

“In the Thick of Life’s Urgencies”

JEFFREY R. AND PATRICIA T. HOLLAND

Jeff: It is wonderful to see such a large group welcoming Sister Holland and me back from our victorious summer at the Olympics. Considering how well we did there, I have actually been very disappointed that there hasn’t been more of a public response here in Provo—but I can see that you have saved all that for today. How sly of you!

Yes, Sister Holland was gold medal all the way in her specialty—jumping to conclusions.

Pat: And Jeff set a U.S. record in the running fever. He went from 98.6 to 104.1 in seven minutes and thirteen enchiladas.

Jeff: We of course also brought home the four gold medals won by the university in the 4 x 400 Boy-George-Look-Alike relay. In that race, rather than pass the baton, the participants pass the buck. All in all it was a victorious summer. We are grateful for this rousing welcome home.

Pat: And we welcome *you* home, as well. We have missed all of you and it is wonderful to have you back on campus.

Jeff: You know, this is a very special new year for us because our first child, our oldest son Matt, entered BYU this fall as a freshman.

[*Matt starts to move toward the stand from the audience.*]

That is a new and exciting prospect for us, a new kind of responsibility we. . . . No, Matthew. No. We’re in a devotional right now. I didn’t mean for you to come up here. We are speaking to these students.

[*Matt keeps coming, goes to Pat and confers with her. She goes to President Holland and whispers. He hands Matt the car keys and he starts as if to return to his seat.*]

Jeff: Yes, we know it will be a wonderful experience to share with all of your parents the joys of having a student at BYU. . . .

[*Matt turns around and walks back to the podium.*]

Pat: Matthew, for pete’s sake, we are trying to hold an assembly here. What on earth do you want?

[*Matt pulls Pat away and whispers something.*]

Jeff: I’m sorry for this interruption. It is embarrassing. Forgive us for just a moment here.

[*Pat comes back. President Holland pulls out his wallet and hands Matt some money. Matt moves toward his seat.*]

Jeffrey R. Holland was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 11 September 1984.

I'm very sorry. As I was saying, I know Matt and all of you are serious about your opportunities here and will be applying yourselves. . . .

[*Matt is now back with a 3 x 5 card. He hands it to Pat who reads it and hands it to President Holland. Matt then returns to his seat.*]

I can't believe this. Would the brunette on row seventy-eight in Political Science 110 leave her name and telephone number taped to the back of her chair tomorrow. MH on row eighty-three will make contact.

Row seventy-eight! Row eighty-three! We don't have large freshman classes. We don't have anything that goes past row six.

It will now be our pleasure to hear from Sister Holland.

Patricia T. Holland

Setting the humor of this little exchange aside, I want you to know that my feelings are deep today, not simply because my own oldest child sets out on a voyage of discovery here at BYU that will shape and affect his life forever, but also because with each passing year (this is our fifth with you) you all seem more and more like my children. I actually get butterflies in my stomach as school approaches, and when I see you swarming back on campus around Labor Day I feel like the mother who waits and watches and finally sees her children drive up for Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter or the Fourth of July. The nice thing about BYU is that every day with you is a little like Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter and the Fourth of July all rolled into one—especially the Fourth of July part! But Jeff and I do want you to know that we do love you and we take our “family” relationship with you seriously.

I don't want to embarrass you any more than we have embarrassed Matt by conveying an *in loco parentis* attitude, but we do sense some obligation to think and act and worry about you in the absence of your own parents. So forgive a mother's dotting today as I fuss

over your meals, straighten your clothing, and ask if you've done your homework.

May I express that love to you with one short story and one word of encouragement for the new year.

Several years ago we were in a small group with President and Sister N. Eldon Tanner. They have always been so kind to us ever since Jeff served under his direction while President Tanner lived in England as president of the West European Mission. In this social setting they asked us how our children were doing and I said something foolish like, “They're just fine—they're not old enough yet to get into any difficulty.”

President Tanner laughed and said, “That reminds me of what I used to say to my girls when they *were* old enough to get into difficulty. As their dates came for them and as they were about to leave the house, I would see them out the door and say, ‘Goodnight kids. Have fun and be good.’ They said that always perturbed them and that I should make up my mind one way or the other whether I wanted them to have fun or be good.”

I want you to have fun and study hard and love the Y and be good. I *especially* want you to be good.

Have you ever stopped to think about how often we use the word “good” in the course of the day?

We say “good morning.” We tell our family, friends, and acquaintances to “have a good day.” We wish people we like good luck, and say of people we don't like, “good riddance.” We have good times, good cheer, good food, good fun. We sing of the good ol' summertime, the good ship Lollipop, and (here's one for all you Beach Boy fans) “good, good, good vibrations.” Our parents tell us of the “good old days”—you know, walking ten miles to school in a blizzard uphill both ways. We like good news. Someone we admire is a “good egg,” and, of course, when our day ends—whether or not it was—we say “good night.”

Well, BYU is a good place to be. Furthermore, I know you want to be good and that is half the battle already won. It is said that “by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we do not quite know what it is, and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil, widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.” May I just repeat that. I believe it is a profound and very encouraging thought. “By desiring what is perfectly good, even when we do not quite know what it is, and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil, widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.”

The Lord does allow darkness and struggle and pain. He often uses it to call us to him. Using my own children as examples, I’ve come to know that the one who is playing happily is so preoccupied with pleasant experiences that he sometimes may not respond when I call and may even run farther away. But the child who has been hurt, or is in pain, seeks me out, comes to me readily, knocks at my door (if you will), and is anxious for me to help and be healed.

Can you make the transition from this motherly concern I have for you to the perfect parental concern of heaven? Even if such a call from him seems as faint as the stroke of a dove’s wing, respond to it and ask, “What would you have me do?” In personal, private communion with God, I promise you that the light in you will widen and darkness will grow narrower. That which may have been depressed will move, and you will be lifted above your troubles to embrace God’s love.

I bear testimony of that love—and with it you will have a good year—in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jeffrey R. Holland

Obviously, part of our purpose in this very first hour together is just to have fun—to sing

the songs and hear the band and laugh a little together. But I find myself wishing selfishly that I had two or three hours with you to consider what a new year might mean for us. Once in my life—when I was about your age—I wished I had money. Now I’m older and wiser (and still about as poor) and I wish far more desperately for time. What you do with your time “in these next few months will matter infinitely more to you than any financial investment could mean to your bank account.

On that subject of your time may I do something here I have never done before—make a strong, personal plea for your attendance at our forum and devotional series here in the Marriott Center every Tuesday at 11:00 a.m. This weekly alternating series is one of the richest traditions we have at Brigham Young University. I know of no university in the nation that offers twice a month, every month, as we do, the visit of truly distinguished men and women, leaders in art and science and government and letters, including some of our own finest faculty members.

As for our devotional assemblies, there is certainly no place, including Salt Lake City itself, where every other week of the academic year a General Authority of the Church prepares and delivers a major message of interest and inspiration. Given the growth of the Church, most members will now see a General Authority only once a year at one stake conference. Yet we are privileged at BYU to have them visit at least twice a month—sometimes more—*every* month of the year.

But attendance at both events has been steadily and persistently declining for ten years. In the name of intellectual curiosity and spiritual renewal, I ask for your attendance here. If attendance continues to decline, the future of the series is in serious jeopardy. To cease holding them would be an immense loss to all of us now here, and an even greater loss to the students who will come after us. Please

make this an important hour on your weekly educational calendar and be in attendance.

Responsibilities at School

Now, in this very first assembly of the year, it is traditional for the president to run down a laundry list of items regarding some of your responsibilities while at school. Included on that list has always been something about dress and grooming. I wish to make a historic departure today and *not* speak about dress and grooming (hold your applause). I do that because I think for the most part you look absolutely splendid this year. I compliment you for that and I ask you to continue to take pride in clean, modest dress and appropriate grooming.

I should note, however, that shorts seem to be popular this year and we are seeing too many of them on campus—any is too many. New Wave is still around, so be careful not to push that to excess. However, I do love the return of the crew cut. I went all through BYU with a crew cut and that was only fifty-seven years ago. BYU likes very cautious progress on these matters of fashion.

I congratulate you—you do look magnificent and we thank you for that. Your appearance says something about you and it says something about BYU. Thank you very much.

Two Letters

Far more important are the truly substantial issues of our Honor Code which deal with matters of character and integrity. I have here in my hand several examples of the twelve or fifteen letters I get every year on this subject. I wish to refer to just two of them this morning.

Inasmuch as this one is from a very recent student, you will realize that the first sentence caught my eye rather quickly. It says: “Here is the \$700 I owe the scholarship program.” The letter then notes that a scholarship for this student was an absolute must to be able to attend BYU but although the high school grade point

average was relatively high, the first taking of the ACT exam did not bring a score good enough for a scholarship. Then, during the crucial second taking of the exam, a friend offered some answers—you know the rest of the story. “I didn’t know how much this would come back to haunt me. I love the Y, but I came there the wrong way. I hope this money I am returning can allow some deserving student to come the right way.” The other letter is from a woman who attended BYU in the 1930s—that is fifty years ago, give or take a year or two. What does that make her in age—seventy or seventy-five now? She writes: “This past year we have been trying to put our lives in order. . . . I need to confess something to you. . . . During the time I attended BYU I worked in [such and such a] department. The wage in those days was twenty-five cents an hour. I needed the money and on a few days I indicated on my time card that I worked more overtime than I had.”

Now listen to this incredible next paragraph.

“In talking this over with my husband, we decided that I probably could have worked two hours a day during the week and maybe four on Saturday. I worked part of two summers also, but to be on the safe side I added hours for all the summer months. All in all we figured that it could have been possible, at the very most, to earn \$357.00 in total wages for the entire time I was at BYU. The amount I cheated on could only have been a few dollars, but I am returning everything. Enclosed is a check for \$357.00.

“This is a difficult letter to write. I am ashamed and a very humbled person. I ask you, on behalf of BYU, to accept this restitution and I pray for your forgiveness.”

These happen to be some of the moral issues we can talk about here with you quite comfortably. Obviously, we can’t discuss some of the far more personal and, I think it is fair to say, far more destructive abuses, sexual and otherwise, that can and do haunt some at this

university. But these letters at least give us a very visible place to begin, a point on which surely no one can disagree. Honesty. Integrity. Character. Virtue. Those are marvelous words in the BYU vocabulary and I pray they always will be. I thank these people for caring enough to write these letters and put their lives in order.

I ask you to use their example and do your own best work. Earn your own success here. If you quote from someone else in a paper or presentation, give appropriate credit. Be courteous. Live within the rules. Be disciplined and devout. Work hard. Be kind. Live together in love. Try to understand what Robert Frost meant when he said freedom was moving easily in the harness (see *Contemporary Quotations*, comp. James B. Simpson [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964], p. 370).

A University Education

What does any of this have to do with an education? Well, everything.

José Ortega y Gasset, the man who for me is the most gifted and persuasive Spanish voice of the twentieth century, said of education, and specifically of university education,

In history—in life—possibilities do not become realities of their own accord; someone, with his hands and his brain, with his labor and his self-sacrifice, must make realities of them. . . . All we are given is possibilities—to make ourselves one thing or another. . . .

[But] slovenliness. . . penetrates our whole national life from top to bottom. . . . [To oppose slovenliness] *the individual must. . . go into training, and give up many things, in the determination to surpass himself. . . . [A] generation [who will do that] can accomplish what centuries failed to achieve without [it]. And there, my young friends, lies [your] challenge. . . .*

[Yours is] *the historic [task] of restoring to the university its cardinal function of “enlightenment.” . . . In the thick of life’s urgencies and its passions,*

the university must assert itself as a major “spiritual power,” . . . standing for serenity in the midst of frenzy, for seriousness and the grasp of intellect in the face of. . . unashamed stupidity.

Then the university, once again, will come to be what it was in its grand hour: an uplifting principle in the history of the western world. [José Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University*, trans. Howard Lee Nostrand (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), pp. 39–45 passim, 86, 99]

Speaking of Zion

Brigham Young University’s “grand hour” is yet to come. But if we want it badly enough and will work for it, then BYU will, like Zion herself, rise up and put on her beautiful garments.

We don’t speak much of Zion anymore, but those old-timers did and they kept on searching for it—from New York to Pennsylvania to Ohio to Missouri to Illinois to the Great Basin west. Whatever else Zion was, then or now, it was a place where good people with pure hearts could gather in common purpose to love God and their neighbor while pursuing eternal truths. A cross-cultural, rapidly growing, multinational church can’t speak of Zion quite as easily today as it once did in Jackson County or Nauvoo the Beautiful, or even in the Salt Lake Valley. Of necessity we now speak of multiple Zions, of remaining pure in heart in the far reaches of the world where perhaps only the scriptural two or three are gathered in his name.

But a little glimpse of that older, original idea could and should remain here. Is it possible that this campus represents the one remaining “city,” if you will, where 35,000 of the young and old, male and female, new convert and longtime member have *chosen* to “gather”—to voluntarily live together as a community founded on gospel principles in what could be a holy experiment very much like those of the ancients who sought to “bring forth Zion, that it may rejoice upon the hills and flourish” (D&C 39:13)?

What the start of school does for me each year is declare that one shining symbol of that age-old quest is still alive and well on 600 acres of land nestled beneath Y Mountain in Provo, Utah. And once more we have a chance to hold some things in common, and indeed to hold them sacred, while we pursue truth and celebrate virtue in our own little united order.

The Price That Others Have Paid for Us

May I conclude with two stories about two very different aspects of what we share here.

The first experience is now 130 years old, the story of one mother's desire to raise her children in the company of the Saints, no matter what the cost.

Having left home and possessions in England in order to move west by handcart, a thirteen-year-old girl wrote of her mother's determination and their journey, including the almost immediate death and burial of the family's youngest, a two-year-old child. This thirteen-year-old was the grandmother of Sister Marjorie Hinckley, wife of President Gordon B. Hinckley.

We traveled from fifteen to twenty-five miles a day . . . till we got to the Platte River. . . . We caught up with the handcart companies that day. We watched them cross the river. There were great lumps of ice floating down the river. It was bitter cold. The next morning there were fourteen dead. . . . We went back to camp and had our prayers and . . . sang "Come, Come Ye Saints, No Toil Nor Labor Fear." I wondered what made my mother cry that night. . . . The next morning my little sister was born. It was the twenty-third of September. We named her Edith. She lived six weeks and died. . . . She was buried at the last crossing of the Sweetwater.

When we arrived at Devil's Gate it was bitter cold. We left many of our things there. . . . My brother James . . . was as well as he ever was when we went to bed that night. In the morning he was dead. . . .

My feet were frozen; also my brother's and my sister's. It was nothing but snow. We could not drive the pegs in our tents. . . . We did not know what would become of us. Then one night a man came to our camp and told us . . . Brigham Young had sent men and teams to help us. . . . We sang songs; some danced, and some cried. . . .

My mother never got well. . . . She died between the Little and Big Mountains. . . . She was forty-three years of age. . . .

We arrived in Salt Lake City nine o'clock at night the eleventh of December, 1856. Three out of the four that were living were frozen. My mother was dead in the wagon. . . .

The doctor amputated my toes . . . while the sisters were dressing mother for her grave. . . . That afternoon she was buried.

*I have often thought of my mother's words before we left England. "Polly, I want to go to Zion while my children are small so that they can be raised in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." [Mary Goble Pay, quoted by Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Faith of the Pioneers," *Ensign*, July 1984, p. 6]*

Making a Zion

That is part of the price that others have paid for us. It is part of the reason we ask you to study diligently and live with Christian commitment. Too many children and too many mothers paid too high a price for Zion then to have us muff our far easier chance now.

This second experience is quite different and is only nine days old.

As a rule I suppose football would not seem to be part of any discussion for establishing Zion. Nevertheless, Coach Edwards told me last week that as the team was returning to Provo about 2:00 a.m., following the Pittsburgh game, he and his wife couldn't help overhearing two of his players talking in the seat just behind them in the bus. They were not talking about beating a traditional powerhouse like Pittsburgh. They were not talking about how the offense had sparkled or how the defense had dug in. They were not talking about a

conference championship or an undefeated season, or about a national ranking.

They were talking about the one player's recent baptism into the Church, along with his wife who is also a student athlete here. He spoke of his eager anticipation of receiving the priesthood and of a future sealing in the temple. Indeed, there seemed to be only one disappointment in this whole conversation, and it wasn't about the ball game. It was that this young man had not known—and joined—the Church early enough to be able to serve a mission. At that, the other player, in reply, spoke of how much his mission had meant to him and how it had given real direction to his life. Much of this young man's life had been spent without a father in the home and I happen to know what it has meant to his mother to have him bear the priesthood and serve a mission.

Coach and Sister Edwards said they had a little trouble fighting down the lumps in their throats, thinking of these 260-pound behemoths sitting behind them—kids who eat steel girders for breakfast and concrete slabs for lunch—talking quietly after one of BYU's greatest football wins ever, of baptism and priesthood and mission and temples. I daresay those are *not* standard discussion topics with any other football teams in America.

Another young man in that bus played marvelously well against Pittsburgh and contributed very directly to that victory. He took quite a beating that afternoon and even a Helaman Halls bed must have looked awfully good to him by the time he hit the pillow at 2:30 or 3:00 that morning.

But his branch president told me that this weary warrior was up and at church bright

and early the next morning. When President Uluave expressed some momentary surprise at his presence, this rock-solid young man with thighs the size of tree stumps said simply, "I am a priest. We have only three in the branch and I wasn't sure who would be here to bless the sacrament." "When we conclude to make a Zion," said Brigham Young, "we will make it, and this work commences in the heart of each person" (*JD* 9:283). "I have Zion in my view constantly," he said. "We are not going to wait for angels, or for Enoch. . . to come and build [it], but we are going to build it [ourselves]" (*JD* 9:284).

The need for us to invest our time wisely and to lean with discipline and integrity toward that great goal is my dream for BYU. For such unique reasons as these just cited, education here is a moral issue and all of us need to be committed to the task. To paraphrase Dante: The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in time of great moral crises maintained their neutrality.

Don't be neutral. Commit everything you have to your educational experience with all the Latter-day Saint significance that has for us here. Your opportunity for growth at BYU, if not a moral crisis, is at least a moral issue. Immerse yourself in the privilege which is yours so that "in the thick of life's urgencies and its passions, . . . [we can grasp the intellect and] assert [ourselves] as a major 'spiritual power,' . . . [as] an uplifting principle in the . . . western world."

Welcome back to school. Work hard. Have fun. Be good. We love you. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.