

# *The Quest for Excellence*

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

**M**y beloved friends, what a delightful experience it is to look into your faces. You are here with great expectations concerning what I might say. That frightens me. You are here to get a lift from the drudgery of your studies. Whether you are in undergraduate or graduate work, the way is difficult. I know that. You made great effort to come here to BYU, and now you have discovered that it is not a piece of cake. It is hard. But the rewards are tremendous. You can grow here as you have never before grown in all of your lives. You can rise to the fullness of your potential. It is a season of tremendous opportunity. You are laying foundations for the future. You are worrying about an eternal companion, and some of you who are now married have discovered that it is like eternity every week to keep up with everything you have to do.

What am I going to talk about today? I want to urge you to stand a little taller, to rise a little higher, to be a little better. You have been spoken to along these lines before. If you did not want to hear it again, you did not have to come today. We will take a moment for any of you who would like to leave.

Well, bless your hearts, you are a wonderful assemblage. I am so proud of you. You are scholars in this the university of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I am grateful for all of you, but I know that a few of you could do much better than you are doing. I have titled my talk "The Quest for Excellence."

I first read these words 67 years ago in a college English class:

*What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!* [William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2]

I recognize that these words of Hamlet were spoken in irony. And yet there is so much of truth in them. They describe the great potential excellence of men and women. If Shakespeare had written nothing else, I think he would have been remembered for these few words of soliloquy. They go hand in hand with these words of David:

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*Gordon B. Hinckley was president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 10 November 1998.*

*When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;*

*What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?*

*For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. [Psalms 8:3–5]*

And the words of the Lord to Job when He spoke out of the whirlwind and declared:

*Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. . . .*

*When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? [Job 38:4, 7]*

These magnificent words declare the wonder of man. And when I speak of man, I of course speak also of woman. We are all children of God, and there is something of His divinity within each of us. We are more than a son or daughter of Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So who reside in such-and-such a place. We are more than a student at BYU. We are of the family of God, with such a tremendous potential for excellence. The distance between mediocrity and excellence can be ever so small. As we shall see again when the Winter Olympics come to Salt Lake City in 2002, that difference will be measured in tenths of seconds. The little extra effort we make becomes such a tremendous difference.

I heard one of my Brethren tell of a recent visit he made to the prison. There he noticed a young man, handsome in appearance and intelligent in his ways.

My brother said to the prison official, “What is that young man doing in here?”

The reply was that one evening he had taken his mother’s car, had obtained some beer and drunk it, and then, not in control of himself, he drove the car down the sidewalk and killed two girls.

I do not know how long he will be in prison, but I do know that he will never get over his feelings concerning the act that put him there. On such small hinges turn the gates of our lives. Little mistakes that seem so unimportant in their beginnings determine the eternal courses we follow.

Had there not been that car and that beer, he would be in school today, a bright and happy young man moving forward on the way to a productive life. Now he sits in misery for nobody knows how long—musing, thinking, repenting of the terrible thing he has done that has blighted his life.

I want to invite you, my young friends, to walk a higher road of excellence. The other evening I picked up an old book and read Lytton Strachey’s life of Florence Nightingale. I think books of that kind are not read very much these days. I had read it once before, long ago. But my rereading brought a new sense of admiration and respect for this great young woman of England who made a tremendous difference in her time.

She was born to the upper class to party and to dance, to go to the races, and to look pretty in society. But she would have none of it. Even her parents could not understand her. Her great overwhelming desire was to alleviate pain and suffering, to hasten healing, to make less dreadful the hospitals of the day. She never married. She devoted herself to nursing and became expert according to the training then available.

Britain became embroiled in the Crimean War. She had friends at the head of the government, and she relentlessly pursued and persuaded them until she was appointed head of the hospital in Scutari, where thousands of the victims of the war were brought.

The picture that greeted her there was one of absolute despair. An old warehouse served as a hospital. The sanitary conditions were terrible. The cooking facilities were terrible. Wounded men were crowded in great rooms

reeking of foul odors and filled with the cries of the suffering.

This frail young woman, along with those she had recruited to go with her, set to work. They beat down the walls of bureaucracy. They beat on the heads of the bureaucrats. I quote from Mr. Strachey:

*For to those who watched her at work among the sick, moving day and night from bed to bed, with that unflinching courage, with that indefatigable vigilance, it seemed as if the concentrated force of an undivided and unparalleled devotion could hardly suffice for that portion of her task alone. Wherever, in those vast wards, suffering was at its worst and the need for help was greatest, there, as if by magic, was Miss Nightingale. [Lytton Strachey, "Florence Nightingale," in *Five Victorians* (London: Reprint Society, 1942), p. 310]*

The beds that held the suffering men stretched over four miles, with barely space between each bed to walk. But somehow, within a period of six months,

*the confusion and the pressure in the wards had come to an end; order reigned in them, and cleanliness; the supplies were bountiful and prompt; important sanitary works had been carried out. One simple comparison of figures was enough to reveal the extraordinary change: the rate of mortality among the cases treated had fallen from 42 percent to 22 per thousand. [Strachey, "Florence Nightingale," p. 314]*

She had brought to pass an absolute miracle. Lives by the thousands were saved. Suffering was mitigated. Cheer and warmth and light came into the lives of men who otherwise would have died in that dark and dreadful place.

The war ended. She might have gone back to London a heroine. The public press had sung her praise. Her name was familiar to

everyone. But she returned incognito to escape the adulation she might have received.

She continued her work for another 50 years, changing hospitals—both military and civilian. She died at an advanced age, bedridden for a good while, but still improving the circumstances of those who suffered.

Perhaps no other woman in the history of the world, insofar as I know, has done so much to reduce human misery as this lady with the lamp who walked through the vast wards of Scutari in the middle of the 19th century, spreading cheer and comfort, faith and hope to those who writhed in pain. Her life was a life of excellence.

My wife likes to tell the story of a friend of hers who, when she was a little girl, was left an orphan. She scarcely knew her mother. As she grew, she wondered about her mother. What kind of a girl, what kind of a woman was she?

One day she came across her mother's old report card. The teacher had noted on that card, "This student is excellent in every way."

When she read that, her entire life changed. She recognized that her mother was a woman of excellence. Her whole attitude changed. She took on the patina of excellence herself and became a remarkable woman in her own right. She married a man who is recognized in all of these communities, and their children have distinguished themselves for their excellence.

Last Saturday evening Sister Hinckley and I attended a concert in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. It was provided by the Tabernacle Choir, the Utah Symphony, and the King's Singers.

Such excellence! The first time I heard the King's Singers was here at BYU some 10 or 15 years ago. I was entranced with their music. I have heard them a half a dozen times since. And on Saturday evening I was again simply enthralled.

They are six Englishmen who sing together all kinds of music from the old madrigals to modern pop. They come from different backgrounds, but every one is a consummate

performer. As their voices lifted in a grand crescendo singing “Rule, Britannia! Britannia rules the waves!” there moved in imagination before the eyes of this old British missionary the long columns of British Tommies marching over dune and headland and the great, proud ships of Britain sailing across the seas of the world. Those boys, the King’s Singers, sang with power and beauty and excellence. And they were backed by the orchestra and the Tabernacle Choir. And BYU’s own Mack Wilberg did a masterful job in arranging much of the music.

What a magnificent thing is the Tabernacle Choir. I think it is the finest choir in the world. It is the choir of this Church, and it is a musical body of magnificence, of wondrous excellence.

That status has not been achieved without tremendous work extending over a period of a century and a half.

But their present quality is not enough. The world is moving forward, and they must go on and improve, and improve, and improve.

I listen to the magnificent music of the various bodies on this campus. It is wonderful. I see young men and young women smartly dressed, singing with consummate skill. It is uplifting. It is wonderful. How very good they are when they are good. And how proud and happy they feel because of the excellence with which they perform, including those who performed for us this morning.

I speak to you this morning not only about a little more effort, a little more self-discipline, a little more consecrated effort in the direction of excellence in your studies. I speak of it also in terms of your lives.

This is the great day of preparation for each of you. It is the time of beginning for something that will go on for as long as you live. I plead with you: Don’t be a scrub! Rise to the high ground of excellence. You can do it. You may not be a genius. You may be lacking in some skills. But you can do better than you are now doing. You are students at BYU. Most of

you are members of this great Church whose influence is now felt all over the world. You are people with a present and with a future. Don’t muff the ball. Be excellent.

Those of you who are not married are here hoping to find a companion, among other things. I could wish for you nothing better than a good marriage, a happy marriage, a marriage fruitful in the sweet and satisfying things of life. Your marriage will not be excellent if it is marred with argument, if it is filled with disrespect one for another, if there is any lack of loyalty or devotion to one another. Cherish your spouse as the greatest possession of your life and treat him or her accordingly. Make it your constant goal to add to the happiness and comfort of your companion.

Never permit yourself to let down in your affection or your respect or your faith in one another. Be excellent in every way.

You will find your greatest example in the Son of God. I hope that each of you will make Him your friend while you are here and ever after. I hope you will strive to walk in His paths—extending mercy, blessing those who struggle, living with less selfishness, reaching out to others.

He is the greatest example of excellence in all the world. He condescended to come to earth under the most humble of circumstances. He grew up as the son of Joseph the carpenter. He struggled with the adversary on the Mount of Temptation. He came forth resplendent and beautiful and magnificent to teach the world. During His brief ministry He brought more of truth, more of hope, more of mercy, more of love than anyone else who has walked the earth. He died on Calvary’s cross for each of us. He arose the third day, the first fruits of them that slept, bringing the promise of resurrection to all mankind and the hope of exaltation to all who would walk in obedience to His teachings. He was the great paragon of righteousness, the only perfect man ever to walk the earth. His was the wondrous example

toward whom each of us might point our lives in our eternal quest for excellence.

God bless you, my dear young friends.

You know there is a more excellent way. The prophet Ether declared, "In the gift of his Son hath God prepared a more excellent way" (Ether 12:11).

You have the witness of that faith in him. You have the testimony of that faith. You have the example of that faith. As I said at the beginning, stand a little taller, rise a little higher, be a little better. Make the extra effort. You will be happier. You will know a new satisfaction, a new gladness in your heart.

Jesus said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

That is the great crowning example of excellence. May yours be a rich and wonderful life moving ever in that direction. We will not become perfect in a day or a month or a year. We will not accomplish it in a lifetime, but we can begin now, starting with our more obvious weaknesses and gradually converting them to strengths as we go forward with our lives.

All of us cannot be geniuses, but we can strive for excellence. This quest may be a long one. It may be fraught with much of repentance, and it will take much of effort. Do not sell yourselves short. You are sons and daughters of God, children with a divine potential. "Look to God and live" (Alma 37:47).

Make a little extra effort and kneel before Him in supplication. He will help you. He will bless you. He will comfort and sustain you.

The excellence of which you dream may not be attainable in its entirety. But there will be progress as you try. There will be growth. There will be improvement. And there will be much of added happiness.

If there has been failure in the past, if there has been sin, if there has been indolence, they may all be overcome.

Tremendous is your opportunity to reach beyond the hoped-for goal of wealth and worldly success—though that may have some modest importance—to build and strengthen others, to relieve suffering, to aid in making the world a better place, to pick up and carry the lantern of Florence Nightingale in walking through the pain-ridden wards of the world.

It was said of the Master that He "went about doing good" (see Acts 10:38). In that process He became the epitome of perfection.

I invoke the blessings of the Lord upon you, my dear friends, to reach for the stars. If you touch them, great shall be your reward. If you stumble and fall while reaching upward, you will be happy knowing you have made the effort.

May the Lord bless each of you as you walk your way with hope, with faith, with that charity which is "the pure love of Christ" (Moroni 7:47), I pray in His sacred name, even the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.