

# *Recognizing and Understanding the Spirit at BYU*

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## **I. Introduction**

My family thinks that I am somewhat obsessive about all things BYU. For example, I go to sleep every night on a Y-logoed pillowcase, head out to my car each morning through a door adorned with a large magnetic Y, fly a large Y flag on my front porch on BYU game days, and display numerous BYU-themed posters around our home. These posters generally celebrate historic BYU coaches, athletes, and events, such as BYU's 1984 national championship in football, the 2006 John Beck to Jonny Harline winning touchdown pass against the University of Utah, and a certain BYU basketball national player of the year in 2011 known simply as "the Jimmer" to those who adored him. I love BYU. It is a spectacular place to study and to work.

Like many of you, I have a long, varied, and personally rewarding association with BYU:

- My mother was a freshman at BYU around 1950. At that time BYU had only a few thousand students and was housed in a small collection of buildings mostly clustered on the southwest corner of campus. As you know, BYU was and continues to be a work in progress.
- My first recollection of BYU was watching its fast-paced 1966 NIT basketball championship team when I was only fourteen years old.

- Although I am a fifth-generation Mormon and a descendant of nineteenth-century pioneer stock, I was the first member of my extended family to actually graduate from BYU.

I later became a "double Cougar" when I graduated with the third class of BYU's law school. One of my most treasured mementos from the law school is a photograph of Rex E. Lee handing me my law degree diploma in 1978. In my view, Rex was the finest lawyer of his generation.

As an undergraduate student at BYU, I met my wonderful wife, Dottie, in a BYU family home evening group. We have been happily married for nearly forty-two years. All of our four children graduated from BYU and married fellow Cougars. We have fourteen grandchildren now—all hoping for the day when they might get to "rise and shout"<sup>1</sup> as students at this prestigious university.

To cap it all off, for nearly thirty years I have had the great privilege of working as an attorney for BYU in the Office of the General Counsel. Some may wonder why BYU needs so many highly capable attorneys and support staff members. I can only tell you that we live in legally

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*Michael R. Orme, assistant to the president and general counsel at BYU, delivered this devotional address on June 5, 2018.*

perilous times and that the legal professionals at BYU are working hard and effectively behind the scenes to advance and protect BYU and its standards, values, and assets. I am really proud of all that this great collegial group has accomplished.

## II. BYU Is a Special Place

For me, being employed at any institution of higher education would be a noble calling. Those of us associated with American higher education get to wake up every workday with an extraordinary opportunity to advance the greater good of society. Working together, students, faculty, administration, and staff help prepare the rising generation with the education and skills they will need to improve the world and to enhance their chances for happy and abundant lives. That said, I believe studying or working at BYU is a singular opportunity. Certainly, by any secular standard, BYU is an outstanding, nationally recognized university. However, what makes it unique in all the world and what draws to it special attention and scrutiny is its vitally important mission to help build the kingdom of God.

Consider, for example, these sentences from the BYU mission statement, which was approved by Church prophets, seers, and revelators in 1981:

*The mission of Brigham Young University—founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life. . . .*

*We believe the earnest pursuit of this institutional mission can have a strong effect on the course of higher education and will greatly enlarge Brigham Young University's influence in a world we wish to improve.<sup>2</sup>*

Frankly, this is the highest and best mission statement of all the great universities of the world. This isn't just an institutional mission; it is an individual mission, and it concerns each one of us who is part of this marvelous campus community. But just exactly how will this great mission be achieved? It can only be achieved by the campus community and will take a lot of hard work, time, and inspiration. At BYU we often speak of the

combination of study and faith<sup>3</sup>—or secular and spiritual knowledge—as the key components in moving forward the mission of BYU. Today, since we are gathered in a devotional setting, I would like to focus on the spiritual dimension of revelation in BYU's mission fulfillment.

## III. The Importance of Personal Revelation

In one of his addresses to the Church in the April 2018 general conference, President Russell M. Nelson stated:

*One of the things the Spirit has repeatedly impressed upon my mind since my new calling as President of the Church is how willing the Lord is to reveal His mind and will. The privilege of receiving revelation is one of the greatest gifts of God to His children.<sup>4</sup>*

We all have a great need throughout our lives to obtain God's guidance as we attempt to navigate the many challenges and questions that come to us. However, in no stage of life is the need for heavenly direction more important than in the formative college and young single adult years, particularly in those first few years spent living away from home and family. Some of the foundational questions that will likely confront a young single adult at this time of life include the following:

1. What are my fundamental standards, values, and beliefs? In short, who am I?
2. What kind of person should I marry and partner with—in this life and the next?
3. What exactly will be my life's work, and how will I contribute to make the world a better place?

In a very real and profound sense, once these decisions have been made, I can tell you that the rest of one's life is something of an epilogue. It is therefore impossible to underestimate the importance of these decisions for our future well-being and happiness. Fortunately, as baptized and confirmed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have the gift of the Holy Ghost to be our "constant companion"<sup>5</sup> and to

reveal to us “the truth of all things.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, God has promised us that He is anxious to help us with the wisdom to address the perplexing issues of our lives<sup>7</sup> if we seek Him out<sup>8</sup> and are willing and worthy to both receive and act upon His guidance.

Prophets both ancient and modern have shared with us their insights into how this revelatory process may play out in our individual lives. The Old Testament prophet Elijah observed that the voice of the Lord is not in the wind or in an earthquake or in a fire but rather in “a still small voice.”<sup>9</sup> Some revelations are made known to us in sudden moments of inspired insight or perhaps in an unusual and vivid dream. On the other hand, some promptings come more subtly.

President Gordon B. Hinckley taught how we can recognize the promptings of the Spirit. He said:

*Does it persuade one to do good, to rise, to stand tall, to do the right thing, to be kind, to be generous? . . .*

*. . . If you are doing the right thing and if you are living the right way, you will know in your heart what the Spirit is saying to you.*<sup>10</sup>

BYU President Kevin J. Worthen has emphasized that inspiring or experiential learning—that is to say, literally learning by doing—is an integral part of the BYU experience. One of the most important reasons why we agreed to be sent to this earth was to learn by our own experiences how God individually communicates with us. As our Father in Heaven, God knows how best to communicate with each of us individually, one by one. He is also interested in and involved in the very details of our lives—right down to our moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings. I want to share with you how I came to understand the truth of this reality when I was an eighteen-year-old freshman at BYU.

During my freshman year at BYU, I resided in room T-417 of Deseret Towers. By the way, Deseret Towers no longer exists and has long since been replaced by new, better student on-campus housing. However, my old dorm room and the experiences I had there still exist vividly and affectionately in my mind.

My undergraduate days were part of a historical era that is sometimes referred to as the “long sixties”—the period from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Parenthetically, they say that in order to remember the 1960s, you have to at least be in your sixties. I can tell you that this is true in my case. This was a time of brilliant rock-and-roll music, of unwise experimentation by young people with premarital sex and illegal drugs, and of extreme student unrest at many colleges and universities across America, mostly in opposition to the war in Vietnam.

At the same time, BYU was a hotbed of conservative calm and traditional values—and, for me, serious study—in the midst of these wrenching cultural changes around the rest of the country. Indeed, as I have grown older and matured somewhat, I have appreciated even more the protected environment at BYU when I was a young and impressionable undergraduate. I predict that many of you students will come to feel the same way after you complete your studies at BYU and make your way to serve in a larger world.

Because I had ambitions to be a serious student and to get good grades to qualify for graduate or professional school, I took every class very seriously—including my religion classes. So late one Saturday night in my dorm room on a very quiet fourth floor in T-Hall, I found myself alone studying the Book of Mormon. I had a midterm test that included 3 Nephi coming up on Monday. I was studying with a determined focus and was carefully rereading 3 Nephi 11.

You may recall that this chapter relates the gathering of the more righteous people to the temple in the land of Bountiful in America after the more wicked part of the people had been destroyed in the tempests, earthquakes, fires, whirlwinds, and physical upheaval following the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. As I read verses 7–10 about Jesus Christ descending out of heaven and appearing to the gathered multitude, I stopped reading, leaned back in my chair, paused, and wondered to myself something like this: “Really? Did a resurrected Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, just miraculously appear out of thin

air and descend out of the sky to minister to a group of pre-Columbian Native Americans? Did this really happen?"

In that moment I honestly and sincerely wanted to know for myself whether or not these things were true. I was totally sincere, but I did not expect to receive a revelation or an answer from God. Nevertheless, in the next moment I had a very surprising and life-changing experience. I experienced a warm, almost burning, sensation that began in my chest and then spread through my body, together with a thought or impression that came to my mind, somehow coming from outside of me, confirming that this event did, in fact, take place exactly as described in the Book of Mormon.

As this palpable sensation passed, my mind rapidly came to a number of profound follow-on conclusions. I had just experienced the promise made by Moroni in Moroni 10:3–5 that the Holy Ghost would make manifest the truth of the Book of Mormon. I now knew for myself that the Book of Mormon was the word of God; that Joseph Smith was a prophet, through whom God had brought forth the Book of Mormon; that the Restoration of the gospel had occurred; that I probably had a role to play in the unfolding of that gospel; and, most important, that Jesus Christ was really alive and that His Atonement was real. In short, I now saw the world and my place in it in a new and wondrous way.

For me, this particular spiritual experience was extraordinary. It was strong, impressive, and quite unexpected. It was also different in kind and degree from the many other and more frequent but less dramatic spiritual experiences that I had had before and that I had after this event. This was more than an inspiration, a thought, or a feeling. It was a physical sensation that was somehow recorded or written in my heart and in my mind in an individualized way that made it more permanent and memorable. Over the years this experience has proven to be something of an anchor to my faith and my trust in God.

As we all know, this world we live in has been purposely designed to challenge us in the choices that we make and in the manner in which we react

to the inevitable adversity that finds us. This mortal experience can take a toll on our testimony and commitment to the gospel. It is precisely in these times of testing that we need to be intellectually honest with ourselves and consciously remember the authentic spiritual experiences we have had. This is part of the sacramental promise that we make to always remember Christ.<sup>11</sup> We should remind ourselves that we really have had these experiences and that, by so remembering, we can be reassured that God is real, that He loves us, and that He will keep the promises He has made with His covenant-keeping people. We can also respond in the affirmative, at any time and in any place, to the provocative question put forth by Alma to the Nephite people in the Book of Mormon:

*And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?<sup>12</sup>*

Heavenly Father is not interested only in our spiritual growth and progress. He also wants us to be happy and successful in achieving our righteous aspirations. He knows that it is through small and seemingly simple things that great things are accomplished.<sup>13</sup>

Some seventeen years after my freshman year at BYU, another miraculous event occurred in my life: I got an offer to come back to work at BYU. I will spare you the details of the ten-year saga of how, with a lot of sacrifice and prayer, this all came about. However, I can assure you that I was absolutely thrilled. Coming from the private practice of law, with all of its attendant pressures of running a small business in a small market in southeast Idaho, I saw BYU as a sort of Garden of Eden for me. In my mind, at BYU my true interests and abilities would be put to the best possible use. There were, of course, a couple of challenges—one of which was to find the right house and the right neighborhood in Provo to raise our young and growing family.

When Dottie and I came back to Provo in June 1988 to do some house hunting, we knew exactly

what we were looking for. We wanted an affordable home to accommodate a family of six in a pleasant, leafy neighborhood close to campus—but not too close—with a good-sized backyard. In addition, we also wanted to have as neighbors other young families stocked with the right age of friends for our children, and we wanted to be close to church and good schools. I guess that, like everyone looking for a new house, we were looking for affordable perfection.

After spending two days with a very patient real estate agent, we found some promising neighborhoods, but there were literally zero houses on the market that fit our wants, needs, and pocket-book. We drove the four hours back to Idaho feeling discouraged, and we resolved that we would find a place to rent and resume our home search after we had relocated to Utah.

That very night, back in Idaho, I had an unusual dream. It was in bright, natural colors with very precise details. In my dream I was walking along a paved path that ran alongside a picturesque, small river. The river was running fast and was lined by big, green trees. It was a perfect, sunny day in June. As I enjoyed this calm and peaceful scene, I noticed that it appeared to be slightly snowing. This was strange, but the snow added to the charm of this beautiful landscape. Big, white flakes were drifting down out of the sky in the middle of summer. When I awoke from this dream, I didn't know its meaning, but I had a reassuring feeling that things were going to work out fine for me and my family with our move to BYU.

Well, we did find a temporary rental and lived there for about fifteen months while we looked high and low from Alpine to Mapleton for the right house. We never found it. Instead, we came across an undeveloped lot in a small, secluded neighborhood in north Provo, located about one mile from the mouth of Provo Canyon and three miles from BYU. The neighborhood was bordered on the west by the Provo River. Interestingly, on the east boundary was a paved bike path running up the canyon to Vivian Park. We ultimately bought the lot, built a house on it, and started our new lives in the Northgate neighborhood. Several

years later, as I was walking along the path near the river in the month of June, I had a feeling of incredible déjà vu come over me. There was a small squall of white cottonwood seeds gently falling off the trees lining the river and collecting on the path. It seemed to be snowing in summer, just as I had dreamed back in Idaho.

It has now been several decades since that long-ago dream and dream fulfillment. Our home and neighborhood turned out to be exactly the right place to raise our family. We have lived by wonderful friends. In fact, it has been nearly perfect—much better than we could have imagined in our house-hunting days. All of this came back to me when President Nelson made the following comments about revelation in his April 2018 Sunday morning general conference address:

*To be sure, there may be times when you feel as though the heavens are closed. But I promise that as you continue to be obedient, expressing gratitude for every blessing the Lord gives you, and as you patiently honor the Lord's timetable, you will be given the knowledge and understanding you seek. Every blessing the Lord has for you—even miracles—will follow. That is what personal revelation will do for you.<sup>14</sup>*

It is reassuring to hear in the words of a modern-day prophet that the Lord continues to be anxious to guide and direct His children in their individual circumstances. President Nelson did note, however, that there may be times when we might feel like the heavens are closed. In addition, the Lord sometimes has a timetable and plan for us that we can understand only in the process of patiently waiting upon the Lord. We need to do our part by being obedient to the commandments, gathering reliable information, and coming to the Lord often with a thoughtful, well-informed plan of our own.<sup>15</sup> While we can be assured that the earnest prayers of our heart are being heard and will be answered, the manner in which they are answered and the timing of when they are answered are in God's hands.

In my experience, the gifts of the Spirit are always forthcoming, promptly and clearly, when

we seek discernment regarding fundamental matters involving right-versus-wrong conduct and in choosing between good and evil and between truth versus error. The Spirit will enlighten us—particularly through our listening to the prophets—as to where to stand in our age of a dramatic and ever-accelerating gulf between the children of light and the children of darkness throughout the world. That noted, we must also acknowledge that the Spirit does not come at our command.

So what should we do in those circumstances when the revelation we so earnestly desire just doesn't seem to be coming? There may come times and important decisions when the Lord will expect us to act without explicit direction by using our best, informed judgment and agency wisely. If we are keeping the commandments and really seeking the Lord's will and not our own purely personal agenda, these decisions and actions tend to turn out for our good and are often ratified by the Lord. Understanding the nuances of how we communicate with God through the Holy Ghost is a lifetime challenge. However, given the spiritually dangerous times in which we live, there is no more important task at hand for us individually and as a people.

#### IV. Conclusion and Testimony

By any measurement, I am in the twilight of my career at BYU. I have experienced and loved the Spirit of the Y. I have also seen in a number of ways and at several levels the hand of heaven moving, in often unexpected ways, to protect and

preserve the mission of BYU, even after all that we at BYU could do. BYU is an important part of the Restoration and will continue to play a vitally important role in the building up of the kingdom of God. I testify that it is a shining city on a hill and that it must be protected and preserved. The divine destiny of BYU will continue to be fulfilled as we, a campus community in Christ, listen to and act upon the spiritual impressions that come to us in these latter days. Of this I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. "The Cougar Song," Clyde D. Sandgren, words and music, 1932; copyright by his son, Clyde D. Sandgren Jr., 1947.
2. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1, 2.
3. See D&C 109:7, 14.
4. Russell M. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2018.
5. D&C 121:46; see also D&C 20:77, 79.
6. Moroni 10:5.
7. See James 1:5.
8. See Matthew 7:7–8.
9. 1 Kings 19:12; see also verse 11.
10. *TGBH*, 261.
11. See D&C 20:77, 79.
12. Alma 5:26.
13. See 1 Nephi 16:29.
14. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church."
15. See D&C 9:8.