

Building Your Bridges

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Fall has always been one of my favorite times of the year. I love the changing colors of the leaves and the crispness in the air. I remember the excitement I felt in my younger years at the beginning of a new school year. Even though I am no longer attending school, I am blessed to be associated with all of you here at Brigham Young University. It is a pleasure for me to have the opportunity to share this exhilaration with you and express a heartfelt welcome to fall semester at this wonderful place. Hopefully your summer months were pleasant and the memories will not be forgotten during the exciting and sometimes stressful days ahead.

This past summer I had the opportunity to travel over and sail under one of the marvels of New York City: the Brooklyn Bridge. It is one of the oldest suspension bridges in the United States and was completed in 1883. It connects the New York City boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn by spanning the East River. At the time of its construction it was the longest suspension bridge in the world and continued to be so until 1903. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1964 and a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1972.

The Brooklyn Bridge took thirteen years to complete and could not have been constructed

and have endured these many years without detailed blueprints, knowledge of mathematics, use of strong and sturdy materials, and innovative tools and equipment as well as careful and strategic planning and study. There was also much diligent and hard work involved in the process. Construction did not always go as planned, and accidents occurred and lives were even lost. There were times of discouragement as well as satisfaction during those thirteen years, but a bridge was erected that is strong and safe. The original designer was John Roebling, who died as a result of an accident that occurred when he was conducting surveys for the bridge project. He began construction of a bridge he never had the opportunity to cross, and it stands today as an engineering marvel.

All of you here today are crossing bridges you did not build but that were constructed by others to bless your lives in many ways and circumstances that are truly remarkable. Your education at Brigham Young University is possible because of men and women who valued education and learning in an atmosphere of

Sharon G. Samuelson, wife of BYU President Cecil O. Samuelson, delivered this devotional address on 6 September 2011.

faith. They built these bridges through their hard work, foresight, and testimonies of what Brigham Young University could and would become in the future.

For example, there is the prophet Brigham Young, who asked a German convert, Karl G. Maeser, to go to Provo to be the principal of Brigham Young Academy. Brother Maeser became the spiritual architect of what is now the largest private, church-sponsored university in the United States, which also has the reputation of high academic standards as well as for being “stone-cold sober.”

Jesse Knight, his wife, Amanda, and Abraham O. Smoot helped keep the Academy functioning with monetary assistance when the school was struggling financially. Others could be named who contributed in so many ways to create this institution you attend today. These men and women won’t pass this way again, but they marked the pathway for you.

In 1995 my husband received a Church assignment to serve in the Europe North Area Presidency, and we moved to Solihull, England, where we lived for three years. Soon after arriving there, he and I were asked to accompany Elder and Sister Joseph B. Wirthlin to a fireside in Cardiff, Wales.

It was a marvelous meeting, and I was especially touched by the music that evening. The Welsh people are beautiful singers. It would not surprise you to learn that the majority of the original members of the Tabernacle Choir were Saints from Wales who had immigrated to the Salt Lake Valley in 1849. As the congregation was singing the closing hymn, I was touched by the Spirit, and the thought entered my mind “I think I may have some Welsh ancestry.” I am ashamed to admit that I had not paid much attention to my family history up to that stage of my life. However, before we moved, my mother had given me a family history book that contained family group sheets and other information about my

ancestors and their lives. Upon arriving back home, I retrieved it from the shelf and opened it to see exactly “who I was.”

I was not surprised—because the Spirit had told me so—to discover that I was approximately one-third Welsh. No wonder I had felt so at home at that time. A majority of my mother’s maternal and paternal ancestors were from Wales. In learning of this, and as a result of the spirit I felt in Wales, I began to feel a powerful attachment to my ancestors. I read more about my progenitors and began to appreciate, respect, and admire them in a new way. From the time I had this experience to the present day, my desire to learn more about them has intensified. It is as if a bridge is connecting my past to my present. For me, the time and space between then and now is connected in a precious way with the bridges my ancestors built with the lives they led. The constructions of their bridges for their descendants have had and will continue to have an effect on me and on the life I live today.

There is a classic poem entitled “The Bridge Builder” that expresses the importance of building bridges during your lives. It reads:

*An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.*

*“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way;
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide—
Why build you the bridge at the eventide?”*

*The builder lifted his old gray head:
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,*

*“There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”*
[Will Allen Dromgoole, in James Dalton Morrison, ed., *Masterpieces of Religious Verse* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 342; quoted by Thomas S. Monson in “The Bridge Builder,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 67]

You have loved ones in your past who created pathways and bridges to connect you to them and thus enable you to benefit from their dreams, experiences, sacrifices, and teachings—necessary components of bridge building. Hopefully each of you can relate stories and histories of ancestors who have contributed to and helped create the person you are today. They have lived their lives and built bridges for you. They will not pass this way again but knew you would one day have to travel your own way. They knew that your journeys though life would take you over many hills and down into deep valleys. You will find a myriad of dangers along the way, but hopefully bridges created by your ancestors will enable you to avoid them during your earthly travels. Daily activities and experiences can be difficult if you do not have the safety of a bridge on which to travel.

Now, my dear friends, it is your turn. At this moment you are constructing bridges for your descendants. I don’t believe I thought as much as I should have about what I was doing with my life in relation to my descendants when I was your age and pursuing my university education. I knew that I wanted to earn a degree, teach school, hopefully get married, and have children. I don’t recall thinking too much about grandchildren and great-grandchildren other than being sealed in the temple to have my family be an eternal one. However,

in the world of today, where the morals and standards are declining and the adversary is gaining many in his camp, it is vital that we build bridges to link the generations before and after us.

President Gordon B. Hinckley once stood at this pulpit and said:

You young men and you young women, most of you will marry and have children. Your children will have children, as will the children who come after them. Life is a great chain of generations that we in the Church believe must be linked together.

I fear there will be some broken links. Do not let yourself become such, I pray. [“Keep the Chain Unbroken,” in BYU devotional address, 30 November 1999]

It is now your responsibility to knit your generations together with the bridges you build. It may be that your descendants will have to cross many more troubled waters beneath them than the ones you are crossing over today. None of you wants to be the weak link in the chain of your family’s generations. You are now the architects and project managers of your own bridges, which are to be constructed for those who will one day follow you. You must make and follow your own blueprints, secure the best and strongest materials and tools, study, and gain the skills and knowledge necessary to complete the projects. Your bridges will only endure when well built. Construction at times will be difficult, and you can be assured that challenges and struggles will block your way unexpectedly. There will be discouragements, sorrows, and heartaches as well as successes and joys as you lay their foundations and build upon them.

One may ask where to find a textbook or manual that can assist you to become a competent bridge builder. What are the building blocks that are necessary to create an enduring and magnificent bridge?

The answers are available to all. They are encompassed in the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Guidance is available in the scriptures as well as in the writings and discourses of our modern-day prophets and leaders. You cannot construct perfect bridges because you are not perfect people, nor will you have perfect lives. However, by following the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, during the building process, as well as by keeping His commandments, you will be guided in creating sound and sturdy bridges.

In conclusion, may I remind you that the Savior of the world built many bridges that

can enable you to return and live with Him and your Heavenly Father. The ultimate one, however, is the bridge over death into eternal life. His life and teachings provide for you the blueprints to enable you to create your own bridges for others to use.

It is my prayer that each of us may travel daily over the bridges our Savior constructed with love for us. May we continuously build our own bridges to be structurally strong and unbending as we are stalwart in our testimonies of Him is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.