

APPROACHING THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD

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As people are drawn to thinking about higher things, they seek institutions to foster and train that thinking; places where they might not only question the meaning of their existence, but find answers; places where they might study how art, science, and literature enrich and define the human experience. Such places might ideally answer a spiritual yearning to “go up to the mountain of the Lord, and he will teach us of His ways and we will walk in His paths” (Isaiah 2:2).

For centuries the university has offered the hope for this type of experience, a place where people can study these higher things, much like a temple. Interesting, the instructions for the operation of the School of the Prophets is mixed into the instructions for establishing a temple (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:118-141). However, for various reasons, the modern university has never quite lived up to these idealistic notions of what it should be. Different forces, over time, have polluted the clear streams from the mountain.

Now at Ricks College we have a remarkable opportunity to craft the ideal place for higher learning—a university where the whole man can be educated in a setting conducive to “getting understanding” (Proverbs 4:7). As a campus community we can try to approach the mountain of the Lord. As individual teachers, we can act as our students’ mountain guides—pointing out possible pitfalls, drawing attention to the inspiring vistas—and together reach its summit.

The forces alluded to above not only pollute the streams, but constantly pull open crevasses in the approach to the mountainside. For example, the history of education in America has been characterized by a central tension between vocational and academic training. Educators have consistently grappled with the very purpose of education—whether to teach skills or foster enlightenment. This quandary is exacerbated by a rapidly and constantly changing marketplace affecting what people must know to be employable, cultural factors affecting what tools students have and what obstacles they must overcome to learn, and an exponentially growing body of available knowledge.

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So what defines education, and what role should the university play? How do we approach the mountain and guide students to its summit? Several sources over many years have asked similar questions and proposed interesting answers. For example, George DeBoer writes: “Education should lead people to independent self-activity. It should empower individuals to think and to act. It should give individuals new

ideas and investigative skills that contribute to self-regulation, personal satisfaction, and social responsibility” (240).

This goal of independent self-activity tempered with social responsibility and self-regulation was also emphasized by William Johnson Cory at Eton College in 1861, when he said,

... you go to a great school, not for knowledge so much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thought, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage, and mental soberness. Above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge. (Roskovsky 101)

Originally the path to this goal was laid upon a foundation of faith. When America's first university, Harvard, was being organized, the founders included this language in what we might now call their mission statement:

Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life (John 17:3), and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. (Morrison 434)

How far we have strayed from this purpose! In public education today, although students are sometimes required to read the vilest filth, they cannot pray, nor are they often exposed to some of the great writing of the past because these writings are judged too religious. Thus our institutions fall short of the ideal, and miss the self-regulating power of faith. As Theodore Roosevelt said: “To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” It is our opportunity at BYU-Idaho create the right combination.

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Another problem, when we look around and see what passes as education, even at places like BYU and Ricks, is that we often find students are not “anxiously engaged” in the process of learning how to learn as much as they are in learning what educators call “the hidden curriculum”—what we teach students outside the syllabus, such as how to succeed without learning, or how to get the grade without understanding. This hidden curriculum was described by A. LeGrande Richards at a BYU devotional a few years ago:

I'm afraid that I used to view education as a game. It was a serious game, but a game nevertheless. There were specific rules for winning or losing; there were tricky moves you could make to compete more effectively for

those elusive grades; there were secrets you could apply to make it easier. I saw a difference between learning and schooling, but I saw schooling as a game. I wish I had placed my schooling in its eternal context, which is anything but a game. (Richards)

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When students become obsessed with the game, we are losing sight of the ideal. Such attitudes have become epidemic across America, and many educators, such as Alan Bloom, have bemoaned the attendant loss of academic vision:

Falling in love with the idea of the University is not a folly, for only by means of it is one able to see what can be. Without it all these wonderful results of the theoretical life collapse back into the primal slime from which they cannot re-emerge. The facile economic and psychological debunking of the theoretical life cannot do away with its irreducible beauty, but such debunking can obscure them, and has. (245)

Ultimately, as Latter-day Saints, we realize the goal is not even Alan Bloom's ideal university, but one that goes even further, wedding academic and spiritual understanding together. This is a lofty ideal—an institution which truly approaches the mountain of the Lord—but it is not merely an ephemeral dream. It is a real possibility, as Jeffrey R. Holland expressed to the BYU community:

From [the first] I have believed that such idealism, such passion for the ultimate possibility, was incumbent on us all. Scholastic tension between the sacred and profane has marked most of this world's history, and if the dream weren't really attainable, then why have a BYU at all? If BYU were to ever look and act just like any other university, then who needs it? [One night] after such dark thoughts, I simply felt inspired to open the scriptures at random and find something fresh and unfamiliar. This night I opened the book without prejudice and with, I think, a special measure of hope in my heart. Literally and truly the first words on which my eyes fell, were "Behold, I the Lord am well pleased that there should be a school in Zion" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 97:3). (144)

The goal, as another BYU president, Ernest L. Wilkinson, put it, "is to bring order out of the chaos of information and inspire [students] with the great spiritual principles which bring harmony, order, joy, and happiness in human life" (32).

My point is that we have here and now an opportunity, unparalleled in earth's history, to craft the ideal university, to approach and climb the mountain of the Lord. We here can not only educate, but inspire, not only train, but testify, not only learn, but feel. Education here can approach the human soul in every aspect—the physical, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual—because of this nebulous but very real

thing we call “the Spirit of Ricks.” The mountain’s height beckons us with grandeur untold. It would behoove us all, as we lay the foundations for this new university, to remember these things, and as Joseph Smith observed, “If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it [will] be a hard matter to get right” (343). ∞

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