First, do your best in school. You might recall a story about a person who was asked to build a house. He decided to cut corners, use cheap materials, and do a poor job. When he was done, the owner handed him the key and said, "I'd like to give you this house as a gift."

Attending the university is like that. You can work hard and do a good job, or you can cut corners and do a poor job. Be fair with yourself by giving your best effort. I encourage you to work diligently, to learn a lot, and to prepare well for the future.

Second, do things to enrich your education, such as having a mentored-learning experience with a faculty member, publishing an article, doing an internship, working in BYUSA, or participating in a student club. Perhaps you can be a teaching assistant or a research assistant or participate in a performing group. BYU offers so many opportunities to develop and grow. When you look back on your education here, these extra activities will have special meaning.

You might participate in intramural sports. Personally, I'm not very athletic. I tell my students that I played football in high school. They had a play designed especially for me. It was called "Pencilneck Right." You know how BYU uses the run to set up the pass? Well, Pencilneck Right was used to set up the injury time-out.

When I was in high school I was in the chess club. I tell my students that I had a rook on my letterman jacket. Do you know what it says when you walk around campus with a rook on your letterman jacket? "Don't mess with me, pal. Checkmate!"

Third, give service. It is important to fulfill Church callings and to perform other service.

Y-Serve, the Center for Service and Learning, located in the Wilkinson Student Center, offers many opportunities to serve in the community. Service is important for its own sake, and it helps you to keep a broader perspective and to stay balanced.

Fourth, make friends. Even though your classmates are not as good-looking—and not as humble—as you are, they are bright, good, and interesting people. The friendships you make here can last throughout your whole life and can be a particularly sweet aspect of your university experience. Take time to make friends.

When I was in high school I didn't have many friends. Once I told my dad that the other kids were giving me a hard time about my religion. My father sat down next to me, and, in his fatherly way, he said, "Son, it doesn't matter what race you are or what religion you are. There will always be people who don't like you—because you're irritating."

Fifth, attend devotional and forum addresses and other events, such as academic presentations, concerts, plays, and art exhibits. These are wonderful opportunities.

Sixth, enjoy your university education. It's exciting, fascinating, challenging, and fun. The secret to happiness is not to look forward to some future time when all your problems will be solved. The secret is to be happy today.

The Joy and Sweetness of Lifelong Learning

There is joy in learning. In some Hebrew schools a special ceremony occurs on the first day of class. The teacher places a drop of honey on the cover of a book and gives the book to the student, who licks the honey off. The symbolic message is that learning is sweet.

Learning can also be challenging. Sometimes the learning curve is steep. When we are acquiring new knowledge or skills, we may feel uncertain, and we may make mistakes. However, being stretched means that we are growing. If we ask Heavenly Father in

prayer, He will increase our ability to learn and help us to overcome our challenges.

Hopefully your university education will provide a foundation for lifelong learning. As *The Aims of a BYU Education* describes:

BYU should inspire students to keep alive their curiosity and prepare them to continue learning throughout their lives. BYU should produce careful readers, prayerful thinkers, and active participants in solving family, professional, religious, and social problems. . . . Thus a BYU diploma is a beginning, not an end, pointing the way to a habit of constant learning. In an era of rapid changes in technology and information, the knowledge and skills learned this year may require renewal the next. Therefore, a BYU degree should educate students in how to learn, teach them that there is much still to learn, and implant in them a love of learning "by study and also by faith."⁷

The most important area of lifelong learning is spiritual learning. We seek answers through prayer. We read the scriptures regularly so that they become part of our lives. Reading the scriptures reminds us of the Lord's commandments, the covenants that we have made to keep them, and the blessings of the gospel. Studying the scriptures also invites the Holy Ghost, who guides our decisions and helps us to learn. Elder Russell M. Nelson said: "Faith is nurtured through knowledge of God. It comes from prayer and feasting upon the words of Christ through diligent study of the scriptures."⁸

Regardless of one's opportunities for formal education, a person can engage in lifelong learning. My grandfather was Jim Gordon. His parents were Scottish immigrants. He was only able to finish the eighth grade before he went to work. He drove a delivery wagon in San Francisco when he was a young man.

Automobiles replaced horse-drawn wagons. Later my grandfather became a mechanic. He brought books about diesel engines home from

work, and he read them. Eventually he became the supervisor over all the diesel equipment for a substantial company. Although his opportunity for formal education was limited, he kept learning on his own. His most important learning experiences occurred when, later in life, he decided to enter the waters of baptism and to receive the blessings of the temple.

When my grandfather was young, he drove a horse-drawn wagon. However, his world changed. During his lifetime he flew in passenger planes, and astronauts landed on the moon. Your world will change too. Many of the changes will be positive and exciting; others may present challenges. Will you be prepared to meet the challenges that will arise during your lifetime?

We need to continue to learn throughout our lives. President Gordon B. Hinckley told graduating BYU students:

We live in a world where knowledge is developing at an ever-accelerating rate. Drink deeply from this ever-springing well of wisdom and human experience. If you should stop now, you will only stunt your intellectual and spiritual growth. Keep everlastingly at it. Read. Read. Read. Read the word of God in sacred books of scripture. Read from the great literature of the ages. Read what is being said in our day and time and what will be said in the future.⁹

Personally, I love to read. I tell my students that my first job was as a proofreader in an M&M factory. You have your own patterns for reading. One thing that helps me is that my wife, Nadine, and I belong to a book group with some friends. During the school year we meet almost monthly. We take turns: a couple chooses a book, hosts the book group in their home, leads the discussion, and serves refreshments afterward. We have read books about a wide variety of subjects. I had never even heard of many of these books before, but I have enjoyed reading them very much.

In addition, I have always enjoyed words. When I was a boy and I would encounter a word I didn't know, sometimes I would ask my father what it meant. He would reply, "Look it up." My father usually knew the answer, but he wanted me to learn how to look words up. So I would open the dictionary that sat on the bookshelf in our living room and look the word up.

Later I wanted to learn more words. One summer my friend John Tanner (who later became a BYU English professor) and I worked as groundskeepers at the Oakland California Temple. On some days we would each write five words and their definitions on an index card and put the card in our shirt pocket. Then we would share the words and use them in sentences during the day. My favorite word from that summer was *halcyon*. It means calm, peaceful, tranquil, or golden. As we pulled weeds and performed other physical labor on the beautiful temple grounds, we would exclaim, "Oh, those halcyon days of youth!" Now, as I look back, I see that they really were halcyon days.

In our busy lives, how can we make time to continue learning? I believe in consistent, incremental progress—small steps over time. For example, one doesn't learn to play the piano in a single day. One must practice daily for several years. After many small increments, one can eventually play hymns, popular songs, or classical music. Lifelong learning is like that. We need to schedule some time each day to study the scriptures. We can also regularly read a little in other books. We learn "line upon line" and "precept upon precept."¹⁰

Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Sister Kristen M. Oaks wrote:

There are few things more fulfilling and fun than learning something new. Great happiness, satisfaction, and financial rewards come from this. An education is not limited to formal study. Lifelong learning can increase our ability to appreciate

*and relish the workings and beauty of the world around us. This kind of learning goes well beyond books and a selective use of new technology, such as the Internet. It includes artistic endeavors. It also includes experiences with people and places: conversations with friends, visits to museums and concerts, and opportunities for service. We should expand ourselves and enjoy the journey.*¹¹

Two Stumbling Blocks of Learning

There are two issues connected with learning about which we must be careful. First, learning can lead to pride. In 2 Nephi Jacob wrote:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! 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, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

*But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.*¹²

President Ezra Taft Benson taught:

*Pride is the universal sin, the great vice. . . . The antidote for pride is humility—meekness, submissiveness. (See Alma 7:23.) It is the broken heart and contrite spirit.*¹³

Humility opens our hearts and minds to learning. By contrast, thinking that we already know everything impedes our learning. King Benjamin taught that a person needs to become “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.”¹⁴

Second, we should expect that at times apparent conflicts may arise between secular learning and gospel principles. “[T]he gospel encompasses all truth.”¹⁵ At the ground-

breaking of the BYU Eyring Science Center in 1948, President George Albert Smith said:

I want to say that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts all that is true in the world from whatever source it may come, with the knowledge that it originated with the greatest of all scientists, our Father in Heaven. . . .

*And so I congratulate the students of this great institution [BYU] to think that you have all the advantages that the people of the world have, plus the advantages of faith in God, a belief in the power of our Heavenly Father, and His inspiration.*¹⁶

The Aims of a BYU Education states:

*Students need not ignore difficult and important questions. Rather, they should frame their questions in prayerful, faithful ways, leading them to answers that equip them to give “a reason of the hope that is in” them (1 Peter 3:15) and to articulate honestly and thoughtfully their commitments to Christ and to His Church.*¹⁷

When human knowledge and the gospel appear to conflict, we should remember that human knowledge is limited. Eternal truth is not limited, but our understanding of it is incomplete. After this life, if we are worthy, we will understand all truth. Meanwhile, we seek answers to faithful questions. We study, ponder, pray, and have patience. We exercise faith in God. He blesses us with greater knowledge, understanding, and peace in our lives.

We should be humble about what we know and what we do not know. An angel appeared to Nephi. Nephi wrote:

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

*And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.*¹⁸

We do not know the meaning of all things, but we do know that God loves His children.

God's wisdom supersedes human knowledge. Elder Oaks wrote:

*We are commanded to seek learning by study, the way of reason, and by faith, the way that relies on revelation. Both are pleasing to God. He uses both ways to reveal light and knowledge to his children. But when it comes to a knowledge of God and the principles of his gospel, we must give primacy to revelation because that is the Lord's way.*¹⁹

We should also remember to put the gospel, not our academic discipline, first in our lives. Jesus said, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."²⁰

The Strength in Learning

This is a wonderful time to be on the earth. There are so many opportunities for lifelong learning. If we do our best and seek Heavenly Father's help, He will strengthen us beyond our natural abilities and help us to learn. That learning will enable us to develop personally, will increase our ability to serve others, and will help us to be prepared in all things.

I testify that the gospel is true. Heavenly Father lives and loves us, and Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Marion B. and Rulon A. Earl Professor of Law, J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University. Apologies and thanks to Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, Steven Wright, and others.

2. D&C 88:118.

3. D&C 90:15.

4. *JD* 14:83.

5. Thomas S. Monson, "Three Goals to Guide You," *Ensign*, November 2007, 119.

6. D&C 88:78–80.

7. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 1996), 12.

8. Russell M. Nelson, "With God Nothing Shall Be Impossible," *Ensign*, May 1988, 34.

9. Gordon B. Hinckley, "A Three-Point Challenge," BYU commencement address, 27 April 1995; excerpt in *TGBH*, 171.

10. D&C 98:12; 2 Nephi 28:30.

11. Dallin H. Oaks and Kristen M. Oaks, "Learning and Latter-day Saints," *Ensign*, April 2009, 27.

12. 2 Nephi 9:28–29.

13. Ezra Taft Benson, "Beware of Pride," *Ensign*, May 1989, 6.

14. Mosiah 3:19.

15. Elder Cecil O. Samuelson Jr. on Elder Neal A. Maxwell's views, quoted in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 167; see also Henry Eyring, quoted in Henry J. Eyring, *Mormon Scientist: The Life and Faith of Henry Eyring* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 60.

16. George Albert Smith, "Address at Ground Breaking Ceremonies for the Physical Science Building at Brigham Young University," 11 May 1948, 2, 4; this quotation is posted on the fifth floor of the BYU Harold B. Lee Library.

17. *The Aims*, 4.

18. 1 Nephi 11:16–17.

19. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 72.

20. 3 Nephi 13:33.