

Prepare to Make a Difference

TIMOTHY J. POWERS

Today as I stand before you, I am humbled by the invitation to share my thoughts and bear my testimony of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It has been mentioned that I am in my 31st year here at Brigham Young University, and I can truly say that this opportunity to address you has never been on my radar screen. Indeed, I have comfortably sat in the audience for more than three decades now and have never ceased to be inspired each week by the music and the spoken word. Rosalind, your selection today was marvelous, and the choir has set the tone and tenor of the message that I wish to share with you.

First let me tell you marvelous students how awed I am to be in your presence. Do you know who you are? You come to this university from all 50 states and from 120 countries around the world. You come from big cities and small towns, from farms and foreign capitols. Seventy-five percent of the young men and 12 percent of the young women have served missions throughout the world for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Almost three-quarters of this student body speak fluently a language other than English. You are literally an “army of God” in that most of you have given two years of your life to preach, teach, testify, and expound on the life and mission of the Only Begotten of the Father,

the Redeemer of the World, the Lamb of God, our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. You have given freely of your time, energy, talents, and resources to declare to the world that He lives!

You are as bright and talented as any students we have ever had at this great university. Your college boards and your grade point averages rank you among the best college students on any university campus in America. Year after year you place BYU in the top 10 universities in the land for students who go on to obtain advanced degrees. You are highly sought after by recruiters in science and industry. You later become our bishops and stake presidents, our Relief Society and Young Women presidents. You are schooled in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and His image is in your countenance. You are obedient to the laws and commandments of our Father in Heaven; you have exercised faith in the redemption of Him who created you; you have experienced “a change of heart.” You “have felt to sing the song of redeeming love,” and, like Alma, I would ask, “Can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26).

Timothy J. Powers was coach of the BYU men's swim team when this devotional address was given on 25 October 2005.

In 1997, while building a deck on my home, I received a call from a stake president who resides in Argentina. He had dropped by the athletic department and wanted to visit with me about our swimming program and the possibility of athletic scholarships for swimmers from his stake. I told him that I was quite dirty from the construction project I was working on, but if he would come to my home on Sunday, I would be glad to visit with him.

When he arrived he brought with him a young former bishop from his stake who was at that time doing graduate work at BYU and was to act as his translator. A few days earlier we had participated in a sesquicentennial celebration of the arrival of the Saints into Utah. The celebration took place at what is now LaVell Edwards Stadium, and President Hinckley was in attendance and spoke to us. At the end of the evening all the missionaries from the MTC marched into the stadium. It was an electrifying moment for all of us as we realized that we have enough missionaries around the world to fill that stadium. When I asked my visitors if they had been able to attend the celebration, the young bishop responded that it was a direct fulfillment of his patriarchal blessing. He stated that his blessing received many years earlier had specified that he would study abroad and that he would behold an “army of God.” As the missionaries marched in, he realized that that specific blessing had been fulfilled.

Brothers and sisters, you are in a real sense a part of that same army of God. Have you wondered why the Lord through His appointed leaders would set aside the sacred offerings of the faithful members of the Church—indeed, the “widow’s mite”—to provide each of you with an opportunity to grow intellectually and spiritually? Have you wondered why He would create a sanctuary where you can develop and nurture your talents while being taught and tutored at the feet of apostles and prophets? You have been given much, and the

Lord expects you to be “stripling warriors,” as were the sons of Helaman.

There has never been a time in our history when you were needed more. I am convinced that you have been held in reserve for this very time when your talents, abilities, and testimonies are most needed on the earth. You can truly make a difference to this generation and greatly affect the generations to come. For some of you it will be on a public stage, and for others it will be in quiet settings where your personal influence, kind word, or example is most needed. You will be called on to raise a righteous generation, and you will draw on the powers of heaven in your efforts to overcome the world. Your greatest challenge will not be persecution or the cold and bleak conditions your ancestors faced; yours will be the challenge of success and affluence.

While you are here I hope that you will take every opportunity to match your spiritual growth and knowledge with your intellectual development. Our libraries on this campus hold millions of volumes of the collected knowledge of the civilized world. Our faculty will guide you in how to apply this knowledge to your chosen field, and the Spirit will give you the wisdom to use these tools in serving your fellowman.

Since my expertise is in coaching and mentoring young athletes, I am sometimes asked by faculty members and colleagues about what role athletics or being a member of the swimming and diving team plays in this university setting and what gospel principles are learned that are preparing students for the challenges that face this generation. Let me try to answer this question for you.

It is my experience that being a swimmer on a highly competitive team runs counter to popular culture. In a world of instant gratification and shortcuts, swimmers have to work first and wait for the results. Success comes only after the work has been done. As we compete, weaknesses in body or technique become

apparent, and through hard work and diligence these weaknesses become strengths.

You must challenge yourself daily to be the best you can be. Constant effort yields perfection in a skill and a glimpse of the capacity our Heavenly Father has endowed us with. Trust and coachability are akin to faith and obedience, and, when tested, prepare you—and your confidence waxes strong. Setbacks or defeats, like victories, are never a permanent condition but rather an opportunity to gather more information to help meet oncoming challenges. Having completed the experience, you are ready to lead and be led, to use your skills to bless others.

I have always felt that my swimmers are stripling warriors. Yearly we watch them with excitement as they receive their mission calls and march forward in faith to bring the gospel message to the world. I love these young men as they return to our team. They have grown in their love for the Savior and for their fellowman. They have spent two years thinking about everyone but themselves. They know how to put their arm around a young freshman who is away from home for the first time and offer reassurance and love. We are a missionary team, and I feel that is our greatest strength.

Today I will introduce you to three former Brigham Young University swimmers who are setting examples and influencing others by how they live their lives.

The first former Cougar swimmer is Lieutenant Colonel Gary Reynolds. Gary has served as a bishop and a branch president and is a navigator on a C-130 aircraft that has been equipped for special operations and provides fire support for Army Special Forces units engaged in combat. When he showed up on the pool deck last summer during our swim camps, he told me that his experience here at BYU made all the difference in his life. He wanted me to have this coin, which you can see on the screen. Each member of his unit

carries one just like it every day to remind them who they are and what they are about.

Gary's crew has served two tours in Iraq and two tours in Afghanistan. Although stationed in Florida, they have supported the 5th and 19th Army Special Forces Groups and provided lifesaving cover for these heroic soldiers. Some of you here may have fathers or other relatives that serve in the 19th Special Forces, as they are home based in Utah. Many of our local servicemen may indeed owe their lives to the fire support Gary's plane has provided.

As you can see, the engraving on the coin is based on Ephesians 6:11–18, which reads:

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;

And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit.

I was deeply touched by this unit's commitment to live righteous lives so that they might be an effective tool in defending our country. Gary served his mission in Hong Kong and has served in the U.S. Air Force now for more than 20 years. Gary is still being an influence for good.

The second former swimmer I want to introduce to you is Billy Betz. Billy was named National Swimmer of the Week during his senior year but has excelled much more outside the pool in his service to others. He served his mission in El Paso, Texas, and upon returning home felt that his service was not over but just beginning. He was excited about giving Christlike service and reaching out to those in need.

He spent the first summer after his mission working at a small medical clinic in El Salvador, suturing wounds and helping to deliver babies. He was struck by the total lack of basic medical supplies and the enormous need in the local villages. Billy has always had a “can-do” attitude and used this challenge as an opportunity to make a difference. He returned home and began visiting doctors in Provo, Salt Lake City, and Logan in an effort to collect medical supplies. After buying an old van with holes in the floorboards, he and his friend drove eight days to El Salvador to deliver the much-needed supplies. The van overheated and broke down many times along the way. Finally, after much prayer, the heavens opened, and a cooling rain made their delivery possible. They were able to inoculate hundreds of children and bring desperately needed medicine and supplies to those humble villagers. The following year Billy returned with two loaded semitrucks. This time they brought an X-ray machine, a mammography machine, hospital beds, and much more. What a blessing Billy and his friends have been to the people of El Salvador.

During his senior year Billy heard of a village in Mexico that had been flooded, and he organized a relief effort with some of his friends. They collected clothing and food and with a good number of trucks and trailers delivered the provisions to the ravaged town. Billy and his bride, Amy, are now living in Southern California, where he teaches early-morning seminary. A criterion for the corporate

position that he ultimately took was that he would have the time he needed to continue to make a difference.

Billy took seriously the parable of the sheep and the goats as taught by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 25:34–37, 40:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me. . . .

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? . . .

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Billy’s service drew national and international attention, and he became the recipient of the first-ever Coca Cola All-American Service Award and the John Wooden Cup, representing Athletes for a Better World. When I was in Southern California for the presentation of the Wooden Cup, Billy asked me to come and bear my testimony to his 6 a.m. seminary class. Not one of his students knew that Billy had been a champion athlete or that he was the recipient of the most prestigious service awards in athletics. Billy didn’t need hoopla. His service and the knowledge that his offering was accepted by the Lord were all the accolades he needed.

The last former swimmer that I wish to highlight is Richard Barnes. Richard is an attorney in Salt Lake City. In 1996 he swam on our Western Athletic Conference championship team, where he was an All-Conference performer. He served in the Micronesia-Guam

Mission. Some of you may have followed his story on the local news this summer. He and his brother David, an emergency room physician, were attempting to become the first-ever swimmers from the state of Utah to swim the English Channel.

Since their swims, Richard and David have been in demand for youth firesides. One of the things that Richard is quick to point out is that the Channel swim didn't start at Shakespeare Beach. In reality it started many years before in developing the work ethic and dealing with the demands of being a competitive distance swimmer. While here at BYU, Richard daily swam the equivalent of a marathon. That means four hours a day with heart rates in excess of 150 beats per minute. Later, as he and his brother prepared for the "Mount Everest" of swims, it meant putting their bodies into Jordanelle or Deer Creek Reservoir in the month of May when the water was 55 degrees and swimming for six hours. That would be enough to put most of us off. This was done in addition to their regular training so that they could prepare for the 60-degree temperatures they would face in the waters off England.

In fact, the Channel Swimming Association will not allow swimmers to attempt the crossing unless they have proven the ability to withstand at least six hours of swimming in such frigid water. They are allowed to wear a Speedo and a pair of goggles and to use some "Channel grease," a mixture of petroleum jelly and lanolin that aids in reducing the kind of chafe that rubs you raw around your neck and armpits. By the time they had pushed off the shore at Shakespeare Beach at 3:30 a.m., they had prepared as though their lives literally depended upon it. The sacrifices of time and training had been made, airline tickets had been purchased, the boats and support teams were standing by, prayers were offered, and, I submit, their confidence waxed strong in the face of the task before them because they had paid the price.

Elder Henry B. Eyring spoke in the general conference of the Church just a few weeks ago about spiritual preparedness. He said:

What we will need in our day of testing is a spiritual preparation. It is to have developed faith in Jesus Christ so powerful that we can pass the test of life upon which everything for us in eternity depends. . . .

. . . Learning to start early and to be steady are the keys to spiritual preparation. Procrastination and inconsistency are its mortal enemies.

[*"Spiritual Preparedness: Start Early and Be Steady," Ensign, November 2005, 37, 38*]

Richard and David know about such preparation.

In the priesthood session of the same conference, Elder David A. Bednar spoke of preparation as well. In giving counsel to young men about preparing for missions, Elder Bednar stated, "My dear young brethren, the single most important thing you can do to prepare for a call to serve is to *become* a missionary long before you *go* on a mission" (*"Becoming a Missionary," Ensign, November 2005, 45*).

Richard and David are swimmers. They have grown up as swimmers, and it is woven into the fabric of their lives—much like the gospel of Jesus Christ is part and parcel of who we are. Can you imagine them heading out to sea with no training and no preparation? Can you imagine Richard swimming for 16 hours and 45 minutes—fighting currents, tides, hypothermia, and discouragement; his swim covering 36 miles of wind-tossed sea; his rest only to take nourishment while treading water—without any kind of preparation?

My swimmers have come to know that you can spend all night on your knees asking for the Lord to help you with a test or a swim race, but He expects you to prepare and do your part. Think of the counsel the Lord gave to Oliver Cowdery through the Prophet Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 9, verse 7:

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.”

In becoming the first person in the state of Utah to successfully swim the English Channel, Richard could not do it alone. His wife, Darcy, afforded him time away from his family to train and was willing to commit family resources because she believed in her husband. She was onboard in every sense of the word. She was there along with his brother John offering encouragement and reassurance. Richard’s brother Dave, who also dreamed of swimming the Channel, trained by his side month after month. Although he finally succumbed to hypothermia and had to abandon the attempt, it must be noted that Richard’s victory over the Channel would not have happened if it had not been for his brother Dave. This is always the case. We can always accomplish much more together than we can alone. Let us look for ways to strengthen our brothers and sisters, and we will all rejoice together as the Barnes family has.

I have been asked by many if I was surprised that Richard was able to conquer the English Channel. My answer is no. Richard Barnes knows how to set a goal and keep his eye on it. I have watched him work toward goals for many years and know of his willingness to put in the work and not become discouraged when at first he doesn’t succeed.

There were occasions during the swim when Richard would swim for hours without progressing toward the opposite shore. This can often be the case in life. Richard shared with me that at the three-hour mark he was quite discouraged from “breathing diesel fumes and being tossed about by the waves.” His stomach finally gave out, and he threw up violently. He thought for a second that this was surely the end. His brother John calmly looked at him and said, “Take your time.” His calmness reassured Richard. A minute or so later Richard began swimming anew, and thus began the best por-

tion of his entire swim. A well-placed word of encouragement can make all the difference.

As a former bishop and as a coach, I counsel ward members and my swimmers to make their plans and dreams big enough to include the Lord. Richard Barnes has done just that. I would relate to you many of the insights that Richard has shared with me about gospel principles that took on new meaning during this life-altering swim, but I will leave that to him. I think he has earned the right to share what he has learned through his labors. I mentioned that this swim was the Mount Everest of swims. Mount Everest has been conquered by approximately 1,500 climbers and is the pinnacle of mountaineering. The English Channel has recorded only 680 swimmers accomplishing its crossing since the first successful attempt in the 1880s. It gives me great satisfaction to know that the first person from Utah to have his name recorded among the great long-distance swimmers is a former Cougar swimmer and BYU graduate. Richard Barnes is here with us today. Richard, would you please stand so that our students and faculty can recognize you?

Finally, brothers and sisters, I cannot let this opportunity pass without adding my testimony that Jesus is the Christ. He lives! I know this truth with every fiber of my being. We are His, bought with a price. Through Him all things are possible. He is Alpha and Omega, the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, and the Messiah. He loves you and me.

I would not be here today if it wasn’t for my beautiful wife, Patcee, who is seated here on the stand. She is the love of my life, and she introduced me to the gospel of Jesus Christ. She exemplifies the gospel in action. She inspires me to strive to be the best priesthood holder I can be. Early on she brought the Lord into our relationship, and that has made all the difference in our marriage and in my life. She looks for opportunities to serve our neighbors.

She is sensitive to the needs of others. Isn't that what the Lord has asked us to do?

It is my prayer that while you are here at Brigham Young University you will grow intellectually and spiritually and that you will sharpen your gospel skills and increase your testimony through service in your student wards and associations. Continue to be disciples of Jesus Christ and examples of the "true believers" described in Acts 2:41–42:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. [See also Alma 46:14–15 and 4 Nephi 1:36–37]

If you will do this, the Lord will have in you a mighty force for good. You then will be prepared to make a difference. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.