

“Unless You’re a Mormon”

JEFFREY R. AND PATRICIA T. HOLLAND

Jeff: Before we begin today, I want to put down a widespread rumor. Unfortunately, former BYU president Dallin Oaks and I will *not* be presenting a live rock concert this month. We know how much you want us, and we know that no other university can claim a rock group out of its last two presidents, but I’m sorry. Holland-Oaks (Hall and Oates) cannot work it into their schedules this fall. Please try not to be too disappointed.

Pat: If you think having a rock star for a president is strange, you ought to try being married to him!

Jeff: For those of you who may be new to BYU, we should explain that time limits are always severe in this welcome back assembly, and most of what we need to say is always beginning-of-the-year business. Sister Holland and I hope you will attend our first devotional next semester when things are more relaxed and we can be a little more parental.

Pat: Speaking of parents, I am reminded that we had many parents of our new freshmen at our home last week, and they repeatedly spoke of “entrusting you to our care.” They want so much for you to be happy and safe, and we share that hope. We lie awake some evenings talking long into the night about you.

We care about you so much. We love you as if you were our own sons and daughters and want you to have a wonderful year.

Jeff: Let us begin with a quote and then a story.

President Reagan recently said in a public address, “A nation’s greatness is measured not just by its gross national product or military power, but by the strength of its devotion to the principles and values that bind its people and define their character” (quoted by William J. Bennett, “Completing the Reagan Revolution,” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, August 1, 1986, p. 611). May I repeat that for emphasis here this morning as we start a new school year. I will take the liberty of inserting some university language. “Brigham Young University’s greatness is measured not just by its collective grade point average or its football success, but by the strength of its devotion to the principles and values that bind its people and define their character.” Please hold that in the old cerebral cortex for a minute and we will come back to it. Now the story.

Jeffrey R. Holland was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 9 September 1986.

Pat: In the summer of 1973, Brother David K. Skidmore received military orders to report for duty in Thailand. Leaving a wife and two small children behind, David hoped to make the year pass as quickly as possible.

On the evening of his arrival, he was invited to join in a social gathering with his new squadron. He turned down an alcoholic drink for a soda pop and tried to obscure himself in quiet conversation amid the pounding of the music and the layered haze of smoke.

As he was introduced around, Brother Skidmore eventually ended up standing at the bar with the squadron commander, a colonel. With the officer's arm around David's neck he was a captive, listening to tales of airplanes, daring, and past comrades.

Soon a signal was given and the men gathered around the bar. The music was turned off and it became very quiet. Everyone was served a small drink of very strong alcohol. When the drinks came to Brother Skidmore, he said quietly, trying to be casual, "No, thank you, I prefer this soft drink."

The room went silent. "But this is a squadron tradition," the man said.

Thoughts raced through David's mind: "Why me? Why in front of the whole squadron? Why the very first night?" Trying to sound confident, David explained that he did not drink alcohol but would participate with soda pop.

With that, the silence deepened, and the commander's arm tightened around his neck and he said, "Lieutenant, I'm ordering you to have this drink. You'll drink it if I have to pour it down you myself."

David thought of how far he could get if he tried to fight. He envisioned the results, and an unpleasant visit to the wing commander to change squadrons. Again he asked himself, "Why me?" But he gathered his courage amidst the waiting silence and said, "I'm sorry, sir, I will not drink alcohol."

An electricity filled the air, and David prayed silently with all his heart.

The colonel leaned back and measured him with his eyes, then replied, "You *are* going to drink this . . ."

David kept praying.

Then the colonel added, ". . . unless you are a Mormon."

What relief filled a soldier's soul! Of course he was a Mormon! He'd always been a Mormon. Why hadn't he said so earlier? "Yes, sir, I'm a Mormon," he answered.

The commander quizzed David again to make sure he wasn't simply taking an easy out. Then he said, "A soft drink for this man, please" (David K. Skidmore, "Yes, I *Am* a Mormon," *Ensign*, September 1985, pp. 55–56).

Jeff: "Unless you are a Mormon." What should that little caveat mean as we begin another school year? What does it say, in President Reagan's language, of "devotion to principles and values that bind us together and define our character"? Someone once asked, "If in a court of law you were accused of being a Latter-day Saint, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

I saw a headline recently that caught my eye. It would have been hard *not* to catch an eye. It declared across the top of the page, "Moral Rot in America." The writer's contention is that over the past 100 years "there has been a decay in the value[s] of American society, from a moral code that was once [one of the] wonder[s] of the world [into what is now a] black hole of moral relativism" (Allan Carlson, "Moral Rot in America?" *Persuasion at Work*, vol. 9, no. 6, June 1986, p. 1).

Let me quote another writer, Meg Greenfield.

There has been an awful lot of talk about sin, crime and plain old antisocial behavior this summer—drugs and pornography at home, terror and brutality abroad. Maybe it's just the heat; or maybe these categories of conduct . . . are really on the rise. What strikes me is our curiously deficient, not to say defective, way of talking about them. We don't

seem to have a word anymore for “wrong” in the moral sense, as in, for example, “theft is wrong.”

Let me quickly qualify. There is surely no shortage of people condemning other people. . . . Name-calling is still very much in vogue. But where the concept of wrong is really important—as a guide to one’s own behavior or that of [determining] one’s . . . side in [a moral issue]—it is missing. . . .

*. . . As a guide and a standard to live by, you don’t hear so much about “right and wrong” these days. The very notion is considered. . . personally embarrassing, since it has such a repressive, Neanderthal ring to it. [Meg Greenfield, “Why Nothing is ‘Wrong’ Anymore,” *Washington Post*, Tuesday, July 22, 1986, p. A19]*

Well, life is better than that at BYU because we expect it to be better and work very hard at making it better. But Somerset Maugham reminded us once, “Every good and excellent thing in life stands moment-to-moment on the razor’s edge of destruction, and if it is to be preserved it must be defended every hour of your life.” We want for you a “good and excellent” life at BYU. We are determined to preserve and defend it. We intend *not* to be “deficient” or “defective” in speaking here of right and wrong. We speak, like Brother Skidmore, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—or as nonmember guests of it.

In that spirit we are especially pleased to acknowledge the presidents of our fifteen BYU stakes who join us in welcoming you back to school. They and their vast stake and ward associates help us make this a special place. We honor them in their calling and publicly pay tribute to them today. We are closely linked with them in the work of “strengthening devotion to the principles and values that bind us as a people and define our character.” Let us touch on just a few reminders as we emphasize what it means to be a Latter-day Saint at BYU in a new school year.

Please understand that with a limit on our enrollment there has been increased academic competition for admission to BYU. Concurrent with that and of equal force with it must always be increased emphasis on worthiness and faith for those who would enjoy the privileges here. Such effort on your part will guarantee that BYU’s greatness will always be more than grade point averages and football successes, pleasant as those are.

Pat: There is a war being declared on drugs and substance abuse in this country, a war we have always fought at BYU that must be continued. The tragic deaths of gifted young athletes like Len Bias and Don Rogers get our attention because they strike the young, or the rich, or the famous. But far beyond sports figures and rock musicians there is an epidemic of abuse, a Niagara of narcotics taking from us as a nation our ability to control our destiny and guarantee our power.

Jeff: Drugs will not be tolerated on this campus! Not users, not pushers, not providers, not experimenters. The devastation of lives elsewhere is all the explanation anyone needs for our hardline position here. We include in that ban alcohol, still the most widely abused and most deadly drug (at least in terms of fatal accidents) in the nation. We take this stand firmly, like Brother Skidmore, “because we are Mormons.”

There are other standards that we must keep if BYU’s greatness is to be genuine and long-lasting. Be honest. Don’t take what is not yours, including answers on another’s exam, or a plagiarized essay, or computer software now electronically pilfered in an instant. Be honest—especially with yourself.

There is too little discipline in most of our housing units, on campus and off. I am asking every landlord and bishop, even now as I ask every roommate, to accept responsibility for the living circumstances and moral climate of our BYU community. Be clean. Don’t pet and play and then wonder why there are problems.

There is too much sexual transgression in the world, in the Church, and at BYU. Explicit sexual material should not be your entertainment at movie theaters or on TV. We cannot monitor your cable network any more than we can monitor the videos you can rent at three dozen locations within one mile of this building. We are simply stating what you already know to be the standard of a Latter-day Saint. We are asking for a most unusual community, one that is bound by “devotion to principles and values that define our character.” We are asking you to stand up and be counted “because you are a Mormon.”

Dress and grooming standards need not preoccupy our time and conversation. These are simple, clearly stated principles and can be understood by everyone. Be neat, be clean, be modest. That is really all we need to say. Shorts are not acceptable wear on this campus for men or women, and never have been. Neither are short skirts or grubby jeans. Almost all of you look absolutely marvelous virtually all of the time. Thank you for that. To those few exceptions we simply say that extreme attire or shabby grooming are not acceptable here. Be the best you can be in every way, including your personal appearance. Let it be “an outward sign of an inward grace.” Look and be and speak as educated, civilized men and women. That is part of what it means to be at BYU. Do it “because you’re Mormon.”

Pat: May I caution the women in the audience not to be so socially conscious or so consumed with dating that you forget what a Latter-day Saint woman stands for and why she is so strongly encouraged to get an education. Marriage is the highest and holiest union we know in mortality—I hope it comes to every one of you at the proper time. But there is too much in our world, especially in those videos my husband spoke of, that screams only of sex appeal and beautiful body—and almost no voice anywhere asking for faith and intelligence and clean, strong women. The world is

generally encouraging exactly what the proverbs call “a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout”—that is, “a fair woman . . . without discretion” (Proverbs 11:22). Use discretion. Use good judgment. Don’t think that your future and your fortune hinges on your face or your figure. Develop *all* of yourself. If you will be personable and intelligent—and above all, if you will be spiritual—so will the men. Be what the Lord has designed women to be and we will have that celestial community we have been speaking of.

Jeff: We need just these kinds of opportunities to be together as such a community, to speak to each other and to remind ourselves of the special nature of our opportunity here. For that reason, we are putting new and greatly increased emphasis on our university assemblies this year. With the approval and blessing of our board of trustees, we have carefully revised and limited the annual forum, devotional, and fifteen-stake fireside calendar. This has been done to accommodate even the busiest of students and faculty members.

We will advertise these events well, and for the weekday assemblies we will shorten the preceding class by five minutes, and delay the start of the next class by five minutes—all in an attempt to let you come and go from the Marriott Center to even the most distant buildings on campus. We are asking the faculty in those classes to assist us by announcing the speaker and walking with you to these assemblies. We will be closing all but the most essential services on campus for that hour so that as many as possible may take advantage of this special association. I don’t want us to be 26,000 “splendid strangers.” A few times each semester we want you to be together as family and friends to strengthen our values and bind us as a people.

Pat: As President Ballif has announced, our speaker next week will be President Ezra Taft Benson, Prophet and President of the Church, and chairman of the BYU Board of Trustees.

Nowhere else in the Church would college students have such an experience! Surely *everyone* in the BYU community will want to be in attendance to hear President Benson's message. Please plan to attend each carefully calendared assembly this year. The administration has never worked harder to provide outstanding speakers.

Jeff: May I make a special appeal regarding your study habits, and then Pat will comment on one very important aspect of that task. As any glance at our physical plant or faculty strength or course offering will quickly attest, an astronomical investment has been made in your education. You are receiving at BYU what a recent national publication described quite simply as the educational buy of the nation.

The thousands of dollars of difference in tuition between other private universities and our own comes as a direct benefit to you from hundreds of thousands—millions technically—of silent benefactors, the faithful tithesayers of this Church. These are the offerings of the faithful around the globe, many of whom may never have seen BYU, nor may ever have a child or grandchild attend here. Yet the leaders of the Church care enough about those who *can* come to make this stunning investment in a handful of students. In addition to all the buildings and the ball games, and surrounding amenities here, every one of you—*every one* of you—receives the equivalent of several thousand dollars in personal scholarship money each year just for attending. And that is in addition to whatever other financial aid you may also receive from the school. That is given because the Brethren love you and believe in you. They believe you will learn and grow and bless the Church and mankind because of your unique experience here. They believe you will stand proudly and tall when someone asks if you are a Mormon.

Please take full advantage of this special opportunity that is yours. It will be gone all too quickly. I love fun and Frisbees and fall

afternoons, too, but don't let them blunt your primary purpose in coming here—pursuit of a superb education to prepare you for service to God and your fellowman.

Time matters so very much to me now. I need it so much, and I seem to have so little for the truly important tasks I wish to pursue. Maybe I'm just getting old. In any case I feel—and you will soon enough—the pain of Yeats' lines:

*The years like great black oxen tread the world, . . .
And I am broken by their passing feet.* [William Butler Yeats, "The Countess Cathleen," 1892]

Grab the ring as it passes, and then let extra effort shape your special destiny. Study first, study well, study hard, *Then* play or party or pig out. Make time work *for* you, not against you. Start papers early. Someone once said there is no such thing as good writing, just good rewriting. Your essays cannot be of the quality we expect, nor can you be taking advantage of your education in the way that I have just been pleading you to, if you leave papers until the night before they are due and then rush toward a deadline with literary meat cleaver in hand. Furthermore, your roommates are *not* benefited by primal screams at about 2:00 in the morning when the word processor goes on the fritz. Write it early, let it cool. Sleep on it and come back for refinement. Polish your prose and take pride in saying something significant. That takes time.

Please. Use it or lose it. Study first and play later. Leonardo da Vinci's cry still holds: "O God, [thou] dost sell us all good things at the price of labor" (*Notebooks* [c. 1500], trans. Jean Paul Richter). Make this year count.

Pat: In that same spirit may I just insert a very personal piece of counsel on a matter that has been a great blessing to us and I believe can be a great blessing to you. While working on his Ph.D. at Yale University, my husband got to know well one of the senior reference

librarians who had given him valuable help researching for his dissertation.

On a whim one day, he said, “Ilene, I need to know how many books we have in either the Sterling Memorial or Beinike Rare Book Libraries that claim to have been delivered by an angel.”

The librarian gave him a peculiar look (but my husband has always received peculiar looks) and said, “I don’t know of any *books* that have been delivered by angels. Swords maybe. Or chariots. But I don’t know of any books.”

“Well, just run a check for me would you? It may take a little doing, but I really would like to know. It would help me with some religious writing I am doing.” (Now, please understand that Yale has the fourth-largest library in the nation, with nearly 9,000,000 volumes in its collection.)

Ilene dutifully did some checking. For several days she had nothing to report, but then one day was all smiles as my husband strolled by to his carrel.

“Mr. Holland, yoo hoo,” she said, very unlibrarianlike. “I have a book for you. I found one book which, it is claimed, was delivered by an angel. But it’s one from your people,” she said. (She always spoke of Latter-day Saints as my husband’s people, which probably meant she had him confused with Wilford Woodruff.)

“But it’s one from your people,” she said, and she held up a paperback copy of the Book of Mormon. “I’m told you can get them for a dollar.”

“My word,” she continued. “An angel’s book for a dollar. You would think angels would charge more, but then again, where would they spend it?”

Well, that’s a funny—and true—story, but I wonder if we have considered the majesty of our message to the world. Prophets are not just everyday people, and angels do not visit us often, but of all the books that will be at your disposal this year at the university, only one has been delivered by an angel. President

Benson has asked the Church as a whole to renew their reading of this book. We repeat that invitation to the BYU family.

At a very difficult and challenging time in my life, Jeff gave me a new copy of the scriptures and I began to read the Book of Mormon as I had never read it before. In a very real way that I cannot share today, but which is very personal and very true, it saved my life. I treasured every word, I savored every chapter. I came to know the promise of section 84 in the Doctrine and Covenants—that my mind was *not* darkened and I was *not* under condemnation because I had *not* forgotten the Book of Mormon (see verses 54–57).

We ask you, every day you are here, to read at least one verse in the Book of Mormon—more if you can—but *something* from the Book of Mormon to give light to your life: “Light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (D&C 84:45). I promise you miracles if you will do it.

Jeff: Let us close with one final story. It is a BYU variation on Brother Skidmore’s experience.

For more than twenty-five years Ben E. Lewis was the executive vice-president of Brigham Young University. He is now retired. I recently asked him to do something very important for the university for which I wanted to give him a token of modest compensation. He refused the money. I argued with him and told him I was the president and he had to do what I said. He said he was retired and that he didn’t have to do anything I said. I shoved the money at him and he shoved it back at me. We argued and then he told me this story.

He said that following his undergraduate years at BYU (where he was a student body president, by the way) he had received an Alfred P. Sloan fellowship for graduate work at the University of Denver. As part of the Sloan fellowship, he and a handful of other students were regularly taken out into the Colorado business community to meet leaders and executives,

and enjoy rather high-level exchange with them. One particular professor always took the group, and they spent many hours together.

After each day's work with these business leaders, the professor would always stop some where for a beer with the students. Brother Lewis always ordered a soft drink. That led to a lot of conversation over many weeks, and the professor came to introduce Ben *everywhere* they went—at every business, at every school, to every leader, and to every executive—this way: “This is Ben Lewis,” he would say. “He’s a Mormon and he doesn’t drink beer.” Everywhere and with everyone it was always the same—“This is Ben Lewis. He’s a Mormon and he doesn’t drink beer.” Over the course of *many* months that phrase was repeated dozens and dozens and dozens of times. “This is Ben Lewis. He’s a Mormon and he doesn’t drink beer.”

One day after a field trip to Fort Collins, the professor wheeled the group, up to a pit stop of some kind where, of course, he and the others ordered their beer. Except this time the professor ordered *two* beers. Ben asked him why. He said, “Because its my birthday and you are going to have a beer with me.” “No,” Ben said, “I can’t have a beer with you, but I do wish you a happy birthday.”

“You *will* have a beer with me,” his teacher said. “At least you must have *one sip*. It is very important to me, and I ask it of you this one time.” And he put a dollar bill on the table. “Drink *one sip* of beer and that dollar is yours.” Brother Lewis said he didn’t want to give offense but, no, he would not be able to drink the beer, even for the dollar.

That conversation, with some increasing tension, escalated until the man had placed \$50 on the counter. He was obviously intent on having Ben participate in this unusual birthday party, and he was in a position to do a student considerable academic harm if he were so inclined.

Like Brother Skidmore, Brother Lewis wondered what to do. He did not want to offend a man who had been particularly kind to him. It was now a very awkward situation, and virtually everyone in the restaurant was aware of some difficulty over at their corner table. One sip would soothe the situation. Surely the Lord would know the integrity of his heart in this matter. Certainly no permanent damage would be done. Furthermore, \$50 in 1941 meant a lot to a working student who wasn’t at all sure where his next meal was coming from.

There, a long way from home, as he mulled over this difficult situation and wondered how to handle the problem, words so clear and loud spoken directly to his brain nearly startled him from the table. As audibly as I speak to you, Brother Lewis said he heard the words from an unseen source. “This is Ben Lewis. He’s a Mormon, and he drinks beer.”

Then he said there in my office, “I didn’t drink the beer, and I can’t take the money. I’m a Mormon. This is Brigham Young University. I love it with all my heart. I have given my life to it. I want to give more. I can’t take the money.”

Pat: May we say it again one last time. “A person’s greatness is measured not by her personal wealth or his professional standing, but by the strength of his devotion to principle . . . by the values that . . . define her character.”

Jeff: God bless you to have a beautiful and rewarding new school year. Make it that way because you are Mormons. We love you and care about each one of you very much, including and especially those who may not be members of our Church. We know of the jobs you are taking and the sacrifice you are making to keep yourselves in school. We see you come and go on campus with devotion and faith and hope for the future. We know some of your problems and heartaches. Most of you try so hard to be what you should be. We will forever love you and admire you for that. You are good

in your hearts, and we will do our best at this university to also make you wise.

We love you and measure that love as we measure the greatness of this school—by the profundity and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sister Holland and I testify together of the Savior’s life and mission and restored

Church in these latter days. We testify of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the prophet Ezra Taft Benson—prophets, seers, and revelators in the grand tradition of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Alma. We testify this morning of God’s love for you—and our own—in the blessed name of Jesus Christ. Amen.