

Some Hopeful Words on Media and Agency

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To say that I am flattered to be standing at this podium would be a gross understatement. I consider this to be an honor of the highest order because of who you are and the enormous impact that this place has had on my life.

My relationship to this campus goes far beyond my current titles or even my degrees from this institution. The only word that is intimate enough yet broad enough to encompass my connection to BYU is the word *home*. BYU is my home. I have lived within walking distance of this very spot more than I have lived anywhere else in the world. I am a child of BYU, not just because I received an undergraduate degree from here but because I was literally a child here—living with my parents and the rest of my family in Heritage Halls during summer pilgrimages to this campus when my father was completing his PhD.

I have learned on this campus, I have grown on this campus, and I have discovered great things about myself and about you on this campus. Much of my research is dedicated to observations of your generation, and, I have to admit, you have much to be proud of. A recent column in the *New York Times Magazine* noted that young people today are more averse to risky behavior than their parents were at the

same age. Drug and alcohol use, smoking, and sexual activity have all been in sharp decline in your demographic during the past twenty years.¹ Also, financial firm TD Ameritrade believes you are more financially savvy and better savers than your parents,² and a study conducted by the Stanford University School of Medicine suggests that your willingness to improve society at large may actually improve your eating habits.³ If these are the inclinations of our culture at large, I certainly believe that these trends would only be amplified among the student body of BYU.

All of this might come as a bit of a shock to your parents, who have spent so much time and effort getting you to eat your vegetables and shielding you from evil—but it does not come as a shock to me. I watch you; I see you doing good. I am acutely aware of my responsibility to add to and not detract from the spirit that you carry.

While you certainly deserve praise and recognition, you should also recognize that your generation has its own unique characteristics and challenges. For example, it

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is becoming increasingly more difficult to capture and maintain your attention. I know that many of you are multitasking at this very moment—doing homework, checking your Facebook account, answering emails, texting your friends about your lunch plans, or even shopping. All of these things are available to you here in the Marriott Center through the devices that we carry in our pockets; these tools and technologies are increasingly becoming vital parts of our work, our play, our families, and our very identities.

I'm addicted, too. If you would have told me at age thirty (just a little while ago) that I would feel completely lost without a cell phone, I would never have believed you. Now my iPhone is almost always within reach. It is likely that my children believe that my most important possession is my MacBook Air, which doesn't just rest on my kitchen counter but is usually open and on whenever I am in the house. If I hear my children cheering "Go, Mama, go!" from the basement, I know that they are not actually cheering me on but rather my Mii on the Wii. I know that there is excellent cell phone and Wi-Fi service here in the Marriott Center, because on any other Tuesday you would find me answering emails and texting my husband to arrange my own lunch plans. So please understand that my task here today is not to scold or reprimand you for spending too much time on Facebook or for carrying your phone to class (though others might). Rather, I will try to give you some hopeful and helpful words about how our spiritual lives might intersect with the world of data and devices that swirls around us.

Out of respect for you, and in fear of this podium and this occasion, I have desperately sought for the Spirit to guide me to the doctrines I should emphasize and the truths I should share. In answer to my fervent prayers, the Spirit has guided me again and again to two doctrines that were central to one of the

most revered devotionals ever given at BYU—one that I have personal experience with.

On January 12, 1988, I sat in this very space in one of the chairs that you are sitting in today. I had just turned twenty. Within the next two years I would be married and working in the public schools as a high school teacher. In that moment, though, I was still preparing for all of that. I was much closer to who you are than to who I am now. I was at the beginning of learning who I was and who I wanted to be in the world. Like you, I was learning that our existence here on earth is difficult, wonderful, terrifying, and beautiful.

I did not yet know that people die (young and old). I did not know that who I married would have moment-to-moment impact on who I became. I did not yet know that babies don't come just because we think they should, even if our begging is sincere.

I did know that I was a daughter of our Heavenly Father. I knew that I loved Him and, more important, that He loved me. I knew that the president of the university at the time was wise and that he loved the students here on campus very much. That is why I was sitting in this space ready to receive personal revelation. That revelation came in the form of a devotional talk delivered by then university president Jeffrey R. Holland. The devotional was titled "Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments," and in it President Holland provided profound doctrines in answer to the question "Why be morally clean?"⁴

My comments today should not be viewed in any way as an extension or a commentary on those beautiful words. President Holland was quite specific and complete in covering his subject, which needs no elaboration from me, and I encourage all of you to review that talk directly from the perspective and context in which it was originally given.

However, I believe that two doctrines he spoke of that day—the doctrine of the soul and the doctrine of the sacrament—have profound

implications for our mediated interactions with the world.

First, the doctrine of the soul. In his devotional address Elder Holland taught that “we . . . must understand the revealed, restored Latter-day Saint doctrine of the soul, and the high and inextricable part the body plays in that doctrine.”⁵ In support of that statement, he cited Doctrine and Covenants 88:15: “The spirit and the body are the soul of man.”

With this in mind, I want to call to your attention the ways in which mass communication technologies impact your body (and therefore your soul). I also want you to be conscious of the ways in which the world is impacted by your soul (and therefore your body).

In very real ways, communication technologies allow us to project our bodies (or our souls) across vast geographies. The very nature of “our presence” is rapidly changing and expanding. As with all things here in our second estate (see Abraham 3:26), there are some spiritual disadvantages of these new abilities that stand in opposition to their obvious rewards.

Please know that I am not speaking of theoretical or metaphysical notions. Rather, I am speaking of very practical and actual effects that I know you and I have experienced. For example, my texting or emailing before and even during a devotional has an effect on my presence here. My iPhone enables me to divide my presence. While I might be seated here, part of my attention—part of my soul—is back at the office, where the concerns of the email I am reading are properly housed. Another part of my soul is in the company of the person I am texting—inevitably miles away from the location of my ears. Such a disbursement of my soul has prevented me on occasion from participating in a devotional with my complete presence, and I have learned that receiving a message through the Spirit is dependent upon my willingness to listen to that message with my whole soul.

In contrast to those occasions, perhaps the reason that Elder Holland’s talk has had such a lasting impact on my life is because I did experience it with my whole soul. The physical impact of those words went far beyond the sounds that entered my ears. Those words had an impact on me, and I felt them. I continue to feel them in a manner that has become characteristic of our faith’s notion of a testimony. In the Doctrine and Covenants, Oliver Cowdery was told that the Spirit speaks “in your mind and in your heart” (D&C 8:2), which implies that testimonies have a physical component in addition to a rational conception. Therefore, the language of the Spirit is partly a physical language—or, in other words, a true and native language of the soul.

That language of the soul is not necessarily hindered by the existence of technology in our lives. In fact, the Church has enthusiastically embraced the opportunities that communication technologies have provided to extend the presence of our modern prophets far into the world. Today we often take for granted how President Thomas S. Monson and the living apostles of Jesus Christ are present in our lives through satellite broadcasts, Web streaming, and other digital technologies. We recognize their faces, we know their voices, and we feel their presence as they testify of Him who sent them and of Him whose presence is our ultimate goal and reward.

We should acknowledge that our cell phones and laptops carry no secret powers that will push us toward one side or the other of the war that began in heaven; they are simply tools that amplify the choices we make through our agency.

I know that you regularly hear of the pitfalls and dangers that do exist as part of our mediated culture, but there is “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11), and in opposition to those things that often dominate our discussions of the Internet and all things mediated is an explosion in the availability of all that is

“virtuous, lovely, or of good report” (Articles of Faith 1:13). Agency was the issue in the beginning, and agency—personal, private, moment-to-moment agency—is the issue for you and me today.

In 2 Nephi 2:26, Lehi explained that because we “are redeemed from the fall [we] have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for [ourselves] and *not to be acted upon*” (emphasis added). I take this as a scriptural promise that our agency will never be overwhelmed by technology. Indeed, I believe that our agency has been enhanced by technology, allowing us at every moment to choose the better parts of our world.

In the next verse Lehi said, “All things are given [us]” (2 Nephi 2:27). Clearly the phrase “all things” can apply to our world of digital information and Google. All things truly have been given us, good and bad—not just to tempt us on the one hand or to give us the opportunity to demonstrate our righteousness to ourselves on the other. All things have been given to us, and the act of choosing from among those things—or exercising our agency—alters the nature of our eternal souls. Each time we choose light, truth, and righteousness we become more like our Heavenly Father and we develop some of His most important characteristics: we expand our knowledge, we increase our capacities, we grow in our compassion and love for others, and we build our testimonies. All of these rewards come because our most important act of agency is to choose to see things from a perspective of eternity—to choose to see things through the vision of our Heavenly Father.

Such vision requires faith to see things as they actually are—not as they appear. Your agency gives you a way to develop this type of vision for yourself, and you can also help others—including those who are most dear to you—develop that vision. The records that we keep can be incredibly powerful in building our faith and the faith of those who are most

important to us, and that faith will help us see into the eternities

When I was a child, President Spencer W. Kimball regularly told members of the Church to keep a journal as a record of their faith for the later benefit of their families.⁶ When I was about to be married, my BYU stake president gave me some very good advice: He told me to take pictures and document my life and my marriage and my family. He explained that this would benefit my children, because they would see that my husband and I existed before they were born, that we loved each other, and that important things happened that they didn’t necessarily remember. He said that a record of our life through pictures would give our children a sense of eternity, because they would have evidence of good, happy, and worthy things beyond their own experiences.

How are you keeping records of the good, happy, and worthy things in your life?

We all have the opportunity and the responsibility to be record keepers. Beyond journals and photographs, we now have at our disposal an immense system of record keeping and sharing. Our blogs, family videos, Facebook pages, and tweets are all opportunities to inject goodness, testimony, and faith into the world. But beyond what you contribute to the world, you should know that your digital footprint—your record of experiences, testimony, and faith—will actually have the greatest impact on those who are the most important to you: your closest friends and your immediate family.

I am so grateful that my sister Anne was a record keeper. She was also a mom, an eighth-grade reading and writing teacher, a Laurel advisor, a runner, a photographer, a sharer of recipes, and a blogger. She loved using technology to improve her life and to reach out to others.

Two and a half years ago this beautiful sister of mine was engaged in a brutal war with metastatic melanoma. Even while she was

fighting cancer, she published stories in the *Friend* and the *New Era*, recorded the miraculous experience of her daughter's birth through NPR's StoryCorps program, and regularly blogged about the everyday occurrences of her life. In every one of these instances she shared her testimony, described her existence as blessed, and identified herself as a daughter of God.

On August 15, 2009, she posted this on her blog, titled "This Home Is Filled with Love and Dreams":

I have no doubt that if it is Heavenly Father's will, I will be healed. But even if I'm not, I have to admit that I feel at peace. The last month has been fraught with panic and frantic anguish, but now I feel differently. I trust Him. I look forward to asking WHY all of this had to happen. I'm not going to ask it now, because I know that He can see the whole picture and I know that whatever His will is, things will be okay. My girls will be okay because they have Ward. I know that Ward will be okay because he has them. And we all have each other—FOREVER—and that's what really matters.⁷

Seven days later Anne passed away. Her body is buried on a peaceful hill in Eden, Utah, where she lived with her husband, Ward, and their three daughters. Most of the time I feel like she is very far away, but when I read those words from her blog, I feel her presence and I know that her spirit and her body—her fierce and gentle soul—are not lost. Those words have power to bring Anne's presence to me, and, more than that, those words have the power to transport a portion of my soul back to a time before cancer and loss and forward to a time of resurrection and reunion. Those words—that testimony—help me feel eternity.

Anne, like me, was an avid consumer of mediated messages; she read widely and she loved a good movie. However, even before the weight of mortality began to rest on her, she was consistent in her view that she was

participating in a process that had eternal significance. She was insistent that everything she read or watched with her children should teach something good or build something good in herself or her family. Similarly, everything she wrote or shared on the Internet was meant to help someone or demonstrate something decent or testify of something great. Her engagement with the world through technology was something more than just entertainment, a hobby, or an interesting way to pass the time. To her, these were holy activities—purposeful, consecrated actions and sacramental exercises of faith that helped her obtain and share the vision of our Heavenly Father.

That brings me to a second doctrine that Elder Holland talked about in 1988: the doctrine of a holy sacrament. He said:

A sacrament could be any one of a number of gestures or acts or ordinances that unite us with God and His limitless powers. We are imperfect and mortal; He is perfect and immortal. But from time to time—indeed, as often as is possible and appropriate—we find ways and go to places and create circumstances where we can unite symbolically with Him and, in so doing, gain access to His power. Those special moments of union with God are sacramental moments, such as kneeling at a marriage altar or blessing a newborn baby or partaking of the emblems of the Lord's Supper. This latter ordinance is the one we in the Church have come to associate most traditionally with the word sacrament, though it is technically only one of many such moments when we formally take the hand of God and feel His divine power.⁸

In a world in which *all things* are delivered to us electronically, a world in which light and darkness are divided by a small number of keystrokes or even the click of a mouse, a world in which what you see is determined much more by the perceptions of your heart than the function of your eyes—in this world

we must make our use of technology and media a holy sacrament.

When we engage with this world through digital devices, we must take every opportunity to “formally take the hand of God and feel His divine power” as He alters our vision to see things as they really are. When we are discerning the myriad of messages that swirl around us every day, we must create those sacramental conditions on a moment-to-moment basis. This means that we must not take our souls to places where the Spirit cannot follow. We must not find ourselves in circumstances that the Holy Ghost cannot abide.

We must be watchful of our agency in each moment because it is often the unassuming and unprepared-for moments of our lives that have the biggest consequences. Such a moment came for me when I was eighteen. I was participating in the Utah High School State Debate Tournament, and I met my husband for the first time. There are various versions of that day’s events, depending upon if you ask my husband or me. One thing we do agree on is that there was a note—and we probably only agree on that because I still have it.

It is glorious and in a 1980s context that I think only people in their forties can truly understand. This note was our first communication. It reads:

Hello. I think you are beautiful. If you think you are beautiful say hello and I will be your slave for life.

And it is signed, “The Man in the Black Suit.”

Though this note was mysterious, exciting, and more than a little bit silly at the time, it has become holy to me in the context of the rest of my life. This was the beginning of my most important relationship. This represents the point in which my family began. This piece of paper was present at the moment that made all the difference in who I am today.

Our communication now is far more mundane, and, like much of your communication,

it comes in bursts of 144 characters or fewer. “Love you” is a common message, as is “I’m here.” To me, our text messages are just as holy as that first note, because they represent consecrated efforts to serve, cheer, comfort, and care for one another. While that first note represented exciting possibilities, these daily missives demonstrate the extraordinary reality of a family unit that tries (and sometimes succeeds) through faith, covenants, and divine promises to become something greater than the members of the family are as individuals.

Our texts are sacramental to me because they are evidence of a partnership between imperfect people and a perfect Deity who is active in our efforts to improve the daily condition of our souls. We facilitate this improvement through conversations, sometimes through texts, sometimes through emails, and often even in person.

The tools of technology that surround us are easily tasked to our benefit and refinement when they facilitate conversations rather than simply transport communications. A conversation, by definition, is an interchange—a back and forth or give and take in which we listen and respond. The best conversations that we have often become moments of private repentance, because it is often during conversations that we change our minds, find a new path, or decide to do better. The changes we make to our souls in these moments are usually small, simple, incremental, comforting, and productive.

You can often tell if the media and technology in your life are having a positive or negative effect on your soul by the quality of the media conversations you are having. We should regularly ask ourselves three questions:

1. Am I having media conversations, or am I simply consuming the media?

As a media scholar, I can tell you that simply consuming media messages is one of the most destructive things we can do to

ourselves. The changes that unchallenged consumption has on your soul are also small, simple, and incremental but oriented toward your eventual destruction.

2. What conversations am I having about media with my family and those closest to me?

Any media practice that discourages conversations with others or is focused inwardly on your appetites rather than outwardly on others will rob you of your faith and prove debilitating to your soul.

3. What am I doing to improve the conversations around me when I use media to communicate?

Remember, you can find ways and you can go to places and you can create circumstances in which you can unite symbolically with your Heavenly Father. In so doing, you can gain moment-to-moment access to His power.

As I said before, I know that you are good. Your potential for greatness and beauty and everything exciting and happy and wonderful is palpable to me and almost overwhelming. However, I also know that many of you now, and all of you eventually, will come to a place of trial and desperation. That is the moment in which I hope your faith is sufficient for you to ask for your own miracle.

When I had been married for ten years, I reached the shores of my own personal Red Sea. My thwarted desire to become a mother had slowly turned my gaze inward and changed my vision until I began to see only bitter disappointment. Wanting a family is certainly not an inappropriate desire, but the focus of my wanting was inward on what I was lacking and on what I believed heaven was denying me.

My frustration began to have a tremendous impact on my faith. I was no longer in a position to receive answers to my prayers because my gaze was locked on my discontent and my struggle to push that discontent further and further inside my broken heart. Feeling cut off

from God, my prayers became mechanical, as I feared even asking for what I wanted most.

I know that “soul searching” is usually the prescription that we receive in such circumstances, but I had searched my soul and found no solutions. However, a gentle bit of family inspiration led my husband and me to change our gaze and seek the vision of the Lord. We resolved to look outward to the souls of those around us. We threw ourselves into our Church callings, reasoning that if we were faithful in our responsibilities we could at least feel comfortable as we approached the throne of God and asked for a miracle.

That is when I learned that the primary way that our Heavenly Father delivers miracles is through the souls of other beings. We have a familiar term for those beings—we call them angels. In this circumstance, my angel’s name was Julia Mattson, and it turns out that the answer to my prayers wasn’t found through soul searching but through visiting teaching. Julia was a medical student at the University of Illinois and my visiting teaching companion. Her inspired questioning, patient listening, and knowledge of medical practices and insurance company peculiarities opened the door to precisely the miracle I had been seeking. Because of Julia Mattson, the right doctors were found, the proper measures were taken, and whispered prayers were answered.

Our twin daughters were born the following year at the end of my first semester as a professor at BYU. They arrived two months early. They were in the neonatal intensive care unit; they were in heavily monitored incubators; and they were fighting to breathe, even to live. Our loved ones were deeply concerned for us and for them, but my husband and I were happy—even fearless in the face of these challenges. We had experienced our own personal parting of the Red Sea; we knew we had entered our own promised land.

Your promised lands await you, but faith is required to get there—and that faith must be

developed through your everyday practices in your everyday world. That world of yours is filled with mountains of information and floods of messages that vie for your attention and present unprecedented challenges. But really, it is still just a matter of agency, just as it always has been. And I have faith in you.

- Choose to be a record keeper: it will build your faith and the faith of those around you.
- Choose to engage in active media conversations and avoid passive media consumption.
- Choose to consecrate your every day—your thoughts, communications, and actions.
- Choose to look outward in service to others for answers to your prayers.
- Choose to “find ways and go to places and create circumstances where [you] can unite symbolically with [our Father] and . . . gain access to His power” to help you navigate through the choices and challenges of your generation.

For this is life eternal, that you in your world, with the tools of your day and the practices of your everyday life—that *you* will come to know the true and living God, and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent (see John 17:3).

Of this I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Tara Parker-Pope, “The Kids Are More Than All Right,” *New Times Magazine*, 2 February 2012; well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/the-kids-are-more-than-all-right.
2. See “TD Ameritrade Survey: Gen Y Saving More Rigorously for Retirement Than Their Parents and Grandparents,” 20 December 2011; www.amtd.com/newsroom/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=634506.
3. See Eric B. Hekler, Christopher D. Gardner, and Thomas N. Robinson, “Effects of a College Course About Food and Society on Students’ Eating Behaviors,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 38, no. 5 (May 2010): 543–47.
4. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 3.
5. Holland, *Of Souls*, 11.
6. See Spencer W. Kimball, “The Angels May Quote from It,” *New Era*, October 1975, 4–5.
7. Anne Creager, Blog: “This Home Is Filled with Love and Dreams,” 15 August 2009; www.wardandannecreager.blogspot.com/2009/08/august-15-2009.html.
8. Holland, *Of Souls*, 27–28; emphasis added.