

Building Character

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I join Peggy in welcoming you to the new school year. For some of you, including an unprecedented number of returned missionaries, this will be your first semester as full-time students at BYU. Others are back for another round. For all, it is a wonderful time of new opportunities, challenges, and, we hope, optimism. As Peggy mentioned, the women's volleyball and soccer teams are both ranked nationally. The men's and women's cross-country teams both won their first meets. And this past weekend the football team demonstrated that Book of Mormon scriptures apply to our times. Read Moroni 7:29 before you watch the replay of that last play.

Peggy next mentioned Laman and Lemuel in her talk. Several years ago, while reading the Book of Mormon, it dawned on me that I had probably been too hard on Laman and Lemuel. Or, more accurately, I realized, to my chagrin, that at times I had been more like them than I cared to admit. While we tend to think of Laman and Lemuel as disobedient rebels who never did anything right, the narrative from their perspective would probably have been much different. My guess is that for much of their lives, Laman and Lemuel considered themselves active members of the

Church, doing the things that they were asked to do, even the hard things.

Think about it. When their father asked them to leave behind their riches, abandon their friends, and go out into the wilderness, did they go? Yes.¹

When their father asked them to return to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass from Laban—not an easy task—did they go? Yes.²

When their father asked them to return again to get Ishmael and his family, they complied.³

When their brother asked them to help build a boat, even though he had no prior experience in such an endeavor, did they help? Eventually.⁴

And when they were instructed to get on that boat—to trust their lives and those of their families to a craft that had not only not been tested for seaworthiness but had also not been built in the normal manner—were they willing to trust their leaders and follow their instruction? Absolutely.⁵

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 8 September 2015.

Given this outward obedience, in my mind’s eye I can see Laman and Lemuel responding to their father’s repeated entreaties to be obedient by saying, “We have done everything you have asked us to do. What more do you want?”

What Lehi wanted from his sons, and what God wants from us, is not just outward physical compliance but also inward spiritual commitment. He wants not just our acts but our hearts, minds, and souls. And if we don’t give those to Him, eventually things will go wrong, as the experiences of Laman and Lemuel demonstrate.

In one sense, what separated Laman and Lemuel from Nephi was not so much their outward actions—although at critical times there were significant and telling differences in their actions, as Peggy has pointed out—but rather their inward attitude, which eventually became part of their character. If we had to choose one word to describe Laman and Lemuel’s attitude toward life, my guess is that most of us would choose the word *murmur*. Laman and Lemuel were world-class murmurers. According to the Book of Mormon record, Laman and Lemuel murmured at least ten times,⁶ and the number was likely higher. Nephi eventually gave up counting and simply noted, “I do not write upon these plates all the words which [my brethren] murmured against me.”⁷

Yes, for the most part Laman and Lemuel did the major things that were asked of them, at least until they reached the promised land. But they did so reluctantly—mumbling, grumbling, complaining, and murmuring every step of the way and, as near as I can tell, making themselves and those around them quite miserable most of the time. The Book of Mormon makes clear that in the long run, this attitudinal difference eventually led to significant, even eternal, differences in the outcome of their lives. Their inward attitude eventually came to shape their characters and define who they were.

It was in regard to this attitudinal issue that I began to feel an uncomfortable kinship with Laman and Lemuel. I must confess that from time to time in my life I have been a bit of a murmurer myself. In fact, in my youth—I am not proud to admit—I was quite proficient at it. In all my years of playing basketball, I’m not sure I ever agreed with a foul called on me! And I usually mentioned it at that very moment—often under my breath, sometimes out loud, but consistently complaining nonetheless. And eventually that began to spill over into other parts of my life. With that guilt on my mind and realizing the toll that such an attitude had had on Laman and Lemuel, I wondered what it was that made those two brothers so quick to murmur. Was it just part of their nature? Was it that they enjoyed being miserable? Or was there some other cause?

The Book of Mormon provides an answer to that question near the beginning of the account. The first time we read that Laman and Lemuel murmured is in 1 Nephi 2:11—only four pages into the record. In the next verse we read, “And thus Laman and Lemuel . . . did murmur against their father.” And then come these key words: “And they did murmur because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them.”⁸

There it is: the root cause. Laman and Lemuel murmured because they did not understand God’s plan for them. They did not see the big picture. They couldn’t see—or they forgot—that there was a larger purpose and broader reason for doing the things they were being asked to do. And when we don’t understand the bigger picture—the reasons behind the things we are asked to do—any sacrifice is too great, any difficulty is too burdensome, and any inconvenience is a reason to complain, and we can soon end up like Laman and Lemuel.

That is true of your educational experience at BYU as well. If you don’t understand—or you forget—the real goal of this BYU

experience, it will be difficult at times to do the hard things that acquiring the full benefit of that education will require. And without that perspective you may make your way through your education here in a grumbling, mumbling, murmuring sort of way, making life miserable for yourself and those around you.

To help you avoid this, let me explain, or—perhaps for most of you—remind you, of the purpose of your being here. It is set forth in some depth in the BYU mission statement and The Aims of a BYU Education document. These are two documents that I commend to you. The first line of the mission statement—hopefully somewhat familiar to all of you—states, “The mission of Brigham Young University . . . is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.” That is our ambitious goal. And we do it, as the mission statement says, by providing “a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting where a commitment to excellence is expected and the full realization of human potential is pursued.”⁹

The specifics of what that educational experience should entail are set forth in further detail in the mission statement and the aims document. Let me suggest that if you find yourself frustrated by some aspect of the university program—if, for example, you are irritated by the fact that you have to take all those GE courses on subjects you consider to be of no interest to you and of no importance to your anticipated career—in those moments read the mission statement and the aims document carefully to see if you might have a different perspective once you understand or are reminded of the ultimate purpose of this endeavor.

I do not intend by this suggestion to imply that every aspect of everything we ask you to do here is critical to your eternal salvation. Nor am I implying that all our programs are perfect or that we are not willing to discuss changes that might improve your experience

here. However, I am confident that those conversations will be more productive, and more enjoyable, if they take place with a sound understanding of the larger picture of what we are trying to accomplish here.

The Aims of a BYU Education document sets forth four specific desired outcomes of your educational experience: “A BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service.”¹⁰

I have sometimes thought that the character-building part of those aims gets less attention than it should in our discussions. Maybe it is because character is so hard to define, and therefore harder to teach and measure, than most academic goals, but I tend to hear much less about that part of the aims in my conversations. And yet those who established the vision for this university at the highest levels have made it clear that character building is at the core of what we do here.

President David O. McKay taught:

Character is the aim of true education; and science, history, and literature are but means used to accomplish this desired end. . . .

*True education seeks to make men and women not only good mathematicians, proficient linguists, profound scientists, or brilliant literary lights, but also honest men [and women] with virtue, temperance, and brotherly love.*¹¹

President Spencer W. Kimball was even more emphatic:

*This institution has no justification for its existence unless it builds character, creates and develops faith, and makes men and women of strength and courage, fortitude, and service—men and women who will become stalwarts in the kingdom and bear witness of the . . . divinity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not justified on an academic basis only.*¹²

As then BYU president Dallin H. Oaks observed:

*One of the most distinctive characteristics of Brigham Young University in this day is our proud affirmation that character is more important than learning.*¹³

But just what do we mean by “character”? *New York Times* columnist David Brooks stated, “Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits.”¹⁴ And thus the aims document states, “A BYU education should reinforce such moral virtues as integrity, reverence, modesty, self-control, courage, compassion, and industry.”¹⁵ That is quite a list. But even a comprehensive list of attributes does not fully define character, because character is not about what we know but about who we are—and who we become.¹⁶ It is about the heart and soul, not just the mind.

That is one reason why character is hard to teach, learn, and measure. As one observer put it:

*The heart cannot be taught in a classroom intellectually, to students mechanically taking notes. . . . You can't teach it or email it or tweet it. It has to be discovered within the depths of one's own heart when a person is finally ready to go looking for it.*¹⁷

Because character is not taught or learned—or, to use the more accurate term, *built*—in the standard academic way, we need to look for ways in which we can all fully contribute to this endeavor as part of the BYU experience. In this regard, let me offer a couple of thoughts about ways in which character development can be taught and ways in which it can be learned.

One of the most powerful ways character development can be taught is by personal example. One observer noted:

What a wise person teaches is the smallest part of what they give. The totality of their life, of the way

they go about it in the smallest details, is what gets transmitted.

*Never forget that. The message is the person.*¹⁸

We are blessed to have good role models of character at the university—both among the faculty and staff, as well as in the student body. To that end I would ask all of us to consider the impact our actions and decisions have on others. Our actions and attitudes may affect others—for good or bad—more profoundly than we realize. With the opportunity to influence comes the responsibility to do so properly. As I told our faculty and staff a couple of weeks ago, we should be part of a “community of learners and lifters” at BYU.¹⁹ We should be a covenant community in which we help to build and strengthen each other’s character every day.

Even more important, we are blessed to have before us the ultimate role model of perfect character—even the Savior Jesus Christ. We should, as the mission statement suggests, build an environment on campus and in our lives that reflects “those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God.”²⁰

In addition to Christ’s example, the gospel of Jesus Christ offers us access to the truths of the plan of salvation, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the redemptive, transforming power of Christ’s Atonement. These inestimable gifts provide a comprehensive framework that gives us the opportunity to ultimately perfect our character. If we keep these things active in our lives, we can have the faith we need to keep going when we stumble—as we all will—and the power to improve—as we all must.

As for learning to build character, we should recognize that our character is usually shaped not by dramatic one-time events but by small and simple daily decisions. To quote David Brooks:

Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved. . . . You become

*more disciplined, considerate, and loving through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment.*²¹

Or, to use the negative example of Laman and Lemuel, you become undisciplined, narcissistic, and rebellious through small acts of defiance, selfishness, and, yes, murmuring.

Accordingly, much of the vital character-building part of your quest for perfection will not take place in the normal course of classroom instruction. It will come in small moments and decisions that may seem only distantly related to your academic work but which, in the long run, will be more determinative of your ultimate success at the university. As the aims document puts it, character-building opportunities will present themselves in a number of situations, including those involving

*academic integrity in taking a test or writing a research paper; sportsmanship on the playing field; the honest reporting of research findings in a laboratory; careful use of university funds derived from the tithes of Church members; treating all other people with dignity and fairness; and wholehearted acceptance of commitments.*²²

With regard to that last item, let me mention in particular the commitments each of us has made with respect to the Honor Code and the Dress and Grooming Standards. I understand that some of those commitments relate to eternal values and others to standards that are more temporal and cultural. But let me emphasize that adherence to *each* of those standards plays a critical role in our eternal character development. Notice the helpful context provided in this statement by President Spencer W. Kimball:

Integrity (which includes the willingness and ability to live by our beliefs and commitments) is one of the foundation stones of good character, and without good character one cannot hope to

*enjoy the presence of God here or in the eternities. In this institution students and faculty commit themselves explicitly to abide by a code of conduct which includes both living by the moral precepts of the gospel and conforming to a dress and grooming code. Some purport to accept the moral standards as important and denigrate the other as trivial and as intruding on their freedom of choice. These people fundamentally misperceive the question, which is not whether the dress or grooming code is wise, but whether they should consider themselves bound by a promise. It is not that such a code is forced upon anyone; there is free choice to come here or to go to some other institution which makes no such demands. . . . There is no disgrace in making that choice; it is a wholly legitimate option. But once having elected to come here and to participate in this community with its special calling to represent the Church and its highest standards, you must not compromise your integrity by promising what you will not do. By taking covenants lightly, you will wound your eternal self.*²³

Let me be a bit more specific about one dress and grooming standard that seems to be more of a challenge than it should be, if we look at it in the light of President Kimball's statement. I have noticed that a few men seemed to have focused on the statement in the Honor Code that "beards are not acceptable" and then have tried to convince themselves (and I suppose others) that two- or three- (or sometimes four- or five-) days' growth is not a beard. However, the BYU standard is a bit more precise. It clearly states: "Men are expected to be clean-shaven."²⁴

In his course syllabus, one of our BYU professors humorously observes that some may think that this "'scruffy three-day beard' look on guys . . . is . . . cool." However, showing a picture of a movie star, he then writes, "You are *not* this guy and never will be. The grooming standards say 'clean-shaven.'"

Now, we might disagree about whether this look is fashionable or whether, after you graduate, you *will* be that guy, but the undeniable

and most important fact is this: As stated clearly in the Dress and Grooming Standards, “members of the BYU community commit themselves to observe the . . . standards,” including that men “be clean-shaven.”²⁵

That same observation applies to the other parts of the Honor Code and the Dress and Grooming Standards as well. Having signed the Honor Code, compliance is not a question of fashion or personal expression. It is a question of integrity, which, as President Kimball said, “is one of the foundation stones of good character.”

Overall, the vast majority of you are doing extraordinarily well in building and demonstrating good character. As one example, we recently surveyed those who have employed BYU graduates and asked them, among other things, to indicate how the BYU graduates they employed compared with graduates of other universities with respect to certain personal characteristics and skills that they considered important to success in their organization. With respect to “honesty, integrity, and dependability,” 67 percent of the employers indicated that BYU graduates were “much better” or “somewhat better” than graduates from other universities.²⁶

Incidentally, as measured by the percentage of employers who thought that a particular characteristic or skill was “extremely important” in their organization, the category of “honesty, integrity, and dependability” was ranked highest, surpassing such things as problem-solving skills, critical-thinking skills, and communication skills.²⁷ As it turns out, quite often character pays.

But that is not the ultimate reward of character development, nor is employer satisfaction the best measure. Because character development is ultimately a question of inner attitudes and strengths, human beings, unaided by the Holy Ghost, can never fully and accurately measure how they are doing. But there are some close proxies.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks indicated that the scriptures suggest two ways in which we can measure ourselves—and I emphasize not measuring others but measuring *ourselves* in this regard. First, noting the effect that King Benjamin’s sermon had on his people, as recorded in Mosiah 5:2, Elder Oaks stated, “If we are losing our desire to do evil, we are progressing toward our heavenly goal.”²⁸ Second, citing Paul’s observation in 1 Corinthians 2:16 that those who have received the Spirit of God “have the mind of Christ,” Elder Oaks observed that “persons who are proceeding toward [our ultimate goal of becoming like the Savior] are beginning to see things as our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, see them.”²⁹

Let me suggest that both of these things—the development of an innate, inner desire to avoid evil and the ability to put things in eternal perspective—can be measured in a very rough sense by how much we are inclined to murmur, particularly when things are going wrong or we find ourselves at odds with those who have the charge to give prophetic counsel. At the end of the day, attitude shapes our character. If we can do hard but good things without complaint, we can find, in the words of David Brooks, that “there’s joy in freely chosen obedience to people, ideas, and commitments greater than oneself.”³⁰

But the impact does not end with ourselves. Others will be uplifted as they see your examples of character. A few years ago we received a letter from a woman in North Carolina who, from a long distance, had noted the character shown by one of our student athletes. The letter was accompanied by a personal check for a modest amount of money. I share portions of the letter with the author’s permission. She wrote:

Please find enclosed my check . . . for the BYU Athletics Department. I am not wealthy. However, I want to offer financial support to an athletic program that has shown itself to be striving for a

level of character that is consistent with its mission statement, although rare and inconsistent with current hedonistic views in this country. [The student-athlete's] honesty . . . shows that he has a conscience—an excellent reflection on your school. As a Roman Catholic, I am used to hearing people insult my church's expectation for behavior, although, like BYU, we don't require anyone to join us. Bless you for keeping your expectations high for self-control, discipline, and personal accountability. Best wishes for your continued success in the NCAA tournament.

People will be watching what you do at BYU—people you will never meet but people whose lives you can affect for good by your example of character.

In his prayer dedicating the carillon tower and bells in 1975, President Kimball said, “Let the morality of the graduates of this university provide the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet.”³¹ What a challenge: that the morality of the graduates of this university provide the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet. You can meet that challenge as you daily live your lives in a way that builds and shapes your character on the perfect model of perfect character, even Jesus Christ. May you do so in this year and in the years to come is my prayer, in His holy name, amen.

Notes

1. See 1 Nephi 2:4.
2. See 1 Nephi 3:9.
3. See 1 Nephi 7:3.
4. See 1 Nephi 18:1.
5. See 1 Nephi 18:6.
6. See 1 Nephi 2:11; 1 Nephi 2:12; 1 Nephi 3:5; 1 Nephi 3:31; 1 Nephi 4:4; 1 Nephi 16:20; 1 Nephi 17:17; 1 Nephi 17:22; 2 Nephi 5:3; 2 Nephi 5:4.
7. 2 Nephi 5:4.
8. 1 Nephi 2:12.

9. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1.

10. *Mission and Aims*, 5.

11. David O. McKay, “Why Education?” *Improvement Era* 70, no. 9 (September 1967): 3.

12. Spencer W. Kimball, “On My Honor,” BYU devotional address, 12 September 1978.

13. Dallin H. Oaks, “A House of Faith,” BYU annual university conference address, 31 August 1977, 9; see also John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 117–18. Fifty years earlier, President Franklin S. Harris echoed the same theme: “The first task of the future is to preserve at the institution this spirit that comes to us from the past—the true spirit of the Brigham Young University. This spirit places character above learning” (Franklin S. Harris, “Inaugural Address,” Brigham Young University, 17 October 1921, 6; see also excerpted version in Welch and Norton, *Educating Zion*, 8).

14. David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 263.

15. *Mission and Aims*, 14.

16. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks observed, “In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to *know* something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something” (“The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000; emphasis in original).

17. Dave Jolly, email to David Brooks; quoted in Brooks, “Introduction: Adam II,” *Road to Character*, xv.

18. Dave Jolly, quoted in Brooks, *Road to Character*, xv.

19. Henry B. Eyring, “A Leader of Learners,” BYU address at the inauguration of President Kevin J Worthen, 9 September 2014; see also Kevin J Worthen, “A Vibrant and Determined Community of Learners and Lifters,” BYU annual university conference address, 24 August 2015.

20. *Mission and Aims*, 1.
21. Brooks, *Road to Character*, 263–64. As the aims document states, “Character is constructed by small decisions” (*Mission and Aims*, 15).
22. *Mission and Aims*, 15.
23. Spencer W. Kimball, “Integrity: The Spirit of BYU,” BYU devotional address, 4 September 1979.
24. Dress and Grooming Standards, Church Educational System Honor Code, registrar. byu.edu/catalog/2015-2016ucat/GeneralInfo/HonorCode.php.
25. Dress and Grooming Standards.
26. Eric Jenson and Danny R. Olsen, *Employers of BYU Graduates Survey* (Provo: BYU Institutional Assessment and Analysis, 2014): 25 percent indicated BYU graduates were “much better,” 42 percent indicated they were “somewhat better,” and 33 percent indicated they were “about the same.”
27. *Employers of BYU Graduates Survey*, 2014: 75 percent of the employers indicated that the characteristics of “honesty, integrity, and dependability” were “extremely important.”
28. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become.”
29. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become.”
30. Brooks, *Road to Character*, 269.
31. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.