

More Brigham Young on Education by Hugh W. Nibley

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I have been asked to speak on the subject of Brigham Young and Education. Brother Sidney Sperry and I used to talk long hours about education in the Church, both because our offices were side by side and because we agreed on everything. I have assembled statements by Brigham Young on education before this, but recently, talks by Brothers Boyd K. Packer, Arthur Henry King, Thomas Rogers, Noel Reynolds, and others have brought to the fore matters which we have never discussed and on which Brigham Young had a good deal to say. So this is "new" material.

The keynote of all Brigham Young's thinking and preaching was the wonder and glory of the gospel against the background of a lost and distracted world. Here was the race of mankind living lives of quiet desperation in a lone and dreary world which they firmly believed would eventually pass away and "leave not a rack behind." Into this world of frustrated, restless, unhappy creatures there came one who told them who they really were and bore ample credentials to the bona fides of the great revelations he brought them. The news was overpowering, almost too good to be true—from now on everything was going to be different: who could keep such news to himself? Certainly not Brigham Young. He shouted hallelujah all the day long and joyfully urged everyone to come and see. His whole concern was to learn all there was to know about this marvelous message and then pass it on to everyone he possibly could reach. "There was more or less of a gloom over my feelings from the earliest days of my childhood that I have in any recollection, until I heard the everlasting Gospel declared by the servants of God."¹ "The secret feeling of my heart was that I would be willing to crawl around the earth on my hands and knees, to see such a man as was Peter, Jeremiah, Moses, or any man that could tell me anything about God and heaven. But to talk with the priests was more unsatisfactory to me then than it now is to talk with lawyers."² Then: "When I saw Joseph Smith, he took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth, brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God."³ "Under that preaching the gloom vanished, and has not since troubled me for a moment."⁴ Nothing else mattered: "I gave away what I had, and I started to preach the Gospel. I was obliged to do it, for I felt as though my bones would consume within me if I did not, consequently I devoted my time to preaching."⁵

So there you have it: "Outside of the religion we have embraced, there is nothing but death, hell and the grave."⁶ What an educational project lay before those who accepted the glad message! The gospel is knowledge and its recipients had first to acquaint themselves with it as quickly and as fully as possible and then disseminate it with all possible skill and speed. "Put forth your ability to learn as fast as you can, and gather all the strength of mind and principle of faith you possibly can, and then distribute your knowledge to the people."⁷ "We are here to live to spread intelligence and knowledge among the people. I am here to school my brethren, to teach my family the way of life."⁸ "Remember, too, the great principle of improvement. Learn! learn! learn! Continue to learn, to study by observation and from good books!"⁹

That was the assignment: "What are we here for? To learn to enjoy more, and to increase in knowledge and in experience."¹⁰ Eternity begins here and now: "Education is our motto.' This will be my text. We are here that we may learn to improve."¹¹ The curriculum, of course, is unlimited: "We should not only learn the principles of education known to mankind, but we should reach out further than this, learning to live so that our minds will gather in information from the heavens and the earth until we can incorporate in our faith and understanding all knowledge which is useful and practicable in our present condition."¹²

This concept of education is implicit in Mormonism. Once we categorically assume a career of eternal progression, no other way lies open. For the course ahead absolutely requires sustained, progressive, ever-increasing mental power and exertion. To be alive is to be conscious, and to be conscious is to think, and to think is to think about something: "The brain craves for information as the body craves for food."¹³ The gospel not only requires such application of the mind, but facilitates and guarantees it.

There is no position a man can occupy in this world . . . wherein he can learn so much of that which is truly valuable and worthy of acceptance as that of an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ in the active discharge of his calling. The present is the day of your opportunities, to mold your characters, to strengthen your faith, to develop your powers of mind and thought.¹⁴

For Brigham Young, knowledge was what Aristotle calls a good of first intent, a thing good and desirable in itself, needing no argument or excuse for its existence.¹⁵ Goods of secondary intent are good for something else. A hammer, a watch, a pair of shoes, a ladder, a knife—each is good because it helps us get some other good thing we are after; but there are goods whose value does not depend on anything else but is intrinsic and immediate, and knowledge is one of them. Joseph Smith feasted on knowledge. He said it tasted good to him.¹⁶ Paradoxically, things of primary intent are actually the most useful goods—in fact, the only useful ones in the long run. We can and do get along without many of the goods of secondary intent and never really miss them; as Brigham Young said many times, life without them may be inconvenient, but it is always possible. Without goods of primary intent, on the other hand, life is by no means possible: without them we wither and die. They are incorporated in our very nature:

The things of this world add to our national comfort, and are necessary to sustain mortal life. We need these comforts to preserve our earthly existence. . . . But those things have nothing to do with the spirit, feeling, consolation, light, glory, peace, and joy that pertain to heaven and heavenly things, which are the food of the ever-living spirit within us. . . . This I know by experience. I know that the things of this world, from beginning to end, from the possession of mountains of gold down to a crust of johnnycake, makes little or no difference in the happiness of an individual.¹⁷

The poor man's johnnycake is no more to be prized than the rich man's gold. "Nothing is calculated to satisfy the mind of an intelligent being, only to obtain principles that will preserve him in his identity, to enable him to increase in wisdom, power, knowledge, and perfection."¹⁸ "Truth cleaves unto truth, because it is truth; and it is to be *adored*, because it is an *attribute of God*, for its *excellence*, for *itself*."¹⁹

Will education feed and clothe you, keep you warm on a cold day, or enable you to build a house? Not at all. Should we cry down education on this account? No. What is it for? The improvement of the mind; to instruct us in all arts and sciences, in the history of the world, in the laws of nations; to enable us to understand the laws and principles of life, and how to be useful while we live.²⁰

Brigham Young often repeated the maxim " 'Mormonism' embraces all truth that is revealed and that is unrevealed, whether religious, political, scientific, or philosophical."²¹ But we cannot cross the bounds of knowledge into new territory until we've traversed the expanse of ground that lies between us. "We, as a people, have in the future to excel the nations of the earth in religion, science, and philosophy."²²

But to surpass them we must first catch up with them! In short: "This is the belief and doctrine of the Latter-day Saints. Learn everything that the children of men know, and be prepared for the most refined society upon the face of the earth."²³

But Brigham Young is known before all else as a solid practical, common-sense man, a pragmatic genius. And this leads us to the common fallacy of classing one kind of activity as practical by nature and the other as impractical by nature. Brigham Young has been accused of inconsistency in insisting that knowledge should be sought for its own sake on one hand but primarily for its practical application on the other. Inconsistent he is not. He knows that the person who does not regard the most practical task primarily as a mental exercise is going to botch it; he's going to be a waster, and a bungler, and not do it properly. He says, "You will almost invariably find that people who are industrious in the common pursuits of life, are industrious in improving their minds as far as they have opportunity."²⁴ Intelligence is not a monopoly of a particular kind of work, or a particular class or age or stage of advancement. A smart baby is far more edifying company than a stupid dean. I've spent many hours in the company of both. Consider this quotation:

And while you delight in raising flowers, &c., do not neglect to learn how to take care of the cream, and how to make of it good wholesome butter, and of the milk good healthy nutritious cheese; neither forget your sewing, spinning, and weaving; and I would not have them neglect to learn music and would encourage them to read history and the Scriptures, to take up a newspaper, geography, and other publications, and make themselves acquainted with

the manners and customs of distant kingdoms and nations, with their laws, religion, geographical location on the face of the world, their climate, natural productions, the extent of their commerce, and the nature of their political organization; in fine, let our boys and girls be thoroughly instructed in every useful branch of physical and mental education. Let this education begin early.²⁵

Now in a passage like that, try to separate the book learning from the other. It can't be done. For Brigham Young it is all practical, and it is all a wonderful adventure of the mind.

On "Sunday, August 12th, President Brigham Young addressed the people from the stand. He observed that our business was with the things immediately before us, and not with the glories of the eternal worlds."²⁶ Again he says, "The Kingdom we are talking about, preaching about and trying to build up is the Kingdom of God on the earth, not in the starry heavens."²⁷

My mission to the people is to teach them with regard to their every-day lives. I presume there are many here who have heard me say, years and years ago, that I cared very little about what will take place after the millennium. . . . My desire is to teach the people what they should do *now*, and let the millennium take care of itself. To teach them to serve God and to build up His Kingdom is my mission.²⁸

Yet this is the man who tells them: "Instead of reflecting upon and searching for hidden things of the greatest value to them, they [the Latter-day Saints] rather wish to learn how to secure their way through this world as easily and as comfortably as possible. The reflections [upon] what they are here for, who produced them, and where they are from, far too seldom enter their minds."²⁹

For Brigham Young what was practical was the task at hand, the thing that had to be done right now, whether it was praying, bathing, dancing, sleeping, or shoeing a horse—all were equally practical, including dancing, but they are practical because each one at the proper time helps us on the way to our objective—always the same objective for all of them. There are indeed two categories of goods, but the distinction is *not* between the practical and the impractical; they are both practical and both spiritual; there is no difference in spiritual and temporal labors—all are one.³⁰

Brigham is teaching the Saints how to climb Jacob's ladder—how to do it in a sensible, practical way, grasping firmly the next rung above, and not grabbing wildly for something up near the top; and thus proceeding carefully and surely step by step, line upon line, and precept upon precept. This does not mean, as many suppose, that he is telling them to forget the ultimate goal, the Spirit, the Millennium, or the eternities, and come down to earth and devote themselves to the common-sense everyday activities of life. No—that is an entirely different ladder. Brother Packer's figure of the ladder is a very instructive one: how we go about climbing the ladder is important, but even more important is *which* ladder we choose to climb.³¹ Both ladders, the one to heaven and the one to the executive suite, are to be climbed in the same way. The rules of success are the same in business, the arts, science, crime, and the military—but the ladders are by no means the same. Brigham Young never allowed the Saints to forget which ladder they were climbing.

This is the lesson we should study. The powers of our minds and bodies should be governed and controlled in that way that will secure to us an eternal increase. While the inhabitants of the earth are bestowing all their ability, both mental and physical, upon perishable objects, those who profess to be Latter-day Saints, who have the privilege of receiving and understanding the principles of the holy Gospel, are in duty bound to study and find out, and put in practice in their lives, those principles that are calculated to endure, and that tend to a continual increase in this, and in the world to come.³²

"And thus we teach the people how to live. This is our business. If you do not learn to live here, how can you live hereafter? If you do not understand the things of this life, how can you understand the things pertaining to the life to come?"³³

All business must be undertaken with an eye to the eternities, but how rarely do we take that view! I remember how disturbed my mother was when a visiting General Authority at our house (we lived in the mission field and were often visited by them) announced at the dinner table that it was more important for a girl to learn how to make a pot

of soup then to recite Shakespeare. As he saw it, the one thing was practical and the other was not, and no girl could do both. Actually both belong to the building of the kingdom and need not be mutually exclusive: the girl has learned to make soup by the time she is ten years old, and if that is all she does for the rest of her life, she doesn't even have a ladder. If people insisted on thinking in such terms, however—if it must be a matter of soup or Shakespeare—for Brigham it was the soup that would have to go.

Make good houses [soup]; learn how to build; become good mechanics and business men, that you may know how to build a house, a barn, or a storehouse, how to make a farm, and how to raise stock, and take every care of it. . . . On the other hand, the neighbourhood or community that adorns its city, farms, gardens, and supremely loves and sets its affections upon these things, had better never have seen or had anything to enjoy.³⁴

If it is a choice between Mary's work and Martha's, there can be no doubt what the Lord recommends (Luke 10:38—42). Again and again statements of Brigham Young that seem to be as solid and earthy as a handbook on gardening end up pointing us to the stars and the eternities:

We cannot marvel at a man's talking about paper rags in a religious meeting, and saying that it is the word of the Lord or at least the word of wisdom that we should save our rags. . . . When the Lord has gathered together a people to be a chosen people to him, he has always begun to educate them by instructing them in the little things pertaining to life.³⁵

If paper rags were a spiritual quantity, Shakespeare was no less a practical one, and MacBeth and Hamlet saw the Saints through more than one hard winter in the valleys. "Instead of trying to find out how God is made, or how angels are made, I wish you would try to learn how to sustain yourselves in your present existence, and at the same time learn the things of God—the things that await you, that you may begin to prepare to dwell to all eternity."³⁶ "Then what is this earth in its present condition? Nothing but a place in which we may learn the first lesson towards exaltation, and that is obedience to the Gospel of the Son of God."³⁷ "[The things of the earth] are made for the comfort of the creature, and not for his adoration [i.e., they are of second, never of first intent]. They are made to sustain and preserve the body while procuring the knowledge and wisdom that pertain to God and his kingdom, in order that we may preserve ourselves, and live for ever in his presence."³⁸

Practical knowledge is any knowledge that is put to use, as all knowledge should be. A favorite teaching of Brigham Young was that we should use everything we have: money is meant to be spent, not stored in a vault;³⁹ food is meant to be distributed and eaten, not hoarded for speculation. Remember what happened to the manna that some far-seeing Israelites stored up as a business investment—it promptly became foul and stinking (Exodus 16:19—20). Mere accumulation of anything is the act of the miser, the most miserable of men, who has so little faith in God that he must ever build up walls of security around himself. "Keep [your] riches," cries Brother Brigham, "and with them I promise you leanness of soul, darkness of mind, narrow and contracted hearts."⁴⁰ All knowledge must be put to use if only to beget more knowledge. Why? To fill a need—constant, urgent, and vital. Remember, "the brain craves for information as the body craves for food,"⁴¹ and if true knowledge is withheld from it, it will manufacture all manner of false doctrine; without a steady diet of learning the person sickens and withers, being false to his own nature. What we need is *constant* nourishment for both body and spirit, not terminal degrees.

But we treat knowledge today exactly as we do precious metals and negotiable papers which, as Brigham Young often reminds us, are in themselves not only worthless but most pernicious in their effect. We exchange knowledge for tokens—marks on paper, punched holes in cards, impressions on tape, and then we lock them up in a safe like a Swiss bank, and make a law that no one may even see our transcript without special permission! The bank then gives us a token, a doctor's degree, which we wear publicly at all times. We never let our fellowmen forget for a moment that we are sitting on all that knowledge, but make careful provision that they shall never take too close a look at it or ask us to draw upon it at short notice—that simply is not done.

This sort of thing is, of course, death to knowledge. For intelligence, the glory of God, is a moral quality. It is defined by the psychologists as "problem-solving ability." And how do you solve any problem? The first step for me is to discover what I do *not* know about it—I must search out the weak and defective spots in my knowledge, for that ignorance is what makes the problem. The next step is to find out the next things in order that I do *not* know but should; and thus I move forward in my quest, progressively laying bare dark new areas of ignorance, looking for the blank spaces on the map, the areas of which I know nothing, or where I have been deceived, where my vanity or

enthusiasm have led me astray. It is a humiliating experience, and the checks, corrections, revisions, deletions, weary retracing, and new beginnings never end. There is no terminal degree. Only the truly humble can take it; in fact, it is the very sort of thing that our institutional bookkeeping, poker-chip credits, and computed degrees are designed to avoid. The first words I ever heard spoken in a class at BYU (the only class I ever took here) was the opening statement of a professor at the old Aspen Grove Summer school, way back in 1927. He had just come from the coast with his brand new doctor's degree, and he introduced himself to the class by reporting how the chairman of the committee a few days before had shaken his hand at the conclusion of his oral exams with the ringing congratulation: "Now you will never have to take another examination as long as you live!" And he firmly believed it! Degrees, honors, appointments, awards, emoluments, offices—all are forlorn attempts to give a sense of enduring value to what Brigham Young calls the "grovelling things of earth," which have nothing in common with the gospel.⁴²

That Spirit, with the Gospel of Christ, interrupts the whole world in their common career, in every capacity of life. That Spirit does not chime in and harmonize with any earthly kingdom or government, either in their political or religious institutions; but it seems to put a check upon every thing, to throw into disorder the best laid plans of the wise and far-seeing among men; in short, it turns the whole current of earthly calculations back upon the world, and deluges it in the dark waters of confusion.⁴³

"We expect to be a stumbling block to the whole world, and a rock of offence to them."⁴⁴ "And to the natural man we are taking an unwise, an unnatural course, wherein our religion is obnoxious to the Christian world. . . . They can see nothing more than natural things; they do not understand the ways of God; they are unacquainted with His doings, with His kingdom, and with the principles of eternity."⁴⁵ Having made their choice, the Latter-day Saints should forget the ways of the world:

But to see a people who say, "We are the teachers of life and salvation," and yet are anxious to follow the nasty, pernicious fashions of the day, I say it is too insipid to talk or think about. It is beneath the character of the Latter-day Saints that they should have no more independence of mind or feeling than to follow after the grovelling customs and fashions of a poor, miserable, wicked world.⁴⁶

So there are at least two ladders, and you cannot climb them both. We have been hypnotized into thinking that there is only one, the conventional ladder of success, but for Brigham that is out:

No one supposes for one moment that in heaven the angels are speculating, that they are building railroads and factories, taking advantage one of another, gathering up the substance there is in heaven to aggrandize themselves, and that they live on the same principles that we are in the habit of doing. No Christian, no sectarian Christian, in the world believes this; they believe that the inhabitants of heaven live as a family, that their faith, interests and pursuits have one end in view—the glory of God and their own salvation, that they may receive more and more. . . . We all believe this, and suppose we go to work and imitate them as far as we can.⁴⁷

"Instead of reflecting upon and searching for hidden things of the greatest value to them, they [the Latter-day Saints] rather wish to learn how to secure their way through this world as early and as comfortably as possible. The reflections [upon] what they are here for, who produced them, and where they are from, far too seldom enter their minds."⁴⁸ Such is the ladder the Saints are inclined to choose, and it is the wrong one: "We are engaged in a higher-toned branch of business than any merchants or railroad men, or any institution of an earthly nature."⁴⁹ "He [Abraham] obtained the promise that he should be the father of lives. In comparison with this, what did Abraham care about machinery, railroads, and other great mechanical productions?"⁵⁰ We remember that "railroads and telegraph lines and cables . . . will increase our facilities and accelerate the progress of the work of the Lord."⁵¹ We also remember that they are only temporary and are not justified on any other grounds. To his son, John W. Young, Brigham wrote, "I will . . . not tear and wear my strength and life to shreds promoting any private enterprise."⁵² "I have never walked across the streets to make a trade," he said. "I do not care anything [much] about such things."⁵³ This attitude set him off sharply from his competitors in the gilded age. He comments on this in a letter in 1870 to his son on a mission in Switzerland:

We are constantly receiving communications from the elders laboring in the States, but how different is their testimony with regard to the work of God there. There is a coldness in the minds of the people, a total indifference to the gospel and its glorious truths and the whole sum of their inquiries [is] how and where we can make the most

money. Of course there are a few exceptions, but what a condition of things does this indicate! Every species of wickedness is on the increase. . . . The people are fast ripening for destruction. And why is this? The gospel door was opened on this land, . . . but these ordinances have been held in derision, the truth has been rejected, prophets and apostles have been slain for the testimony of Jesus, and now the people have become hardened in iniquity and are led captive to the will of that evil power they prefer to serve.⁵⁴

A good summary of Brigham's attitude toward what we call education for success is given in one of his many statements on the study of the law, i.e., specialization:

It is hard for a man to study law without forsaking the spirit of the Gospel. This proves that there is a lack of sound knowledge in the individual who permits himself to be thus led away. There are many among the inhabitants of the earth who . . . can only look upon one thing at a time [not for the moment but during an extended period of interest and activity]; and they forsake the contemplation of everything else for the one idea which occupies the mind [this is the whole secret of success set forth in the how-to-get-rich books!]. There are some of our Elders who will argue themselves into false doctrine by giving an undue preference to one scripture and passing over others equally as important. [This is what President J. F. Smith called "Religious Hobbyism."] This same lack of comprehensiveness of mind is also very noticeable at times with some men who happen to accumulate property, and it leads them to forsake the Spirit of the Gospel. Does it not prove that there is a contractedness of mind in those who do so, which should not be? . . . How contracted in mind and short-sighted we must be to permit the perishable things of this world to swerve us in the least degree from our fidelity to the truth. It shows that we lack knowledge which we should possess.⁵⁵

He puts his finger on the spot as he comments on the unbridgeable gulf that lies between the search for knowledge and the search for success.

How difficult it is for our Elders to go forth and contend with the learning of the age. . . . When a false theory has to be maintained, . . . it requires study, and learning, and cunning sophistry to . . . give it the semblance of truth, and make it plausible and congenial to the feelings of the people [i.e., to sell it]. . . . A child can tell you the truth, in child-like language, while falsehood . . . requires a scholastic education to make falsehood pass for truth. . . . Men are educated to promulgate and sustain false theories to make money. . . . But if the profession of a lawyer is chosen, . . . he needs to be educated in all the learning of the age to be successful—. . . to make things appear what they really are not.⁵⁶

Let us recall that "making things appear what they really are not" is Plato's definition of Rhetoric: making false appear true and true appear false by the skillful use of words.⁵⁷ With the recognition of the profession of Rhetoric of Public Relations as a legitimate activity, any civilization proclaims its moral bankruptcy.

It was natural that the Latter-day Saints should gravitate toward "education for success." Brother Brigham knew his people only too well. For him the purpose of education was to take the measure of the world, but for the poor Saints who had lived their lives among the ignorant and oppressed, its great promise was to find a place in the world. Being human, the Mormons followed the course of least resistance and defined success like everyone else as getting what you want, which in its ultimate terms means power and gain with fame and popularity as a bonus—all of which are exactly the things which God has categorically forbidden us to seek. The Saints were not yet ready for the higher school.

Brigham Young knew the material he had to work with: "We gather a few scientific and learned men, but the great majority are the poor and the ignorant."⁵⁸ "Very few of the learned or of those who are high and lifted up in the estimation of the people receive the Gospel."⁵⁹

In the due time of the Lord, the Saints and the world will be privileged with the revelations that are due to them. They now have many more than they are worthy of, for they do not observe them. . . . If guilt before my God and my brethren rests upon me in the least, it is in this one thing—that I have revealed too much concerning God and his kingdom, and the designs of our Father in heaven. If my skirts are stained in the least with wrong, it is because I have been too free in telling what God is, how he lives, the nature of his providences and designs in creating the world.⁶⁰

Having been given great knowledge, the Saints were in constant danger of underestimating their own ignorance. It was necessary to remind them again and again that if God's gifts are treated lightly they will be lightly withdrawn. The Mormons have constantly slipped into the dangerous complacency of the student who feels superior because he has the only answerbook in the class. Had they been given too much light? When would they be ready for more?

A year before his death, the Prophet Joseph wrote:

I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them. The Lord deals with this people as a tender parent with a child, communicating light and intelligence and the knowledge of his ways as they can bear it. The inhabitants of the earth are asleep; they know not the day of their visitation.⁶¹

And Wilford Woodruff recalled: "His mind was opened by the visions of the Almighty, and the Lord taught him many things by vision and revelation that were never taught publicly in his days; for the people could not bear the flood of intelligence which God poured into his mind."⁶²

And Brigham himself: "This people have not received, improved, grown, and enlarged in their capacities as fast as they should have done."⁶³ "We may look upon ourselves with shamefacedness because of the smallness of our attainments in the midst of so many great advantages."⁶⁴ "It is mortifying that the children of this world should know more about these things than the children of light. . . . The lack of knowledge manifested by us as a people is disgraceful."⁶⁵ The trouble was that the Latter-day Saints were insistent on combining Zion and Babylon in a new concept of success. This combination as we have frequently seen is utterly impossible. To try to combine the ways of the world and the law of the gospel can only lead to disaster, as Brigham Young often noted:

The man or woman who enjoys the spirit of our religion has no trials; but the man or woman who tries to live according to the Gospel of the Son of God, and at the same time clings to the spirit of the world, has trials and sorrows acute and keen, and that, too, continually. This is the deciding point, the dividing line. They who love and serve God with all their hearts rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks; but they who try to serve God and still cling to the spirit of the world, have got on two yokes—the yoke of Jesus and the yoke of the devil, and they will have plenty to do. They will have a warfare inside and outside, and the labor will be very galling, for they are directly in opposition one to the other.⁶⁶

So we are forced, whether we like it or not, to take up our position on one side of the line or the other. The conflict between the two projects is summed up by Brigham Young in a powerful passage:

What do you love truth for? . . . Because you think it will make you a ruler, or a Lord? If you conceive that you will attain to power upon such a motive, you are much mistaken. It is a trick of the unseen power, that is abroad amongst the inhabitants of the earth, that leads them astray, binds their minds, and subverts their understanding. Suppose that our Father in heaven, [or] our elder brother, the risen Redeemer, the Saviour of the world, or any of the Gods of eternity should act upon this principle, to love truth, knowledge, and wisdom, because they are all powerful [i.e., for what they could get out of them], . . . they would cease to be Gods; . . . the extension of their kingdom would cease, and their God-head come to an end.⁶⁷

Why should concern for the economy be especially pernicious to the cause of education? Aristotle's famous formula gives us the answer, *ou to zein alla to eu zein*: our object is not to stay alive but to live as we should. Our real interests and concerns begin where the economy leaves off. Dogs, mice, cockroaches, elephants, and oysters have through the long ages managed to solve the problem of staying alive and reproducing, the problem of survival. So far God has always provided. He has also promised to provide for us as for the sparrows. The question of how much will I get paid is the last question any student should ask, so with us at the BYU it is invariably the first. In the words of Samuel the Lamanite, "Ye do always remember your riches" (Helaman 13:22)—always the economy, the economy, all the day long. Young Brigham with his Puritan upbringing knew as much about the work ethic as anybody, and he despised it. Again he insisted it's the objective that's contemptible. Commendable zeal should not be wasted on the wrong ladder. We admire the billionaire who takes his lunch to work in a paper bag. He is seeking to project the image of the true work ethic, while all his life's goals belie it. The real work ethic is dedicated to a life of austerity and plain living and high thinking precisely because its goal is not to accumulate substance. "Work less, wear less, eat less, and we shall be a great deal wiser, healthier, and wealthier people than by taking the course we

now do. . . . Our artificial wants, and not our real wants, and the following of senseless customs subject our sisters to an excess of labor."⁶⁸ "But you find the mechanics that can go to with an old three-cornered file, a jack-knife, a spike-gimlet, and an inch augur, and build a waggon in a workmanlike manner, and you would say that he is a superior workman."⁶⁹

This is the type of economy and resourcefulness that Brigham admires, not that aimed at the accumulation of a lot of stuff to have power over others. The work ethic is only a method. The objective is the important thing. Which ladder are you climbing? "After suitable rest and relaxation there is not a day, hour or minute that we should spend in idleness, but every minute of every day of our lives we should strive to improve our minds and to increase in the faith of the holy Gospel."⁷⁰

This is the typical Brigham Young twist: what seems to begin as the typical routine admonition of the millionaire on "the secrets of success" turns out to be a call to the improvement of the mind. "If we all labor a few hours a day, we could then spend the remainder of our time in rest and the improvement of our minds."⁷¹ That is the real work we are called to do and the real wealth we are to accumulate individually. "The laboring man, the ingenious, industrious and prudent man, the man who lays himself out to advance the human family in every saving principle for happiness, for beauty and excellency, for wisdom, power, greatness and glory is the true benefactor of his race; . . . he is a civilized man."⁷²

A measure of the avoidance of real work in our day is the universal surrender to kitsch. What is kitsch? It is a more established international term for what we also call corn and camp. Kitsch is the lowest common denominator in art and style, what is supposed to have the widest popular appeal and therefore the widest market. The ultimate in kitsch is the "commercial." Applied to the gospel, kitsch puts everything on the telestial level, easy of access to all, no effort required. But kitsch runs counter to everything the gospel stands for, for it seeks to escape the impact of reality by limiting our vision to safe and familiar objects. Every close view of eternity has a terrifying effect on mortals, who must always be reassured by visiting angels whose presence makes them "sore afraid." To the extent to which the gospel influences a creative artist, something of this culture-shock carries over. This means, paradoxically, that there is something to be said for kitsch where the gospel is concerned.

In the study of early Christian and Jewish art, it is notable that the nearer one gets to the pure primitive community of Saints, the clumsier and less beguiling their art becomes. At the same time, however, it becomes ever more symbolic. It is as if they knew perfectly well that the fourth dimension that gives the gospel its power and its glory simply cannot be captured in any two- or three-dimensional medium. Any attempt to depict celestial glory in any of the limited media at the artist's disposal is doomed to be a dismal failure. Religious art and music reached their height in the Baroque, and even then all is painfully artificial, contrived, forced, theatrical, operatic—*Theatrum Dei* was Bernini's expression to describe his own work. For the real gospel that will never do. It is better not to try to depict the glories of the eternities than to fall flat on one's face and make them ridiculous. The Egyptians perhaps had the answer. They made no attempt at realism or impressionism but presented a carefully thought-out arrangement of symbols, mere abstractions, but symbols so intimate and familiar to the beholder that the sight of any of them had a direct impact on his mind and his emotions. The greatness of a presentation would have to be all in the beholder's eye. The avowed purpose of kitsch is to settle for the safe and commonplace—music, art, science, literature, religion, all-for-family fare, G rated: the kiddies must enjoy it as much as you do.

It is Joseph Smith who puts his finger on the spot when he says, "Our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversations [have been] too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God."⁷³ *Condescending* is what kitsch is. Webster defines the verb as "to come down; descend; accommodate one's self to an inferior." Dale Carnegie's maxim, "If the customer says 'ain't,' you say 'ain't,'" is not an index of humility or a common humanity but merely a trick to get money from people. Kitsch is out for the general market and deliberately chooses to appeal through the commonplace, ordinary, conventional, things that disturb nobody. In art it is realistic, obvious, shallow, sentimental, ordinary, insipid, requiring the least possible amount of effort to produce a predictable reaction.

Brigham Young, on the other hand, insisted that the Saints should stretch their minds and work hard at cultivating taste, never settling for kitsch. "Let us . . . show to the world that we have talent and taste, and prove to the heavens that our minds are set on beauty and true excellence, so that we can become worthy to enjoy the society of angels."⁷⁴

We enjoy because we have sensibility. Promote this sensibility, seek to get more and more knowledge, more wisdom, and more understanding. . . . This will give us greater sensibility, and we shall know how to enjoy, and how to endure. I say, if you want to enjoy exquisitely, become a Latter-day Saint, and then live the doctrine of Jesus Christ.⁷⁵

"The greatest and most important labour we have to perform is to cultivate ourselves."⁷⁶ "Our senses, if properly educated, are channels of endless felicity to us, but we can devote them to evil or to good."⁷⁷

It is an Article of Faith (No. 13) with the Latter-day Saints that the world has good things to offer and that the Mormons possess no monopoly of taste.

If there is anything that is great and good and wise among men, it cometh from God. If there are men who possess great ability as statesmen, or as philosophers, or who possess remarkable scientific knowledge and skill, the credit thereof belongs to God, for He dispenses it to His children whether they believe in Him or not, or whether they sin against Him or not; it makes no difference.⁷⁸

This is the belief and doctrine of the Latter-day Saints: Learn everything that the children of men know, and be prepared for the most refined society upon the face of the earth, then improve upon this until we are prepared and permitted to enter the society of the blessed—the holy angels that dwell in the presence of God.⁷⁹

What could be more foolish than to reject such gifts because they are found outside the Church? Just as the King James version of the Bible is worthy of our reverent attention until the day when we can excel it, so it is no disgrace that the Church has not produced a Bach, Michelangelo, or Shakespeare—the whole world has hardly produced a handful of such men in a thousand years. We should receive their gifts with gratefulness before we presume to supplant them with our own poor talents.

Many think that all which was taught them by their fathers and mothers, school teachers and priests, ought to be removed, laid aside, dispensed with, and that they should begin anew to learn every principle of civilization. This is a great mistake. . . . Some imagine that they must begin and unlearn the whole of their former education, but I say, cling to all the good that you have learned, and discard the bad.⁸⁰

Accordingly, no Latter-day Saint can be justified in setting up standards of taste until he has had the widest possible experience. Brigham comments on the well-known phenomenon of the young Latter-day Saint who had no inkling of how great the gospel is and how much it offers until he goes out in the world and makes extensive comparisons:

Our children do not know the greatness of their blessing and privileges. . . . They do not know that they possess the light of the Holy Spirit until they go out into the world and learn the great contrast. . . . They hear their fathers pray, and they hear the Apostles and Prophets preach, but they cannot know that "Mormonism" is true for themselves until they have had the privilege of being placed in circumstances to exercise faith for themselves, and to pray to God for themselves for testimony and knowledge.⁸¹

It was this absorption in the larger scene that drew Brigham toward the stage as a vehicle of culture, though his Puritan ancestors would have been horrified at the thought.

The Lord knows all things; man should know all things pertaining to this life, and to obtain this knowledge it is right that he should use every feasible means; and I do not hesitate to say that the stage can, in a great degree, be made to subserve this end. . . . Can we not even make the stage of a theatre the platform upon which to exhibit truth in all its simple beauty?⁸²

But this was no mere holding up of the mirror to society as the stage depicted it. The great geniuses of art and literature are timeless; but to heed the voice of fashion is another matter entirely. He wanted the Saints to create what he called a "style of our own."⁸³

To me a desire to follow the ever-varying fashions of the world manifests a great weakness of mind in either gentleman or lady. We are too apt to follow the foolish fashions of the world; and if means were plentiful, I do not

think that there are many families among the Latter-day Saints but what would be up to the highest and latest fashions of the day.⁸⁴

If I do not say much about such customs and fashions, I shall probably skip over some naughty words. In my feelings they are positively ridiculous, they are so useless and unbecoming. . . . I take the liberty of saying that these fashions are displeasing in the sight of truth, mercy and justice.⁸⁵

Nothing could be more retrograde to this philosophy than the present-day practice of combining the splendor of the gospel with the lowest fashionable idiom of the day, the kitsch of the Broadway stage, as a means of selling inferior compositions in the Church market. The facile, sentimental Broadway melody tolerable in its place is set to equally mawkish words and exalted to the realm of high art simply by assigning it the subject of the First Vision or the Temple. This is definitely hitting below the belt. It is like trying to raise the standard and status of a school simply by giving it the cheap and easy title of "the Lord's University." Indeed, when that expression was first used about 1950, some of the General Authorities found it foolish and offensive—clearly a case of claiming the prize before one has earned it. When Laman and Lemuel affected superior virtue by pointing out that they and their friends were the Chosen People, Nephi rebuked them sharply: "Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:35). Wherever the honest in heart seek knowledge that is the Lord's school.

The very essence of taste is that it is not to be prescribed by any authority. It is one of those things in which every individual is required to exercise his own judgment. "We are not disposed," said Joseph Smith, "had we the power, to deprive anyone of exercising that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts."⁸⁶ Brigham Young spoke often on this theme: "Ladies and gentlemen, I exhort you to think for yourselves, and read your Bibles for yourselves, get the Holy Spirit for yourselves, and pray for yourselves."⁸⁷ "The catalogue of man's discipline," says Brigham Young, the sound psychologist, "he must compile himself: he cannot be guided by any rule that others may lay down, but is placed under the necessity of tracing it himself through every avenue of his life. He is obliged to catechise and train himself."⁸⁸

"Pay no attention to what others do, it is no matter what they do, or how they dress."⁸⁹ Brigham deplored the idea of following fashion for fashion's sake no matter who said it: "I am not a stereotyped Latter-day Saint," he cried; "away with stereotyped Mormons!"⁹⁰

Yet he knew that there is no stronger temptation at all levels of authority than to prescribe taste—which is under no circumstances a leader's prerogative:

It is no more natural for your lungs to expand and contract in breathing than it is for you to wish others to be like yourselves. . . . All of these classes act according to their faith and traditions, and each one of them says, "If you are not as I am, you are not right." This is just as natural as it is to breathe vital air. I wish this trait in the Saints to be done away. I want the Elders of Israel to learn to take people as they are.⁹¹

If decisions must be made in such matters he recommends the broadest base of communication:

When it becomes our duty to talk, we ought to be willing to talk. If we never exhibit the knowledge within us, the people will not know really whether we have any. Interchanging our ideas and exhibiting that which we believe and understand affords an opportunity for detecting and correcting errors and increasing our stock of valuable information. I have frequently thought that I should be very happy if I could hear the Elders of Israel speak their feelings and impart their knowledge pertaining to their fellow-beings, to earthly things, to heavenly things, to godliness, and God.⁹²

Thus we are to advocate our ideas, but never force them on others:

No person has a right to say to another, "Why do you eat wheat bread, corn bread, or no bread at all? why do you eat potatoes, or why do you not eat them? why do you walk, or why do you sit down? why do you read this or that book? or why do you go to the right or the left?" . . . If the Elders of Israel could understand this a little better, we would like it, for the simple reason that if they had power given them now they manifest the same weaknesses in the exercise thereof as any other people.⁹³

If we do not prescribe to others in matters of taste, neither may we depend on them to prescribe for us: "Now those men, or those women, who know no more about the power of God, and the influences of the Holy Spirit, than to be led entirely by another person, suspending their own understanding, and pinning their faith upon another's sleeve, will never be capable of entering into the celestial glory."⁹⁴ Granted "there never was and never will be a people in heaven nor on earth, in time nor in eternity, that can be considered truly and entirely independent of counsel and direction."⁹⁵ Still the law of agency requires them only to follow the counsel they ask for and accept: "If they do not believe in my advice, teachings, and counsel, they are at perfect liberty to disbelieve them, and I will not find one word of fault with them for so doing."⁹⁶ "We have history enough to prove that when [men] have the power their motto is, 'You shall.' But there is no such thing in the economy of heaven."⁹⁷

Of course we run the risk of being confronted by all manner of false doctrine and ideas, if left thus to ourselves, but that is part of the plan. Brigham Young's son, Willard, very shrewdly observed in a letter to his father in 1876 that his friends who had left the Church did not do so because of "instructions they got that misled them, so much as the *want* of proper instructions."⁹⁸ The trouble was not that they had heard too much but that they did not hear enough.

In short, Brigham's teaching "breathes that spirit of liberty in the pursuit of knowledge characteristic of the work of God in the last days."⁹⁹ Everyone was free to go his own way: "'To mind your own business' incorporates the whole duty of man."¹⁰⁰

Let me conclude at last with a sentimental journey which I took the other night. It began when I found in my overstuffed mailbox (alas for the forests of America!) an impressive flyer from the BYU Travel Study—an elegantly inscribed Hebrew version of Orson Hyde's prayer dedicating the Holy Land in 1841, along with an invitation "to be instructed more perfectly . . . of things both in heaven and earth." "What better way to be instructed," said the flyer, "than by a scholar from the Church Education System while standing on the Mount of Olives where Orson Hyde's dedicatory prayer was offered." With this the customer was provided with a list of almost twenty experts to choose from; the question arises: which of these could best read and interpret the Hebrew prayer? Can *all* of them? Can *any* of them? I leave it to you to discover.

Intrigued by this, I went over to the Travel Study office for more information, and as I left was attracted by an impressively drawn placard announcing a series of courses in a certain department in which I could choose to take "Primitive Pottery," "NRA Hunter Safety," or "Interim classes." Having been long at the BYU, I was neither shocked nor surprised by this sort of thing, which I have seen a thousand times—the impressive facade with nothing behind it is the rule, not the exception, with us. I was reminded of the announcers over KBYU speaking with oh-so-cultured accents as they elaborately mispronounce all the proper names they are reading off from the record covers. As I left the place I picked up another brochure inviting the public to enter into a great "Adventure into Learning"—this surely is the real thing: I opened the brochure and was challenged to extend my questioning mind through courses in Slimnastics, Cake Decorating, Auto Maintenance, and A More Feminine You. From there I passed to the bookstore and was reminded both of what Brother King has recently said about it (a vulgar place and a monopoly), and of the fact that for upwards of 100 years Provo has been a university town without a single bookstore. What on earth could the students have been doing all the time? To find out, listen to their conversation among themselves, as I have for the past thirty years: one thing you would never guess from such conversation is that you are at an institution of learning. The subjects are (1) jobs and money, (2) cars, and (3) social activity—religious and romantic. Quite recently Brother Thomas Rogers, speaking from a higher and more official level of observation, has announced the same verdict: BYU students simply are *not* interested in things of the mind. From the bookstore by a natural transition I passed to the library, where without the new addition we already have shelf-space for over a million volumes; but here any thought of serious research is out of the question, because the officials, to save themselves time and trouble and make room for new acquisitions, simply took all bound periodicals earlier than the year 1970 and locked them up in a warehouse. Now the heart of any program of serious study in almost any field is the periodical literature of the past century—but can you make a librarian see that? Never mind—the books will not be missed: that became apparent to me as I left the library late at night and walked home through an empty and deserted campus, as I have done thousands of times in the past—the lights do *not* burn late on Temple Hill; they never have.

Descending the steps that take me home, I remembered President Harris and his interest in making a lovely natural preserve on the south side of campus: now what we have is the carefully manicured, groomed, trimmed, regimented landscaping where nothing is allowed to grow in its wild or natural state. Nature must observe our dress standards—

the look comes first; nothing else really matters. I noticed as I always do the smoke pouring from the power plant and asked myself again: What is it we produce that is worth the price of all that pollution? Certainly not knowledge. I was reminded that most of our smartest students are now working with computers: they are not discovering or absorbing knowledge, but simply processing it, neither producers or consumers of the precious stuff, but middlemen, dutifully attendant on machines. And if knowledge, then not character; Woodrow Wilson said that character is a by-product, the by-product of hard work well done.

So I have come full circle. My first day in Provo, thirty years ago, President Joseph Fielding Smith was on the campus and made a remark to Leroy Robertson that I have never forgotten: "We are rapidly coming to be known as a mediocre people." Why must this be? In a letter written just 100 years ago, Brigham Young clearly states his purpose in founding the BYU at Provo:

We have enough and to spare, at present in these mountains, of schools where young infidels are made because the teachers are so tender-footed that they dare not mention the principles of the gospel to their pupils, but have no hesitancy in introducing into the classroom the theories of Huxley, of Darwin, or of Miall and the false political economy which contends against co-operation and the United Order. This course I am resolutely and uncompromisingly opposed to, and I hope to see the day when the doctrines of the gospel will be taught in all our schools, when the revelation of the Lord will be our texts, and our books will be written and manufactured by ourselves and in our own midst. As a beginning in this direction I have endowed the Brigham Young Academy at Provo and [am] now seeking to do the same thing in this city.¹⁰¹

The purpose of the BYU, then, is to challenge the reigning philosophies of Darwinism and what today is commonly called Social-Darwinism (see Alma 30:17)—not to forbid their teaching but to present the gospel alternatives to it. Instead of which we still embrace both with uncritically open arms, and as a result remain to this day "fixed with a very limited amount of knowledge, and, like a door upon its hinges, move to and fro from one year to another without any visible advancement or improvement. . . . Man is made in the image of God, but what do we know of him or of ourselves, when we suffer ourselves to love and worship the god of this world—riches?"¹⁰²

I pray that the Lord may enlighten all our minds with a fuller understanding of his purposes.

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