

Stand Up Straight, Smile, and Remember Who You Are

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Over the past several decades my wife, Lisa, faithfully stood at our door to send our children off as they left our home for school. Without exception, she would call to them—usually in her pajamas—and say, “Stand up straight, smile, and remember who you are! You’re a Richardson, a child of God!”

Without taking a breath, she would then say our family motto: “Reverence. Respect. Responsibility. Resourcefulness.”

And then, with the excitement of a cheerleader, she would roll her arms and say the final word: “Reesolve.”

Oh, but wait, she wasn’t quite finished. She would cap it all off with an enthusiastic “Be a light!”

After our children heard this charge nearly every day of their young lives, is it any wonder that this ritual has been forever engrained in their memories—and in the memories of their friends and quite possibly of our neighbors?

With this image fresh in your mind, I would like to focus on the first part of my wife’s simple but profound instruction: “Stand up straight, smile, and remember who you are.” BYU has impacted my ability to stand up straight, has influenced why I smile, and has greatly molded who I am today. I have been privileged to be part of this

university as a student, a professor, and now an administrator for more than three decades.

I know what you are thinking, and yes, three decades is a very long time—and yes, I am old. After all these years you would think that I would know my way around campus, which I do; understand more about honor and integrity from the Honor Code, which I do; know all of “The Cougar Fight Song,” which I do; and know and enjoy BYU’s history and culture, which I do. Yet there are certain things about BYU that I earnestly hope I will *never* forget.

President Ezra Taft Benson once said, “It is our privilege to store our memories with good and great thoughts and bring them out on the stage of our minds at will.”¹ Sadly, remembering even the good and great thoughts can be difficult.

I am confident that you, of all people, understand this well. After all, you have been taking quizzes and midterms lately and probably know that sick feeling in which your head is like a balloon with a small hole and all your preparation at the library is leaking out at an alarming rate as you make your way to the Testing Center. Oh sure,

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you try and pump your head up again by quickly reading through the stack of note cards as you walk, but you know deep down that all the good stuff is leaking out just as fast as you are putting it in.

There is great power in knowledge, but it seems that there is even greater power in remembering. President Spencer W. Kimball once asked, “When you look in the dictionary for the most important word, do you know what it is?”

He then answered, “It could be *remember*.”²

With everything you have tucked away, there are some things you should never forget—like wisdom. More than knowledge and facts, wisdom deals with applied knowledge coupled with experience and good sense. It was Alma who admonished his son Helaman, “Remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth.”³ No wonder President Kimball said, “Our greatest need is to remember,” and emphasized that “*remember* is the word. *Remember* is the program.”⁴

It is not unusual for people to use strategies or objects to help them remember things that are important. Everyone knows about tying a string around one’s finger, but I have never met anyone who has actually used this technique. Others use rhyming patterns, flash cards, repetition, or other devices to create, categorize, or even trigger a memory. Some people save mementos. More than just a keepsake or a souvenir, a memento is an object with the purpose of helping one to remember. In fact, the word *memento* comes from Latin, in which it literally means “remember!” (with an exclamation point, no less).

I would like to share four personal BYU mementos that continue to help me in my quest to stand up straight, smile, and remember who I am. I realize that some of you may be thinking, “What is the value of this little show-and-tell?”

Consider Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s counsel as my response:

We who have already walked that portion of life’s path that you are now on try to call back to you something of what we have learned. We shout encouragement. We

*try to warn of pitfalls or perils along the way. Where possible we try to walk with you and keep you close to our side.*⁵

So let’s take a walk together.

Memento 1: A Chemistry 105 Exam

One treasured memento from my BYU past is a Chemistry 105 exam. In truth, of all the hundreds of papers, quizzes, and exams from my undergraduate degree, this is the only academic memento I saved from my *entire* undergraduate experience.

I vividly remember watching the professor hand a big stack of exams to the person on the front row and say, “Find your exam and pass the pile along.” This was long before FERPA laws protected privacy, so public humiliation or adoration (depending on how you performed) was always a looming possibility. I hastily retrieved my exam and hurried out of class.

As I was walking out of the building, I quickly glanced at the exam and saw the number 76 scrawled across the top in red pen—76? I quickly stuffed the exam into my backpack. I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach. My mind raced and I started thinking that obviously I wasn’t smart enough to be at BYU, for surely everyone else in the class had scored much higher than I had. I envisioned my fellow classmates celebrating together at the Cougareat and toasting their success with chocolate milk.

The number 76 kept flashing over and over in my mind as I walked to my apartment by going down the stairs south of campus leading to the Botany Pond. Nearing the bottom of the stairs, I pulled the dreaded exam from my backpack, hoping that somehow I had read my score incorrectly. But sure enough, that red 76 was still there.

Then I saw something I hadn’t noticed before. My heart raced when I saw a tiny minus sign. You see, I didn’t get a 76 on this exam, I *missed* 76! And sure enough, in the corner was the number 24! Surely this is the lowest score in BYU history given to someone who actually tried to do well.

I was so stunned that my first impulse was to jump into the Botany Pond, swim to the bottom, and hide from the entire world. Little did I know that the Botany Pond was less than three feet deep, so that plan would have also received a score of 24, as it too would have been doomed to failure.

Now you may ask, “Why in the world did you save that particular exam as your only memento of your BYU undergraduate academic experience?”

I saved it because this experience impacted and shaped me in significant ways—ways I hope to never forget. I am not proud of failing—or of failing with such absolute certainty. What happened next, however, was something that I hope I will always remember. Somehow I resisted the urge to pack all my belongings into my car, drive home, and leave BYU and all my humiliation in the rear-view mirror. It was during this time that I came across a quote that read, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”⁶

My mother used to tell her children that we were of “pioneer stock.” I wasn’t sure if I really knew what that meant when I was younger, but I did know the stories about crossing the plains. They were usually filled with unbearable challenges, setbacks, and seemingly impossible odds. And at the end of the day the pioneers circled their wagons, built a fire, sang, and danced—or at least that is the way I remembered the stories. And what was their theme song? “Come, Come, Ye Saints.”

I always thought this was a strange song for those who were hungry, fatigued, and at the brink of devastation. One verse, for example, reads, “And should we die before our journey’s through, Happy day! All is well!”⁷

All is well? Anybody could see that all was *not* well. And just who were these overly optimistic people anyway? Apparently they were my people. And now, years later, they help me to remember just who I am and what it means to be of pioneer stock.

Years ago I was sitting on the stand in a chapel in Europe singing “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” A leader leaned over and whispered, “You know, the Polish translation of this song is quite different from the English version.”

“Really?” I countered.

“It doesn’t really read, ‘All is well! All is well!’”

I looked at him somewhat surprised.

“The real translation,” he said, “is ‘Not so bad, not so bad.’”⁸

I couldn’t help but quietly chuckle. Then I thought of the pioneers who might not have always described their own circumstances as being “all is well.” But I could see how with their expanded vision and tremendous dedication they could say, “This is not so bad, not so bad,” and then with a deep breath take yet another step and continue to forge on.

Oh, to be of pioneer stock! Regardless of your heritage, we can all be pioneers, as I learned from one of my favorite Primary songs:

*You don't have to push a handcart,
Leave your fam'ly dear,
Or walk a thousand miles or more
To be a pioneer!*

*You do need to have great courage,
Faith to conquer fear,
And work with might for a cause that's right
To be a pioneer!*⁹

Not so bad, not so bad.

I occasionally look at that exam and remember that “failure is not fatal” and that “it is the courage to continue that counts.” I remember that every storm will eventually break if you just hold on long enough. I remember that learning is a process and not an event and that I can do difficult things, even when it takes more time than I have and additional strength and effort. Most important, I am reminded that life is not determined by a singular performance and that there are times when we need, as my wife so eloquently taught our

children, to remember who we are and to stand up straight—no slouching, no shrinking, no wilting. Just stand up straight, smile, remind yourself that it is not so bad, and move on.

Memento 2: Half a Degree

My next memento came from my graduate studies at BYU several years later. Upon receiving my master's degree, we held a family celebration. As I was running out of our home to the party with my new degree in hand, I had an epiphany. Without thinking, I went to the workbench and cut my degree in half. I drove to the party, walked in the door, and handed my wife half of my degree.

She looked somewhat stunned and asked, "What's this?"

"It's my master's degree!" I said.

"You sawed your degree in half?" she asked incredulously.

Because of the look on her face and the sound of her voice, it was only then that I started to realize that this might not have been one of my better ideas. I explained that even though the degree had my name on it, it was just as much hers as it was mine. She had worked just as hard as I had and deserved at least half of the credit.

"But you cut it in half!" she said again.

Now why would I keep half a degree on my shelf? Because I always want to remember that everything worthwhile comes with the help of others. Life is a collaborative endeavor, and success—genuine success—is attributable to a lot more people than just you.

So please ask for help. Look for support. Seek for those who will cheer you on, support you, celebrate with you, and even push you to be more than you are at the moment. Be that person for others.

Karl G. Maeser used to tell the students of Brigham Young Academy, "Be yourself, but always your better self."¹⁰ I feel we need more Karl G. Maesers in our life. We need to smile more, encourage more, and help one another more. This is, after all, who we are.

Memento 3: BYU Foundational Documents

Every fall I read the BYU foundational documents, a compilation of talks about BYU and who we are—or at least who we must become. These include talks by Karl G. Maeser and past BYU presidents from Franklin S. Harris to our current president, Kevin J. Worthen. You will also find the mission statement, *The Aims of a BYU Education*, and many addresses by prophets, seers, and revelators. I read these documents every fall so that I will never forget that at the core of this university are revelations, dreams, and visions.

There is one particular story that I would like to highlight today. In 1915, BYU was in dire financial difficulties and was preparing to sell the very land on which our campus now stands. The commencement speaker, a student named Alfred Kelly, was given an assignment to promote selling the property in his speech, but he was troubled by the idea. Early one morning he walked to the land that was to be sold. He prayed, and then it happened. He saw what he called a "strange vision" with "thousands of young people who approached me, their arms laden with books." Kelly continued:

I turned around to find the area behind me illuminated as well. In that light I saw hundreds of buildings, large and beautiful temples of learning. Those young people passed by me and entered in. Then, with cheerfulness and confidence, they turned toward the east and lifted their eyes heavenward, where, again becoming part of the sunlight, they gradually disappeared from my view.¹¹

He decided to share this experience in his commencement speech instead of promoting the idea of selling the land. After finishing his comments he sat down, and everyone present was silent. I have always loved how Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, when he was BYU president, told what happened next:

Longtime BYU benefactor Jesse Knight jumped to his feet and shouted, "We won't sell an acre. We won't sell a single lot." And he turned to President George

*Brimhall and pledged several thousand dollars to the future of the university.*¹²

Why was this experience so important? Was Alfred Kelly's vision of BYU's future needed to inspire and motivate those like Jesse Knight to invest in BYU with confidence and to ensure its future? If so, this reminds me of a movie about an Iowa farmer working in his fields when he heard a voice say, "If you build it, he will come." He then saw a vision of a baseball field appear in his cornfields.¹³ Perhaps the vision of Alfred Kelly was akin to Ray Kinsella's vision: "If you build BYU, they will come." And build it they did—and thousands did come.

So was the ultimate goal only to ensure that one future day degrees would be awarded, jobs would be secured, and one's eventual contacts on LinkedIn would overflow? If this is what you think, then I would ask you to consider Alfred Kelly's vision more carefully. It is true that his vision did describe *a* BYU, with thousands of young people laden with books entering into large and beautiful buildings. In this way it was a vision—a crystal-ball view—showing that this educational enterprise was all going to work out in the end.

I believe that Alfred Kelly's vision, however, did much more than just save the campus. I believe it defined our campus as well. Alfred Kelly not only saw future buildings but purposefully described them—as did Karl G. Maeser earlier¹⁴—as "temples of learning." And this was not all. Those temples of learning were illuminated by light. Sixty years later President Spencer W. Kimball said that all subject matter at BYU should be "bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel."¹⁵

With all this in mind, I feel that BYU aptly fits a descriptor that Hyrum Smith once used to describe his own family's household. In the fall of 1829, Solomon Chamberlain visited the Smith farm in Palmyra, New York, to inquire about a gold bible and heavenly visitors.

Upon entering the Smiths' house, he asked, "Is there any one here that believes in visions or revelations?"

Hyrum Smith was the first to respond, and he said, "Yes, we are a visionary house."¹⁶

I have always imagined Hyrum standing up straight and smiling as he said that.

But consider Hyrum's words carefully. Note that he did *not* say, "This is a visionary house," but he specifically said, "We are a visionary house." The emphasis here is not on the house, as important as it may be. Hyrum underscored that the occupants created a visionary house.

With this in mind, consider Alfred Kelly's vision once again. More than just buildings and a campus, he saw future BYU students. I believe that it is very likely that Alfred Kelly may have seen you: you were coming out of those temples of light "with cheerfulness and confidence," and you "turned toward the east and lifted [your] eyes heavenward."

I love this imagery. If you stand on campus and turn to the east, what do you see? The mountains. In his inaugural address, President Kevin J. Worthen taught that "mountains are places of spiritual communication and revelation." He also explained that "mountains are . . . locations where people can be enlightened, uplifted, and changed."¹⁷ We are nestled in a revelatory setting unlike any other, and the very posturing of students described by Alfred Kelly with their eyes lifting heavenward evokes in my mind images of other learners, such as Joseph Smith in a grove of trees.

Finally, it must not be lost on us that Alfred Kelly was a student at the time of his impactful vision. It is rather astounding to think that such a dream was had by a visionary student about future visionary students! Every time I read BYU's foundational documents I am reminded that this place is a place of revelation and vision.

John S. Tanner, former BYU academic vice president, once said: "Over the years thousands

of individuals have contributed to the dream of BYU. Every year new students and faculty add their particular hopes and dreams to our collective vision.”¹⁸ Thus all of us must continue seeking enlightenment, pursuing revelation, and dreaming dreams for our own futures and the future of this university. “Where there is no vision,” the proverb reads, “the people perish.”¹⁹

Memento 4: “You Gotta Believe”

Let me present one last personal memento from my BYU experience. Every computer I have owned for the past twenty-nine years has had the same screen saver. It is a scrawling custom message that reads, “You gotta believe.” This memento helps me recall something I hope to always remember. While there are many more details to this experience, I will offer an abridged version due to our limited time together.

At the beginning of my senior year at BYU, I began worrying whether I was making the right decision about my future. I was taking entrance exams for graduate programs and even submitting applications, but nothing felt right. To find some guidance, I interviewed doctors, lawyers, businessmen and -women, teachers, and pretty much everyone who had a pulse. Nothing clicked. Lisa and I started fasting and praying for direction. Nothing happened. We kept on praying and fasting.

One day in the fall Lisa asked me if there was *anyone* who could possibly help me with whom I hadn’t yet already talked.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I said, “Yes. If I could only talk to the president of BYU, Jeffrey R. Holland, that would clear everything up.”

So Lisa, who possesses more passion, compassion, and faith than Joan of Arc, Mother Teresa, and Esther of the Old Testament—combined—said, “Then you should go and talk with him!”

“Are you crazy?” I thought. What would I say? “Um, excuse me, President. I am one of the 30,000-plus students at BYU. Will you please tell me what I should major in?” Oh please!

Instead I muddled my way through the next seven or so months trying to figure it out. But I couldn’t seem to get my bearings. I felt as if I were in a fog. It felt as if *everyone* else was receiving revelation, direction, and confidence.

The irony was that while I knew that God would answer the prayers of any who asked with sincere intent, I still wavered in knowing that He would answer my prayers. And when it seemed like it mattered the very most, I felt a little alone—abandoned and even hopeless at times. I reached a point in which I didn’t care so much about what I did for a living as much as I cared about receiving divine direction. It was clear that I wasn’t standing up very straight, my hands were hanging down, and my feeble knees needed strengthening.²⁰

Just several weeks prior to graduation, I attended my senior capstone classes in the basement of the Jesse Knight Building. As I prepared to leave the building, I noticed a crowd gathered at the west doors. I worked my way to the front of the doors and discovered that the reason no one was leaving was because it was raining—a complete downpour. Having taught at the MTC earlier that day, I was dressed in a suit. I can almost hear myself saying, “Typical, just typical,” as I looked outside at the rainstorm and sized up the situation.

I put a *Daily Universe* newspaper over my head and started running through the parking lot. The newspaper turned to a pulpy mush, and I was soaked almost immediately. So I walked—slowly.

“I might as well catch pneumonia and be sent to the hospital,” I thought. I was in a blue mood.

As I walked past the Brimhall Building, I heard someone yell out, “You need this more than I do!”

I looked across the street, and there was President Holland holding up an umbrella. I offered an exchange of my backpack for his umbrella. He responded by opening the rear passenger door and offering me a ride home. I ran across the street, got in, and immediately created a little puddle of water on the backseat. Sister

Holland, who was already in the car, greeted me as President Holland got into the driver's seat.

"Where can I take you?" President Holland asked as he looked at me through the rearview mirror.

My wife and I were managing apartments south of campus, and I hesitated telling him where I lived because I didn't think he would be very impressed. But with the president of the university looking me in the eye, albeit through the rearview mirror, I confessed the name of the complex.

President and Sister Holland chuckled, and President Holland said, "Pat and I managed those apartments when we were undergraduates at BYU."

I was stunned and speechless. My tiny brain couldn't comprehend that President Jeffrey R. Holland had actually lived in the same apartments that I was living in. Impossible! You see, I had long admired President Holland and had placed him and Sister Holland in the "Born with a Life" category. I imagined that his life was charmed. He had been a perfect high school athlete, had been a perfect missionary, and had a perfect wife—just perfect. So to think that I actually lived in the same apartments was incomprehensible.

"Are you married?" they asked.

"Yes," I answered, my head still spinning.

"Do you have children?"

"We have a son," I said.

"Our first son was born while we were in those apartments," they explained.

"Really?" I managed to blurt out.

We drove south on Campus Drive past the Maeser Building. As I sat in the car, I suddenly realized that seven months previous I had told my wife that if I could only talk with President Holland, then I was confident I would receive helpful direction. I mustered my courage and asked, "Did you ever worry about your future?"

"Oh yes," he replied.

I was stunned, and all I could say was, "Really?" After all, I thought this was a man who had never had a worry in his entire life.

I asked several other questions and found my response to be "Really?" every time.

I finally asked, "President Holland, have you ever been so discouraged that you didn't know if things would ever work out? Did you ever worry that you might not make it after all?"

He looked at me through the rearview mirror and answered, once again to my surprise, "Yes, I did."

True to the pattern of our conversation, I managed an incredulous "Really?"

I recall Sister Holland saying, "Yes, Matt. Really."

We drove to my complex (without any directions given, I might add), and I moved toward the door to get out. But President Holland put the car in park, and he and Sister Holland turned in their seats to face me. We talked.

At one point he said, "Matt, part of your problem is that you don't believe."

I admit I felt a little badly, as if my testimony was considered subpar.

"Oh, I'm not talking about your testimony," President Holland said. "You just believe that God will work His mighty miracles for everyone but you."

His assessment was right.

And then he said with his typical fervor, "You gotta believe, Matt. You gotta believe."

He offered me sound counsel and heaps of encouragement, and then I got out of the car. I stood and waved until they were out of sight.

Upon entering our apartment I shared my experience with my wife. We wept together and then wrote the experience down—so that we would always remember.

So why the screen saver? While I will always be grateful for President and Sister Holland, I want to make sure that I never forget that God is aware of each us. I want to remember every day that BYU is a place in which students can turn to the mountains, look heavenward, and be filled with light. This is who we are. I want to remember every day that no matter what happens, you gotta believe.

Twelve years after my ride home in the rain-storm, Elder Holland, in a general conference address, reflected on a personal experience when he was discouraged and unsure about his own future. He offered himself this advice, which brought back memories and renewed my own resolve. Elder Holland said:

*Don't give up, boy. Don't you quit. You keep walking. You keep trying. There is help and happiness ahead—a lot of it—30 years of it now, and still counting. You keep your chin up. It will be all right in the end. Trust God and believe in good things to come.*²¹

I hope you will forgive me for being very personal today. At the same time I hope you will understand that a BYU education is personal—or at least it should be personal.

I realize that your BYU mementos may not be exactly like mine. I am confident, however, that they are probably similar, at least in principle. I testify that as challenging as it may seem, with faith and diligence it is really “not so bad, not so bad.” I testify that if you seek help and invite others into your life, then your life will be fuller, your success will be more meaningful, and you will find peace. I testify that BYU is a place for visions—your visions—and that God will answer your prayers. It may take months, years, or however long is required for you to openly receive His answers, but the vision will surely come. You gotta believe!

I especially hope that you will stand up straight, smile, and remember who you are. You are a student at Brigham Young University. Reverence, respect, responsibility, resourcefulness, and resolve! Be a light. Don't you ever forget it.

In the name of our beloved Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Ezra Taft Benson, *Come unto Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 41.

2. Spencer W. Kimball, “Circles of Exaltation,” BYU summer school devotional address, 28 June 1968, 8.

3. Alma 37:35.

4. Kimball, “Circles of Exaltation,” 8.

5. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Our Priesthood Legacy,” *Ensign*, May 1995.

6. While this quote is predominantly attributed to Winston Churchill, Richard M. Langworth, a Churchill historian, has not found an attribution of this quote linked to Winston Churchill in his research. See Richard M. Langworth, ed., *Churchill by Himself: The Definitive Collection of Quotations* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 579.

7. “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 30.

8. See “Chodź, chodź mój bracie,” *Hymny, oraz pieśni dla dzieci* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 6. “All is well” is translated as “nie jest źle” (“it is not bad”). In 2016 a new edition of hymns was published, and the “all is well” translation was changed to “dobrze jest” (“it is well”) (“Naprzód marsz, święci,” *Hymny kościoła Jezusa Chrystusa świętych w dniach ostatnich* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016], no. 19).

9. “To Be a Pioneer,” *Songbook*, 218–19.

10. Karl G. Maeser, in “Sayings of Dr. Karl G. Maeser,” *Dr. Karl G. Maeser Memorial*, special edition of *Brigham Young University Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1 February 1907); also quoted in “Dr. Karl G. Maeser—Some of His Sentence Sermons,” *Millennial Star* 70, no. 29 (16 July 1908): 452.

11. In John S. Tanner, “House of Dreams,” BYU annual university conference address, 28 August 2007; quoting from DVD *Passport to Destiny*, BYU history documentary, September 2005 update; taken from B. F. Larsen, “Fifty Years Ago,” speech given at a BYU alumni meeting, 25 May 1962, B. F. Larsen biographical file, BYU Archives, 3–5.

12. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Who We Are and What God Expects Us to Do,” BYU devotional address, 15 September 1987; see Larsen, “Fifty Years Ago,” 5.

13. IMDb's page for quotes for *Field of Dreams* (1989), imdb.com/title/tt0097351/trivia?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu.

14. Karl G. Maeser in *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, eds. Ernest L. Wilkinson and Leonard J. Arrington, vol. 3 (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 3.

15. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," pre-school address to faculty and staff, Brigham Young University, 12 September 1967; see also excerpted text in "Climbing the Hills Just Ahead: Three Addresses" in John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 54.

16. "Life Sketch of Solomon Chamberlain," Solomon Chamberlain autobiography (1856), L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

17. Kevin J Worthen, "Enlightened, Uplifted, and Changed," address at his inauguration as president of BYU, 9 September 2014.

18. Tanner, "House of Dreams."

19. Proverbs 29:18.

20. See D&C 81:5.

21. Jeffrey R. Holland, "An High Priest of Good Things to Come," *Ensign*, November 1999.