

Gathering: Education in a Compact Society

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Welcome to the first devotional of the new academic year, the first official gathering of the campus community—a campus community that is itself the result of a gathering of students, faculty, and staff from throughout the world to Provo. It is a wonderful sight—and a wonderful feeling to be with you.

At this devotional gathering of those who have been gathered to Provo, I would like to talk about gathering. More than a decade before he became president of the Church, our beloved prophet Russell M. Nelson taught that the “doctrine of the gathering is one of the important teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”¹ And, as you well know, since he became president of the Church, President Nelson has emphasized that the gathering of scattered Israel is

the greatest challenge, the greatest cause, and the greatest work on earth. . . .

*. . . There is **nothing** happening on this earth right now that is more important. . . . There is **nothing** of greater consequence. Absolutely **nothing**.²*

President Nelson has invited all of us to enlist and involve ourselves in this great cause.

The gathering envisioned by President Nelson is stunningly broad and at the same time remarkably focused. It is a gathering that is all-encompassing in its intended target. It involves “all of God’s children on both sides of the veil,”³ extending to not only the more than seven billion current inhabitants of the earth today but also the billions of others who have ever lived on the earth. At the same time, it is a gathering for a specific purpose—to invite all “to come unto their Savior, receive the blessings of the holy temple, have enduring joy, and qualify for eternal life.”⁴ I encourage all of you to accept President Nelson’s invitation to be involved in the missionary, temple,

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on September 10, 2019.

family history, and ministering aspects of that great work.

However, today I would like to discuss how the doctrine of gathering applies to your educational endeavors on this campus this year.

Gathering Is Essential to Education

I start with the premise that the educational endeavor in which we are engaged is greatly enhanced by our gathering together in one particular place. This thought first came to me when I became the dean of the law school here at BYU. It was then that I began to understand the enormous resources the Church expends to bring us all together on this campus for the purpose of providing an educational experience to our students. As I considered the amount of funds that the Church provided to the law school—not only for operating expenses but for capital projects as well—I concluded that if all the Church wanted to accomplish was to ensure that 120 active, covenant-keeping Latter-day Saints could obtain a good legal education each year without incurring unnecessary debt, the Church might be better off financially to simply give a very generous stipend to each of those law students and send them off to other really good law schools. But that is not what Church leaders chose to do. Instead, at great expense, they built, staffed, and maintained a law school where these students could gather together. Reflecting on this decision, I determined that there must be something more that comes out of the BYU educational experience than the elimination of or reduction in the debt of law students who might as a result better bless the kingdom.

As I now consider the budget of this university and the hundreds of millions of dollars the Church expends every year to make it possible, I have come to the same conclusion with respect to the entire university. There must be some reason other than providing an affordable education to 30,000 students that would cause Church leaders to expend all the time and all the expense of building a campus and managing its operations in order to bring people—specifically, you students—here. As I have begun to understand

the doctrine of gathering, the why has become a little more clear.

The concept of gathering goes back much further in time than many realize. It seems to have been part of the plan before the earth was even created. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

*It was the design of the councils of heaven before the world was, that the principles and laws of the priesthood should be **predicated upon the gathering** of the people in every age of the world.⁵*

It is not surprising then that even before Israel was scattered throughout the earth—indeed, even before there was a group of people called Israelites—Adam physically gathered his posterity together in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman.⁶ And one of the reasons he did so was to provide instruction to those whom he had physically gathered together.⁷

Thus, from the outset, education has been one of the main purposes of gathering. In fact, education of the most important type seems to require a physical gathering. Joseph Smith further taught:

Intelligence is the great object of our holy religion. . . . Intelligence is the result of education, and education can only be obtained by living in compact society. . . .

***One of the principal objects then, of our coming together, is to obtain the advantages of education; and in order to do this, compact society is absolutely necessary.**⁸*

Joseph seemed to indicate that there is something about physical proximity—about gathering in a compact society—that is essential to education, at least to the kind of education that is most important. In today's world, in which online education seemingly eliminates the need for people to be in one place at one time in order to hold a classroom discussion, one might wonder if the Prophet's observation merely reflected the conditions of his day—whether his statement came with an expiration date, making it applicable only until technology developed to the point that the barriers of distance and time no longer limited the conveyance of information. That view might hold

some sway if the sole purpose of education is to convey information. But at BYU, our educational charge is much broader than that.

A BYU education does not focus solely on the acquisition of information, as important as that critical task is to the educational process. As our mission statement makes clear, a BYU education focuses more broadly on “the full realization of human potential.”⁹ And that potential is much greater than most people understand. Each of our students, indeed every human being, “is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”¹⁰ Our ultimate educational goal is to assist them in their quest for that ultimate divine destiny. Our goal is to provide an education that is “(1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service.”¹¹ It is that kind of holistic education that I believe is greatly enhanced or made fully possible only by gathering together in one location.

Here is the real question then: What is it about gathering here in Provo that is helpful—maybe even essential—to that kind of education? I will readily admit that I do not have all the answers to that question, but let me offer some thoughts, along with a few specific suggestions and invitations as you begin the new school year.

My thoughts on this question first began to form some twenty years ago at a devotional address just like this given by President Gordon B. Hinckley here in the Marriott Center. As he began his address, President Hinckley noted that he had recently spoken at another university in this state at which most of those in attendance were institute students who, like BYU students, were clean, well groomed, eager, and attentive. Returning from that experience, he wondered, “What [does BYU] have . . . that for the most part is not found elsewhere?”¹² He then discussed a number of things that distinguish BYU from other universities, several of which are features that advance the aims of a BYU education in ways that are enhanced by close interaction with others in a compact society—by being part of a gathering.

He noted, for example, that we “have a unique and dedicated faculty” who “are, for the most

part, dedicated Latter-day Saints, men and women who feel as much at home in the house of the Lord as they feel in the classrooms of this university.”¹³ This remarkable faculty—who are at the forefront of knowledge in their fields of expertise and also rock solid in their faith in and commitment to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—is truly unique. There are a number of universities in which you might encounter both a large number of faculty who are involved in cutting-edge research in their fields and a different set of very able institute faculty who can teach and model the principles of the restored gospel. However, only at BYU, here in Provo, will you find a gathering of a large number of faculty who embody both of those attributes in the same person. These are faculty who are at once involved in world-class research *and* committed to the principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. In making that observation, I include our outstanding faculty members who, while not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, support and live in accordance with its principles.

The gathering of such a faculty with whom you can interact—and from whom you can learn hour-by-hour, day-by-day—is an extraordinary blessing that can be found nowhere else. And to enhance the impact of that gathering of faculty, we ask these faculty members to engage you—the students—more proximately by involving you in their research endeavors. This provides you with a truly unique opportunity to come to know in a closer way what a life that is both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging looks like. And because these faculty are all gathered on one campus—in a “compact society,” to use Joseph Smith’s term—you can get glimpses of what a community of disciple-scholars looks like in a wide variety of subjects, helping you understand the interrelationships between truths found in all disciplines.

I invite you to get to know your faculty better and to take advantage of opportunities you have to work with them on a mentored-research project or even just to engage with them in informal discussions. I urge you to take advantage of your opportunity to interact with this extraordinary

community of disciple-scholars who have been gathered here in this compact society for your benefit.

President Hinckley also noted that BYU students belong to wards or stakes populated largely by other students. This again is possible only because you are gathered together in one place. However, like President Hinckley, I wonder “how many of you really appreciate the meaning of this”¹⁴ opportunity. As President Hinckley noted, membership in such a unit automatically gives you a place where you belong: “There is no competition to get into social fraternities, and yet there is every opportunity for sociality. Here every student stands on an equal footing.”¹⁵ No one is left out; no one is alone in the process. President Hinckley noted that membership in a ward carries with it a built-in support system with bishoprics, Relief Society presidencies, elders quorum presidencies, and ministering brothers and sisters, all available in close proximity to help you deal with the inevitable individual challenges you will face during your time here. What a blessing that is to your education.

Membership in wards and stakes not only provides you with a support system that you will all need at one time or another, but it also gives you the opportunity to serve others—an important aspect of the kind of character development that is a critical part of your education. Membership in a ward that is geographically based rather than self-selected gives you the opportunity to interact with, serve, and, as a result, love those with whom you might not otherwise associate. It gives you the opportunity to operationalize the powerful covenant we made at baptism “to bear one another’s burdens, . . . mourn with those that mourn . . . , and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”¹⁶

During your time at BYU, you will be given assignments and callings to serve and minister to those you would not otherwise know—or perhaps even care to know. What may start off as acts of duty have the potential to lift, elevate, and change you as you come to understand and then truly love all with whom you come in contact—even those whose views may differ greatly from your own. As Bryan A. Stevenson taught in a forum

here last year, “There is power in proximity.”¹⁷ And membership in wards provides that proximity. As you come to truly know others—especially those who are neglected or on the margins—you can better help them. This will then help you develop the Christlike character to which the aims of a BYU education point. I invite each of you to be actively involved in your ward or stake and to look for other opportunities to serve those around you, both on and off campus. Others have been brought here and you have been brought here for that very purpose. It is one of the ways in which your being part of a gathering here will make your BYU education more productive.

President Hinckley noted that another aspect of the distinctive BYU experience is the presence of a temple near the campus. Joseph Smith taught that the primary purpose of gathering throughout the ages is to build temples so God’s children can receive the ordinances and instruction needed to achieve their full potential.¹⁸ President Hinckley observed that the close proximity of a temple gives you, the students, the “opportunity to work unselfishly in the interest of others while growing spiritually yourselves,”¹⁹ again contributing directly to the aims of a BYU education. I invite you to take full advantage of that opportunity that is now available in *two* locations in Provo. It will refine and elevate your educational experience in important ways.

Finally, President Hinckley noted that all students at BYU have agreed to live “the proscriptions and the prescriptions of the Word of Wisdom.”²⁰ President Hinckley observed that in addition to helping students avoid the all-too-prevalent problems associated with alcohol on most college campuses, following the Word of Wisdom enables students to realize the scriptural promise that they would find “great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures.”²¹ He stated:

*This does not mean that you will necessarily be smarter in your normal studies. It does mean that the power of the Holy Ghost may distill upon you and bring to you an increased knowledge and understanding of the . . . things of the Lord. This is another phase of the BYU experience.*²²

The blessings of this individual commitment to live the Word of Wisdom can be reinforced and strengthened by being part of a community collectively committed to that promise. I invite you to encourage your fellow students to keep that promise, as well as the other honor code commitments they have made. The power of being part of a collective commitment to standards is another educational benefit that comes from being gathered into a compact society.

President Hinckley summed up his expectations by stating, “I hope that the BYU experience will cause you to take on those qualities that will make of you a true disciple of Jesus.”²³ That is the real goal of a BYU education. And that process is enhanced by gathering together. Elder Dale G. Renlund taught the faculty and staff just two weeks ago at our annual university conference:

*Developing Christlike attributes does not happen in a vacuum or by isolating ourselves. It does not happen by metaphorically cloistering ourselves in monasteries and chanting mantras. That is not the purpose of compact societies. Christlike attributes come to us as we serve God and our fellowman.*²⁴

There are undoubtedly other ways that your BYU education is enhanced by the fact that you have all been gathered here at this time and place. Physical attendance at these devotionals is one of them. On a weekly basis we can hear from inspired members of our own campus community and, with increasing frequency, from General Authorities and general officers of the Church, including members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles or the president of the Church. I invite and urge you to attend those devotionals in person. There is a different spirit that attends this unique kind of physical gathering, a spirit that can elevate and enhance the holistic education we hope you all experience at BYU.

You Have Been Gathered in This Compact Society by God

Let me close with a simple—but, for me, powerful—example of what can happen when students view themselves not just as isolated

individuals pursuing their own individual career goals but as part of a covenant community gathered together in a compact society to realize their full potential as children of God.

As many of you know, law school can be very competitive. At most law schools, including BYU’s, students are literally ranked in order by their grades, and employers often make the initial hiring decisions based primarily on that ranking. It is an environment rife with competition—which, as C. S. Lewis taught, is at the core of the sin of pride.²⁵ To add to the tension, in most law-school courses the seemingly all-important grade is determined solely on the basis of the final examination. As you might imagine, the stress levels at the law schools are quite high during finals.

A few years ago, after finals but before grades had come out—before students knew how they had done—I was involved in a discussion with a group of law students about how to avoid pride and animosity toward their fellow students in that kind of highly competitive, zero-sum setting. During that discussion, a first-year law student—who had recently been through the soul-trying experience of the first set of law-school finals but who still did not know how he had done—related the following experience, which I share with his permission:

When I came to BYU Law School, I immediately developed a big, fat crush on my entire 1L class: they were the nicest, smartest, most interesting people that I had ever been around. . . . [Even though] I realized right away that I was outgunned, outsmarted, and outpaced in every class . . . , I didn’t resent the successes of my peers; they were . . . my friends, and I liked them. . . .

As classes ended, [however,] and our 1L class threw all its weight, collectively and individually . . . , toward finals, I was anxious. The anxiety grew and turned black. I studied hard and long, but I felt more insecure the more I studied.

The student went on to say that he began to stay away from his classmates because each interaction with them increasingly convinced him that they knew more about the subject than he did and

that he was, therefore, destined to fail. He became isolated and alone. He then related:

I was praying early one morning about finals, asking for help to do my best [or even to just pass the class], and I began describing the bleak feelings I harbored, and I asked for help. After a few minutes, I [suddenly] found myself [praying] not [just] for myself but for my classmates, and not just for those few that I knew . . . struggled [with the material,] as I did, but for the gifted and the talented as well. I prayed that they would do their best, that they would have peace and clarity. As I prayed for them . . . , I felt a surge of love for the classmates I had admired and had liked so much in the beginning.

He then began to reengage with his fellow students, not just to learn from them but with the thought that he might actually have something he could offer to them. At that point his stress level dropped dramatically, his learning increased considerably, and his view of law school—and of the true purpose of a BYU education—was transformed. He was no longer involved in an individual contest against every one of his classmates. He was part of a loving, caring compact society that had been gathered together to help each member succeed.

This kind of experience and countless others like it are made possible because students, faculty, and staff are gathered together in a setting that allows each of us to progress both intellectually and spiritually in ways that develop our character and lead to lives of unending learning and service.

You students have the rare opportunity to be part of that kind of gathering—to be part of a compact society that God has prepared to help you learn and develop Christlike attributes. You are not here by accident. You have been gathered here by God. Whatever your background, whatever your talents, whatever your challenges or perceived weaknesses, you are a vital part of this gathering. You have something to gain from and something to offer in your interactions with those around you.

May each of you recognize and delight in the blessings of being fully engaged in this unique

kind of gathering “of learners and lifters”²⁶ is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” *Ensign*, November 2006.
2. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” worldwide youth devotional, 3 June 2018, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng; emphasis in original.
3. Russell M. Nelson, “Let Us All Press On,” *Ensign*, May 2018.
4. Nelson, “Let Us All Press On.”
5. Joseph Smith, *HC* 5:423 (11 June 1843); emphasis added.
6. See D&C 107:53.
7. See D&C 107:56. There are other purposes associated with gathering. Elder David A. Bednar taught, “The Lord gathers His people to worship, to build up the Church, for a defense, and to receive counsel and instruction” (“The Spirit and Purposes of Gathering,” BYU–Idaho devotional address, 31 October 2006).
8. Joseph Smith, “To the Saints Abroad,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 53; emphasis added. Quoted in Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 37.
9. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).
10. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).
11. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
12. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience,” BYU devotional address, 4 November 1997.
13. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”
14. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”
15. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”
16. Mosiah 18:8–9.
17. Bryan A. Stevenson, BYU forum address, 30 October 2018; quoted in Erica Ostergar, “BYU Forum: Creating Justice,” *Intellect*, *BYU News*, 30 October 2018, news.byu.edu/news/byu-forum-creating-justice.

18. See Joseph Smith, *HC* 5:423–25, 427 (11 June 1843); quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 416–17. See also David A. Bednar, “Honorably Hold a Name and Standing,” *Ensign*, May 2009.

19. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”

20. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”

21. D&C 89:19; see Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”

22. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”

23. Hinckley, “The BYU Experience.”

24. Dale G. Renlund, “Creating and Conveying a Christlike Culture: More Than a Job,” BYU university conference address, 26 August 2019.

25. See C. S. Lewis, “The Great Sin,” in *Mere Christianity* (1952), book 3, chapter 8, paragraph 3; quoted in Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989:

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.

26. Henry B. Eyring, “A Leader of Learners,” BYU inauguration devotional address, 9 September 2014.