

## IMPROVING COMMUNICATION TO BECOME ONE

David L. Ward—Department of English

Communication is at the center of everything we do at this institution, especially during this time of transition. For BYU-Idaho to become the premier learning and teaching university envisioned by a prophet of God, clear and inspired communication must inform all planning. Yet in our attempts to communicate, we often forget that to effectively share our thoughts and ideas, we need to be willing to learn from each other. The will to learn and teach should not simply beat in the heart of every effective classroom; it must throb at the heart of every counseling experience we have as faculty and administrators. To achieve this type of clear and inspired communication, we need *charity*, which is more than being nice—it is the godly trait of being one. Consequently, *communication* is all about *communion*: that is to say, communication is all about becoming one through the sharing of the word.

But such communion is difficult to enjoy. A professor who taught me transformational grammar at the University of Michigan often reminded his students that because of the sociological nature of language and meaning, it is a wonder that we understand each other as much as do. He helped me realize that misunderstanding to some degree is to be expected in any attempt to communicate. The reason for this is born out in what President David O. McKay told Lowell Bennion during a private conversation. “Brother Bennion,” cautioned President McKay, “remember: words do not convey meanings; they call them forth.” Thinking of the implication of this statement, Brother Bennion concluded the following: “I speak out of the context of my experience, and you listen out the context of yours, and that is why communication is difficult.”<sup>1</sup>

For this reason communication is never simply about an *idea*; it is essentially a matter of *identity*. It is a matter of discerning *who* another person is and *where* that person stands—not simply *what* his/her stand is. When we share words with each other, we are capable of sharing only pieces of our world. But this is only half the challenge. These pieces, far from simply “conveying our world in part,” call forth personal meanings within those who listen. The meanings they associate with *our* words invariably arise from *their* world of experience.

We must then remember that we are engaged in a process of understanding that does not begin with what we *understand*. Rather, understanding grows out of a commitment to discern what we are *misunderstanding* and how we are being *misunderstood*. This discernment originates from a willingness to perceive what meaning the other person is construing from our words. Understanding requires an intellectual

Understanding  
grows out of a  
commitment to  
discern what we are  
misunderstanding  
and how we  
are being  
misunderstood.

and emotional commitment to learn from and teach each other what meanings are being called forth by our talk. The irony of learning to understand each other is that initially we have only our personal meanings and experiences to draw upon. These mean everything to us. They are what make us who we are; they form our identity. As such we hang onto them vigilantly. Consequently, when we hear another person talk, we understand *ourselves* through what they say—instead of understanding *them*. Understanding them requires a commitment to move through personal misunderstanding toward their intentions. To do this, we must be willing to let go of what we thought we understood. Only then do we begin to become one through the word.

**The hardest thing  
for us to really  
understand is the  
thing we think  
we're already  
understanding.  
Yet letting  
go is possible.**

Letting go is one of the most difficult sacrifices we are called upon to offer during the process of communication. The hardest thing for us to really understand is the thing we think we're already understanding. Yet letting go is possible. We do so by being willing to ask questions and share points of confusion. Similarly we must be willing to allow others to share points of confusion and to question what we think should have been perfectly clear to them. In this mutual exchange of questioning and answering each other, we work together to refine misunderstanding into understanding. We must learn to do this without taking offense or becoming defensive. In all our exchanges we ought to assume that we will misunderstand each other. Then we need to submit our best effort to sort through that misunderstanding in order to shape each other's understanding into mutual thought.

The agent for this process of shaping is the mutual exchange of ideas. Through such an exchange each participant is privileged to enjoy the blessing of becoming understood, of becoming valued, of feeling the insecurity of being alone melt into the security of another's empathy—in a word, of becoming one with other people.

An image implied in the experience of becoming accepted and received through understanding and empathy is that of being embraced: of being drawn from a position of "alone-ment" into the position of "at-one-ment." When this happens, we are invited out of an individual place into the presence of another. The experience of becoming one with each other, and the fulfillment we experience in that oneness, is but a living symbol of the great atoning union through Christ. Perhaps this is the greater truth that informs Jesus' reminder, "If ye are not one, ye are not mine" (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27).

## COMMUNICATION VERSUS DOMINATION

All of us in our own ways yearn for such union. Yet as much as we yearn for this, the experience of oneness is something we enjoy far too little and are even taught not to expect by a world educated to "take the advantage

of one because of his words” (2 Nephi 28:8). Jesus teaches differently. To quote Jesus’ own conclusions on the outcome of genuine communication, “Wherefore he that preacheth, and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (Doctrine and Covenants 50: 22). We rejoice for having found those with whom we feel “at-one” and yearn to stay “at-one” with them.

But we destroy the oneness we could experience when we use tactics of persuasion and argumentation to tactfully impose our ideas upon each other in the name of communication. For imposing one’s view upon another, when that person isn’t willing or ready to receive that view, is not communication. It is domination. The outcome of domination is not learning, nor is it understanding. It is resistance and often resentment—even though a particular view may be true or effective. When domination is the motive of any exchange, one’s ideas, regardless of their merit, estrange the other, separate him from the course of a better way, and leave him feeling misunderstood and ignored.

The difficulty we face is learning how to share our ideas responsibly and with conviction without dominating. This is difficult because our formal education has taught us to persuade each other in this way. We learned the importance of using clear reasoning, not primarily to understand each other, but to wield language with rhetorical power to persuade others to think as we think. Though we were taught to be courteous and sympathetic, these traits tended to be taught as part of a communication strategy focused upon winning an argument or getting a proposal accepted. Drawing upon our education, we rarely enter a discussion to learn from others in the room, let alone to be persuaded by their ideas. We enter to present and to persuade.

For instance, we learned that thoroughness persuades an educated audience because thoroughness and detail tend to appeal to assumptions of objectivity and evidence. We learned that we need to appeal to the principle of flexibility—of providing multiple options in order to address all arguments. If these fail to persuade, we learned to fall back upon an appeal to “authority”—our authority—by presenting details that carry an “air” of privileged knowledge. In doing so our motive is not to clarify in another’s mind what our intentions are nor to teach another sufficiently so that he or she can discuss an issue with us on equal grounds. Rather, we mention these details to cloud and confuse those who may be trying their best to process the issue. We speak to “darken counsel by words” (Job 38:2). The end is not the enjoyment of mutual understanding. It is estrangement. We get our way, but at what price?

**The difficulty we face is learning how to share our ideas responsibly and with conviction without dominating.**

PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

In the world's workplace, this motive to dominate is at the heart of various persuasive strategies. Since progress sometimes results, the motive behind these strategic discussions is rarely questioned. But left unquestioned, this motive wedges itself between our ideas and the most meaningful end achievable by genuine communication: the end of becoming one with each other.

However, we at this institution should never lose sight of this end. When all the brilliant ideas about how to improve BYU-Idaho have been shared and implemented, what will ultimately matter? Our love of God and Christ and each other. Yet we are so often estranged *from* each other after supposedly talking *with* each other. We so often feel ignored after having presented our best ideas. We acquire a resistance to meetings because they often require us to give our best, only to be told in one way or another that our best isn't good enough. And even when we're congratulated for sharing "our ideas," we can't dismiss the sneaking hunch that the ideas we're being congratulated for aren't really our ideas; they are ideas construed by another from the material of our thought.

In a community where vision of refinement, improvement, innovation, and the "rethinking of education" is the goal of most everything we do, how can unity of thought, feeling, and purpose be achieved, notwithstanding the diversity of perspective and talent needed to realize this vision?

Though worthy in itself, shaping misunderstanding into a type of understanding whereby we feel unified with each other is but one aspect of exchanging ideas. But more is required when the purpose for discussion is to discover innovative and insightful ideas and approaches needed to lift the capacity of this university and each other. At such times, the means of mutual understanding discussed earlier remains essential. Yet it's only the beginning. But the beginning of what?

It's the beginning of what may be called "progressive communication." As the name implies, the end of progressive communication is the achievement of "a higher consensus" than what results from understanding what we think and how we feel. It's one thing to communicate in order to understand and appreciate each other as we are. It's quite another for communication to lead us to experience mutual insight that can make this university and ourselves better than we are. This type of improvement is possible but only if we all agree upon one foundational principle. We must remember that the end of progressive communication is to discover an idea or approach that is novel in some way. As such the idea sought will be one that transcends any one idea initially put forth. This perspective on the purpose of discussion must be absolutely clear and agreed upon by all participants. Otherwise the promise of progressive communication will be stifled by our efforts to persuade each other.

**More is required  
when the purpose  
for discussion  
is to discover  
innovative and  
insightful ideas and  
approaches needed  
to lift the capacity  
of this university  
and each other.**

With this assumption in place, there is no need for anyone to play “the devil’s advocate.” We don’t need opposition for the sake of opposition. If we’re honest in our deliberations, opposition will surface because of the diversity of our experience. Parker J. Palmer has said something to this effect: If two or more people readily agree upon a point of discussion, someone isn’t being honest. The opposition Palmer implies is what Joseph Smith called “contraries.” In teaching the essential nature of contraries the Prophet said, “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”<sup>2</sup> Eugene England has interpreted the Prophet’s meaning this way: “By ‘prove’ [the Prophet] meant not only to demonstrate logically but also to test, to struggle with and to work out in practical experience.” He then went on to use this interpretation to determine why the Church is true and we might add, how this university may become “true.” Said he, “The Church is as true—as effective—as the gospel because it involves us directly in proving contraries, working constructively with the oppositions within ourselves and especially between people, struggling at an experiential level with paradoxes and polarities that can help to redeem us.”<sup>3</sup>

#### CHARITY IN CONTRARIES

The truth of contraries is underscored in the Book of Mormon: “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). From both sources we learn that opposition is essential, not simply so we can appreciate our health after a bout of sickness or, more profoundly, so that we can make meaning and discover the most meaningful truths within our reach. The fact is opposition must surface in progressive communication in order for us to discover the better solution, the more effective approach, the more significant point, or the more insightful idea than any one of us could have discerned by himself or herself. And this is where charity comes in.

In the face of contraries, we need charity if we’re going to work our way through the multiple cross-roads that invariably criss-cross their way throughout the terrain of our thinking. This is especially true when the dynamics of going from a lesser view to a greater view reveal *our* idea to be the lesser view. At such a time, charity must kill any jealous impulse in us to mount a resistance against the better view because it came from someone else. On the other hand, charity must also obliterate the tendency for us to feel better, more worthy, more intelligent than the one whose idea is shown to be less than our own. Charity must enable us to feel grateful for doing our part to promote an honest discussion and rejoice in the fact that we contributed toward gaining a greater understanding. Charity must destroy the natural tendency to resent others or belittle ourselves from embarrassment that we somehow didn’t measure up—and they did. Charity must move us away from the tendency to set ourselves

**In the face of  
contraries, we need  
charity if we’re  
going to work our  
way through the  
multiple cross-roads  
that invariably  
criss-cross their  
way throughout the  
terrain of  
our thinking.**

up as a light unto our fellow men and women. It must move us to learn and to teach for a greater cause than self; it must move us to learn and to teach for the cause of Zion, which cause will move us to ensure that the laborer in Zion shall not perish for the part he or she played in building Zion (2 Nephi 26:29-31).

Scott Samuelson shared with me a time when he experienced the blessing of the gift of charity while serving as a counselor in a stake presidency. He and the other members of the stake presidency had talked briefly about an important matter as they entered the room and met each other. The other members of the presidency were obviously concerned about this matter. In their enthusiasm to understand what each other felt and thought, the council remembered that they hadn't prayed to begin the meeting. They immediately knelt and asked Heavenly Father's blessing to be upon their council. Scott recalled that during the prayer he began to receive distinct promptings to resolve the matter. He felt grateful for receiving what he thought was the Lord's will. He was sure the others would recognize the origin of the gift as he had done and that their concerns would be quickly solved.

After the prayer the president invited his counselors to continue sharing their thoughts and ideas as they had done previously. With confidence and concern, Scott shared the impressions that had come to him during the prayer. The stake president and other counselor received his contribution graciously. Following a pause as each considered what he had said, the discussion began again but the direction Scott felt so sure the presidency should go was altered during the exchange. The more they talked, the less the solution seemed to be like the impression that Scott had experienced during the prayer. Ultimately, the best course of action was something quite different (even opposite) than Scott purposed. Scott confidently sustained the action but still wondered about the revelation. "Why did I receive this prompting? Since the idea was contrary to the final decision, what was the purpose in my having felt so inspired?" These and other thoughts went through his mind as he felt inadequate in his responsibility to counsel the president righteously.

Since that experience Scott and I have discussed what may have occurred. Our conclusion is that Scott was indeed inspired by God during that prayer. But the end of his inspired contribution was not designed to be the divine end of the discussion. Instead his inspiration was formative and functioned with other ideas as the means by which the rightness of the final action could be revealed. Just as the clarity and brilliance of a diamond is perceivable against the black velvet in a jeweler's display, so Scott's idea functioned as a backdrop which made it possible for the presidency to perceive the Lord's will during their council. Only by lowering the backdrop of an inspired possibility could

**His inspiration  
was formative and  
functioned with  
other ideas as the  
means by which  
the rightness  
of the final action  
could be revealed.**

the best solution be discerned. Scott *had* been inspired. He had simply misinterpreted the role of his inspired idea in the revelation of a higher consensus of thought.

In sharing Scott's experience, I am not implying that the only means by which we are drawn toward discovery of a higher consensus is through someone's willingness to share and sacrifice his or her oppositional ideas to the cause. Often the higher consensus is reached as each member of the group shares impressions that are refinements on thoughts presented previously. Yet whatever the character of the idea shared, all participants must be willing to share them and sacrifice personal investment in them if they are to become contributing members of a community capable of discerning ideas greater than their own.

### EMBRACING THE HIGHER TRUTH

As we work to create a premier learning and teaching university, we should be extremely careful and caring not to become overzealous or undercontributive. How easy it is to slip into one or the other camp. Our extreme zeal may result from personal experiences in preparation or during a meeting in which we feel absolutely confident that our idea is not simply a good idea, not simply an inspired idea, but the best idea revealed to us by heaven itself. We may then feel responsible not simply to share it but also to convert others to it. If we're not careful, we may revert to our old tactics of persuasion to press others to confess the truth of what we've been blessed to receive. Motivated by a zealous mind-set, we may become impatient, angry, or resentful of what we perceive is sheer belligerence of another when he or she disagrees with our perspective. Our zeal may move us to organize another offensive, believing the administration or faculty must not understand us if they don't agree with us. But such zeal will not prove the truth of what we see. It will only reveal us as contrary.

On the other hand, we may sit in a meeting and experience a brief, fleeting impression, then not be able to articulate very well what we felt. Feeling embarrassed for not being able to compose ourselves or to formulate the idea, we may inappropriately ignore what Joseph Smith referred to as "the first intimation of revelation" or "a sudden stroke of ideas."<sup>4</sup> Such non-participation, though well-intentioned, may stifle the group's ability to progress. And why might that be? Because we often withhold our ideas to protect ourselves from responding to questions our inklings are sure to provoke—questions we feel we could never answer. In our resistance, we are likely to be possessed by a spirit of pride—the "bottom-up" variety explained by President Benson in his classic address. But consider this possibility: that inklings, though not fully clear to ourselves, that intimation, though fuzzy and ill-formed in our minds, that stroke,

**As we work to  
create a premier  
learning and  
teaching university,  
we should be  
extremely careful  
and caring not to  
become overzealous  
or undercontributive.**

though absent of rationale, may be the very catalyst required to take the discussion to a new level.

No doubt there are other reasons why charity is vital to our personal deliberations and public discussions with each other. Yet one thing is sure. When charity isn't simply the adornment of argument but rather the crux of communication, the higher consensus lifts everyone to a view of what is possible. This higher consensus has the effect of contributing light to each participant's world, enriching that world, making that world somehow larger. Each person feels of greater worth, being informed by greater views and ideas than he or she possessed formerly. But there's more. Such views and ideas invite participants in various ways to extend themselves into mutual commitment to magnify their talents and abilities through offering them as a means by which the higher idea may be "brought to pass."

Drawing each other into a higher consensus through honest, charitable, progressive communication will implicate us as part of a community that participates in the discovery of the higher truth or idea.

Drawing each other into a higher consensus through honest, charitable, progressive communication will implicate us as part of a community that participates in the discovery of the higher truth or idea. We will feel and know not simply a better way to accomplish a task, teach a course, or administer a program, but that to do these things we must walk a better way if we're to keep faith with those whose life, intelligence, and emotion made the discernment of that better way possible. Such a two-way knowledge binds knower and known by "the connective tissue" of charity, or what Parker J. Palmer calls "tough love." But, says Palmer, we often flee from this love "because we fear its claims on our lives." In place of knowledge or insight born of love, we tend to prefer knowledge born of a motive to control. The reason for this natural preference, teaches Palmer, is that knowledge to control invariably "distances us from each other and the world, allowing us to use what we know as a plaything and to [use others] to play the game by our own self-serving rules. But a knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability"—notwithstanding the personal sacrifice required of us.<sup>5</sup>

The apostle Paul wrote, "Though I have the gift of *prophecy*, and understand all mysteries, *and all knowledge*... and have not charity, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2 emphasis added). John W. Welch has observed that "charity is essential to avoid disputation. Left untempered by love, scholarly debate and critical inquiry will be divisive and unhealthy."<sup>6</sup>

Given what Paul and Brother Welch have said, we conclude that though we were to understand and have all knowledge to fashion BYU-Idaho into a premiere learning and teaching institution if we have not charity,

we will be nothing; and naught, but what the world could fashion, will become of our ideas, ourselves, and this university.

God bless us to resist self-serving motives as we discuss the affairs of this university—which necessarily will have a major influence in the lives of its faculty, administrators, and students. God bless us as faculty and administrators to learn to love God and His Son with all our heart, might, mind, and strength; and to love each other through that purifying love. May He bless us to this end that we might be led to communicate in progressive ways through the clarity of our words and the charity of our minds and hearts.

## NOTES

1. Lowell L. Bennion, *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings 1928-1988*, ed. Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 191.
2. *History of The Church* 6:428.
3. Eugene England, *Why the Church is as True as the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 4.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 151.
5. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Harper, 1983).
6. John W. Welch, "Into the 1990s," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 26.