

DISMANTLING A THEME PARK

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President Hugh B. Brown (1833-1975), a counselor in the First Presidency, described the ultimate evil as “the closing of the mind or steeling it against truth, resulting in the hardening of intellectual arteries.” This, he posits, requires rethinking. “God desires that we learn and continue to learn, but this involves some unlearning. As Uncle Zeke said, ‘It ain’t my ignorance that done me up, but what I know’d that wasn’t so.’”¹

What does it mean to rethink something? The prefix “re-” literally means to repeat, to do again. Or it can indicate a backward motion, as in “revert” or “refurbish.” Either way, the slogan “rethinking education” suggests that, in becoming a *real* university, our educational system requires some restructuring. We must, therefore, *rethink* the way we do things, the way we teach, the way our students learn, the way we forward our mission to teach the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

RETHINKING THE ENVIRONMENT: THE THEME PARK EXPERIENCE

When I talk to my students about the importance of rethinking, I share my own experience visiting an environment where most of the thinking is done for you: Disney World. Several years ago I went with my husband on a business trip to Orlando, Florida, which included a one-day foray into Epcot in Disney World. Our first stop was at an enormous, geodesic dome called Spaceship Earth. Like many of the rides at Epcot, this one had animatrons which narrated a story of sorts to the tourists as they wheeled around dark corners in their saucer vehicles. At Spaceship Earth, the theme recounted the history of communications where cave dwellers chipped petroglyphs upon rock, renaissance men puzzled over the miracle of a printing press, and a cowboy removed the mail from his express-line saddlebags. And so on and so on. As the ride ended, a cheerful female voice buzzing from the speaker thanked us for our participation and reminded us that AT&T was working to make our future in communications brighter.² The big, golf-ball-shaped Spaceship Earth ride, I tell my students, bears a not-so-coincidental resemblance to the AT&T symbol which ornaments our phone bills every month. The next ride promised a trip back in time, when dinosaurs walked the earth. Before proceeding into an interior canal flanked by junglish landscapes and dripping, robotic lizards, we had to sit through a seven-minute film that pitched the importance of further oil exploration and consumption. Can you guess the sponsor? That’s right—Exxon.

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World system in Orlando—designed to showcase modern innovations in technology. While most tourists are aware of the highly promotional nature of these exhibits, how often do they pause to rethink their entertainment—to consider that it is financed by special interests who are selling not only products but also images, lifestyles, and even value systems? The Disney mega-theme parks are programmed in such a way that visitors never question their role in the synthetic landscape. The experience is more fun that way—you don't have to think about it.

Susan Willis, a professor of English at Duke University specializing in cultural studies, describes a “totality of the built and themed environment” within mega theme parks like Disneyland and Epcot:

Visitors are inducted into the park's program, their every need predefined and presented to them as a packaged routine and set of choices. “I'm not used to having everything done for me.” This is how my companion at Disney World reacted when she checked into a Disney resort hotel and found that she, her suitcase, and her credit card had been turned into the scripted components of a highly orchestrated program.³

Disney World and Epcot are a long way from BYU-Idaho, but I like to challenge students to be cognizant of the theme park mentality where one submits so entirely to the program that conscious thinking and reflective thinking shuts down. At this point they complain that I'm “no fun” and that theme park adventures should be worry-free. The experience is more fun when you are not required think about it, when you can fall into a predictable pattern, where all your needs are factored into the program and all your worries eliminated.⁴ Perhaps they are right. But submitting to a constructed experience so much that you quit thinking seems a bit sinister to me—especially when we all know that the Disney corporation is no more charitable for the sake of making dreams come true than Las Vegas is committed to providing free money for gamblers.

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With all due respect to Mickey Mouse and friends, we cannot afford the theme park mentality in today's media-saturated culture. Too often our choices are dictated to us through subtle and not-so-subtle messages—messages encouraging conformity to what is comfortable or trendy. If students can be taught to rethink their environments and experiences, they will be better equipped to recognize the manipulation inherent to popular culture. But how do we help our students become independent thinkers when they are so accustomed to being told how to think?

RETHINKING ROUTINES: THE LIMITS OF THE SAFETY NET

There are some crucial differences between the kinds of theme park thinking endemic to the Disneyland experience and the deeper thinking that leads to greater understanding.

Matthew Lipman says that critical thinking is “skillful, responsible thinking that is conducive to good judgment because it is sensitive to context, relies on criteria, and is self-correcting.”⁵ We certainly want our students to employ good judgment; but it feels safer, somehow, not to think too hard about the things that we have accepted on faith all our lives, to sit back and let the prescribed program work for us. Better not to rock the boat. Better not to raise too many questions for fear of exposing our doubt and, possibly, our ignorance.

But is this kind of mental lethargy healthy to a growing mind and spirit? I see evidence of complacent, programmed thinking all the time in my students. Oh, they’re good kids who want to do the right thing, for the most part. But at some point in their development as spiritual beings, many of them stopped asking questions about their values, their testimonies.

One student, for example, turned in a paper to me on third-world poverty in which he decried the lamentable conditions of the people he saw on his mission who were living in squalor. I looked forward to his resolution, which I expected to be a Christ-like extension of love and empathy. The paper, however, ended on a sour note when he wrote that these people, like most of the society’s poor, may never rise above their circumstances. His explanation: had they wanted to escape poverty, they would merely try harder and accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I was alarmed that this bright, capable, righteous young man had learned little on his mission about responsible, reflective thinking. And, even after two years in the mission field, he had little sensitivity to the physical, spiritual, political, and socio-economic contexts of the people he was teaching. If he had stopped to think his conclusions through, he might have reasoned that his judgment was based on oversimplified and stereotypical notions about poverty.

If this were an isolated incident, it would be easy to brush aside. However, I’ve heard similar sentiments from students, ward members, relatives, and even some colleagues who think about issues but apparently not in any reflective or self-correcting way. Members become so familiar with the programmed routine that they never challenge their own thought processes.

I do not want to suggest that the campus of BYU-Idaho is a corporate theme park bent on turning students into unthinking robots. But there is one similarity—the participants in each can sometimes lapse into a state of blissful, unthinking auto-pilot. In a sense, they come to BYU-Idaho accepting the totality of the environment here because it provides them with a comfortably familiar routine.

Like the happy tourists at Disneyland, have our students discarded critical and creative thinking because they feel safe and unchallenged

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here? If so, is that such a bad thing? Probably not—if the safety net provided here follows them into the real world of secular attitudes and value systems.

We cannot, however, guarantee that their lives beyond BYU-Idaho will be safely entrenched in the comfortable routines of chaperoned ward activities and public prayers by like-minded Christians. As a matter of fact, students are likely to encounter situations where active, independent thinking is necessary for them to defend their values and beliefs.

One of the features I like best about the BYU-Idaho experience is that it can be a safe place for open dialogue. And that is encouraging because every new generation that graduates from this campus encounters a greater onslaught of conflicting values and dark temptations. What better time for them to ask questions than here? What safer environment for them to explore their own belief systems than in our classrooms? They must know how to ask questions, how to challenge assumptions, and how to read between the lines. Now more than ever students must understand what they believe and why they believe it.

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RETHINKING THE PROCESS: THE COURAGE TO QUESTION

As Ellen Pearson pointed out in the Winter 2002 issue of *Perspective*, honest, healthy dialogue can be a challenge when students and faculty alike avoid questioning or disagreeing with others because it might raise contention.⁶ I, too, have encountered trepidation in my classrooms whenever I encourage students to question their values, as if the conservative culture in which they were raised has some unspoken creed that forbids open discussion of such matters.

I wonder if they confuse faith with blind acceptance. There is a difference. Faith is the righteous belief in the unknown based on the known—a spiritual inference, if you will. Faith does *not* preclude further questioning and enlightenment. Blind acceptance, however, arises from careless resignation to whatever comes; blind acceptance never seeks a fuller understanding—that would involve too much effort and controversy.

The Lord teaches us that faith in Him makes all things possible (1 Nephi 7:12). When King Lamoni was astounded by Ammon's formidable composure and questioned his source of power, Ammon explained that the Lord imparts knowledge and power according to faith (Alma 18: 35). While faith is an essential component to our salvation, faith without

personal effort to understand is a waste of spiritual energy. The prophet Joseph Smith promised the saints that the understanding and knowledge we seek now will be with us in the resurrection (*Doctrine & Covenants* 130:18–19). Showing faith and actively seeking deeper understanding are perfectly righteous and compatible pursuits.

We often look to children as examples of perfect faith. Yet even children ask questions; that is how they grow into mentally mature adults. The young Joseph Smith, an especially alert thinker for a fourteen-year-old, was troubled by many questions that he dared to bring before the Lord:

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to “ask of God” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture. (JSH 1:13)

In an *Ensign* article entitled, “Finding the Abundant Life,” James E. Faust identifies the dichotomy of learning that Church members will encounter throughout their lives. Our knowledge comes from two sources: the divine and the secular, defined by Brigham Young University president Rex E. Lee as “the rational process and the extra-rational process.” The rational process, writes President Faust, is the more familiar course of school and study. “The extra-rational, or divine source, is less common,” he explains. “This source is, however, more sure. Both sources may be available to us. Fortunately, we do not have to choose one to the exclusion of the other.”⁷

I remind my students that actively seeking knowledge and then critically analyzing that knowledge is ultimately how we arrive at Truth. I also tell them that their belief systems usually arise from their knowledge and experience. Questioning their own belief systems can make students squirm a little. “How can one question one’s testimony?” they ask. “How can one have a testimony without asking questions?” I respond. Many significant events in the history of both the ancient and latter-day Church arose from the catalyst of a simple question. Joseph Smith, the apostles Paul and Peter, Nephi and Alma—each dialogued with God because of the human and divine need to discover the Truth. The Lord provided powerful answers, life-changing, earth-shaking answers. Still, the prophets continued to question God, to seek understanding, to clarify purpose. As long as we are imperfect mortals striving for a higher degree of divinity, we will continue to ask questions: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Luke 11:9).

Obviously, there is a certain appeal to giving up one’s thought processes to a safe, predictable system of habit and pattern. But if our goal is to rethink education here at BYU-Idaho, then perhaps the first step should

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be to consider how and if we are teaching students to think critically. We are not merely educating bright, capable workers for the job market. We should be encouraging conscious consumers, wise voters, responsible citizens, and moral human beings.

In rethinking education, we should regard our students as more than theme park visitors where all their needs are predefined and presented to them as a packaged routine. Encouraging questions, dialogue, and critical thinking are all ways to approach the challenge. And if rethinking requires a little “unlearning” for our students (or for us), then we can only grow from this experience.

We could even adopt a new slogan for “rethinking education.” We might have to make the banners a little longer, but imagine Uncle Zeke’s words in bright lettering on a black, nylon canvas waving from poles all over campus: “It ain’t my ignorance that done me up, but what I know’d that wasn’t so.” ☺

NOTES:

1. Hugh B. Brown, quoted in “Finding the Abundant Life,” James E. Faust, *Ensign*, (July 2001): 2-5.
2. David Harris, “Disney Theme Parks: A Commentary.” <http://www.arasite.org/ndisney2.htm> [accessed 7 September 2002].
3. Susan Willis, “Disney World: Public Use/Private State,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92:1 (Winter 1993): 119-138.
4. Susan Willis.
5. Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
6. Ellen Pearson, “Dialogue,” *Perspective*, 2:1 (Winter 2002): 11-18.
7. James E. Faust, “Finding the Abundant Life,” *Ensign*, (July 2001): 2-5.