

## TEACHING IN ZION

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**H**aving reviewed my life at Ricks College and BYU–Idaho, I propose that the growth I’ve experienced might be typical enough to invite reflection. My colleagues’ growth seems parallel in enough ways to encourage that conclusion.

### STARTING OUT: CONSOLATION AND OBLIGATION

I came to Ricks College without portfolio and without any specific vocational design in my head. I was driven here mostly by what seems now to have been post-graduate school enthusiasm. When I applied I was much relieved to find in place no complex service programs and little administrative oversight. I simply applied; my eccentricities were duly noted, I’m sure, and I was accepted. Accepted. What a word! So full of consolation. So full of obligation.

For the first years of my tenure, I focused on the consolation. I think there was one basic question or issue that lay before me: my social adjustment to life in Rexburg. I wanted lots of individual space and yet I wanted to be part of a community of believers. I had trained myself to be a historian of Greek religion, but the thoughts of actually niching therein with the “Corpus of Greek Inscriptions” filled me with inexpressible wanderlust. My brother Larry was the first to tell me what I heard many times thereafter, that Ricks College was the best kept secret in the Church. On our way to watch the Ricks College football team practice, he demonstrated the validity of his observation by guiding me along the tiny periodicals shelf in the library. Roger McPheeters had ordered several periodical titles just for Larry. I was sold! And we were free to teach whatever we wanted. Don Decker taught *The Odyssey* in every single one of his literature classes. And Larry himself had taught even Russian novels in freshman English. And why not? There was no need for complex designs. “Ad hococracy” was the order of the day.

Teaching was fun, to be sure, and engaging, in large part because my activities in the classroom were well insulated from institutional vicissitudes, like accommodating growth, dealing with public relations, participating in administrative projects, et cetera. As I said, I didn’t want academic peers telling me how to go about the process of educating myself. With a few questions, they can turn a mostly recreational enterprise into a professional obsession. A ten-year-long study of the Classics had taught me that. Nor did I seek a coterie of devoted students. They crowd too heavily from behind. I didn’t want the Harvard Library

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either, nor a bevy of assistants at the ready with sharpened pencils and fresh notebook paper.

For me the entire process was wonderfully idiosyncratic. I just wanted to graze languidly and eclectically over the green pastures of “general education.” I loved the bricolage of the place. Though over forty when I arrived, I felt at ease among sophomores. I was in a learner’s paradise. The campus’ very architectural design (what design?) reflected the culture we lived in: a few academic buildings huddled around the McKay Library, a building cut in half to accommodate the administrators: these constituted what was the main campus. The two plazas north and south of the Manwaring Center did not then exist. What is now Viking Drive is the bare remnant of a parkway that split the campus in two at the time, making for what were upper and lower campuses—the academicians being housed in three or four principal buildings mostly in lower campus. The conversations I shared with my friends in the English Department, with my brother in particular, wandered randomly over the world of ideas and clearly outside the purview of any administrative concerns.

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CHANGING VOCATIONAL PATHS:  
FROM INTELLECTUAL ENTHUSIAST TO CULTURAL CONVEYER

Though trained as a classical philologist, I began my tenure here as an English instructor, teaching three sections of freshman English without so much as a graduate degree in my chosen subject. I was out of my area of formal schooling. What’s more, I entertained no desire of someday teaching in “my area of expertise.” To this day I’ve never really taught Greek or Latin at the level to which I’ve been trained. I’m aware that I’m not alone. I was content to let fate bring me whatever it would: courses in Shakespeare, Letters, Ethics, Technical Writing, etc. I followed my bliss in teaching novels, poetry, and whatever else suited me in my lit classes. In those days the English Department had only one vocational requirement that I can think of. We had to assign and grade six student themes per student per writing class. I was perfectly comfortable in the new setting, quite amenable to neglecting my professional portfolio. I spread out my teaching agenda as much as possible by teaching early in the morning clear through to the end of “day classes” late in the afternoon, this in order to give me more prep time. If I had simply read the material before I went into class, I counted myself prepared; after all, I could always outread my young students.

And in English, the experience for classroom focus was reading. Texts were our meat and drink. So much of the joy and precision of reading had been lost in graduate school, as we raced to “get through” the corpus. Not so at Ricks College. I shall openly admit that most of the thirty or so different subjects I have taught here over the years were not masterpieces

of teaching; such a vocational virtue I seemed not to have had at the first. If I modeled anything for the students—and they sometimes remind me of this—it was simply this: enthusiasm.

Books and conversations clearly influenced me, particularly the books that addressed social and cultural issues. But I was frankly distressed by how poorly my students received them. Couldn't I do more to make them accessible? I hadn't counted on the tasks of parsing them out for easy consumption. I hadn't imagined that I would have to sell them. I had to adjust to this role of "conveyor of culture."

We faculty occasionally met in study groups. These conversations ranged in quality, but we clearly hungered for something grander in our work. But the "pedagogically grand" was not on the table. That was more for private conversation. My brother and I walked and discussed the issue of "pedagogical design" ("debated" is much too strong a term for my association with Larry, who knows that tossing arguments to me was like tossing meat to a caged carnivore). I was drawn more and more to the design.

He, on the other hand, resisted. Always a free-ranger and clearly a man of an older era, he could sense, I suspect, that threatening changes were looming. Our reactions to the computer were indicative. I enthused over new software; he demurred. When I became too animated in my assertions, he would simply point out with avuncular tact some item of historical interest, like the handiwork that he'd performed working grounds in the summer. "I think it was over there that President John L. Clarke introduced us to Henry Eyring," he said more than once. "Don Hunter and I down in the mud digging a ditch." "In the summer our faculty do *other things*," President Clarke said to an embarrassed President Eyring. And his point was made. Larry's was a freer, less trammled age, and a certain price had been paid for it. If I wanted changes, I would have to be prepared to pay for them.

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FROM CAREER TO VOCATION; FROM A KNOWLEDGE  
PROJECT TO A WISDOM PROJECT

About the time the school closed off Viking drive and built the Smith Annex, I switched from the English to the History Department. Don Hammar had vigorously resisted the administration's proposal that they build the Smith Annex of metal, with an almost poetic account of how it would snap and moan in the Rexburg wind. We got a brick building. Things were moving forward. As a history instructor, I deepened my devotion to pedagogy. For one thing, history teachers must deliver a timeline in class; they can't just come into class prepared to lead a discussion based on a specific text. They must be able to answer questions that can come in from almost any direction.

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I had to face that challenge and an even deeper one: I myself had begun to drift from learning about things to learning about students. I began to evaluate them more closely and learn that the many things I thought I was teaching them *they hadn't learned*. I was repeatedly shocked to learn that I was taking for granted far too much. I wondered if I might be a failure. My early morning reflections focused much on that issue. As my children matured and left home, I began to see what kind of world it was that they were entering. I wondered if the school were doing enough to prepare them. In the History Department I made friends; a series of new faculty were joining us. They raised both institutional and pedagogical questions which we discussed and debated.

Soon after joining BYU–Idaho, many of us discover that we must deal with challenging personal issues. My own example speaks to this point. Moreover, many discover that BYU–Idaho is not an ideal venue for fulfilling professional ambitions acquired in graduate school. Many pet projects simply have to be put on hold while new faculty learn to teach competencies and skills that they themselves acquired almost unconsciously as undergraduates. While remaining competent in their fields, they must learn to teach to broader (and sometimes deeper) issues that are pressing on our students. A biologist, for example, might find himself dealing with theological issues. Or even teaching reading and writing. These might be competencies they didn't know they had to deal with when they came here. A religion professor might begin to wonder if the students are actually reading the material assigned. In either case the professor might eventually discover that he must learn to dispense training that students don't seem to acquire on their own. The little sacrifices that I've made to my "professional portfolio" have been compensated for by a flood of teaching ideas; still, this process has required time and diligent application, and not a little personal pain.

We must be patient with those among us undergoing this transition. They will more than likely complain about the difficulties they are encountering; this ought not to provoke us to persecution. If we are patient with those who are making these sacrifices, we shall find ourselves amply rewarded in the long run.

When I taught analytical reading, I worked to develop a reading pedagogy based on what I considered to be sound philological principles. Never in graduate school did so many ideas come as they did to me at that time; I was stumbling to be sure, but I was learning too. I produced a lengthy book on the subject in manuscript form. I wanted to give my students a leg up on the whole educational project, a kind of MTC for young intellectuals. But as I said, the more I came to know my students, the more I realized that the program of recreational learning that I had so eagerly embraced when I came here would have to be deferred; there

were more important issues to be addressed. My career was actually becoming a *vocation*.

To be sure the little Palace of Pleasure I had anticipated here was being undermined by a growing awareness that if the knowledge project itself were to survive, I needed a more advantageous perspective. I needed to add to my *enthusiasm for knowledge* more teacherly concern. I could not afford to spend hours in the library researching pet projects. I began to toil over calendars and lesson plans, creating study guides and question banks. As a member of the history department I had to learn how to use *PowerPoint* and *not let it use me*. And there was less and less room for my personal idiosyncrasies. Let me note here that I don't believe that knowledge really does make one *eccentric*; but the acquisition of knowledge—even the sophomoric—often does insulate us socially. I learned that simple inadvertencies among our young people can be deadly. For the first time I moved out of the idiosyncratic. And the knowledge project inexorably became the wisdom project.

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#### MOVING FROM THE IDIOSYNCRATIC TO THE COMMUNAL: THE PATH OF WISDOM

About this time came “the transition” (now there's a word to contemplate). We realized that the campus was *blossoming*. Design was suddenly everywhere. Larry and I began to walk evermore southerly, across the plaza fronting the Taylor Building and then up First West. There was *energy* in that direction. A volunteer landscape architect had planned out the vast new wilderness area south of campus. We noticed how the arboretum was now functioning to link Northern and Southern campuses. The arboretum was becoming the new center of things. South was the direction of the future, as our walks to the North had been mostly into the direction of the past. And then the Ricks Building went up. One senses growing institutional maturity in the building's study areas and in its capacious offices. Learning (and not just teaching) was now represented architecturally. Students, now accommodated with study tables and reading chairs, were reading and preparing *intensely*. The temple across Seventh South was beginning to preside over a series of buildings that descended in proper hierarchy down the hill: the temple, the stake center, the married students' dorms, and eventually the student playing fields. In truth, I must note here that we were feeling more and more pressure to conform and to cooperate. Things were heating up. Gone were the free-ranging Ricks College days. The conversations with Larry became a therapeutic necessity.

There were, perhaps because of what we were feeling then, many grand moments. On the southeast corner of the Kimball Building one day, where one of those blue-lighted call boxes stands, I stood and waved my

hand to the South. “There is space here,” I said to my brother, strangely moved. “This place,” and I pointed to a great empty space in the South, “will some day be filled with students, *many of them from foreign lands.*” Somehow at that moment what was evident in the spatial configurations of the campus became apparent to me in the verbal.

To be sure, President Clark’s summons to group dialogue is all of a piece with the things I have been trying to sketch out here this afternoon about developments on campus. It is a summons to design, if you will, and a call to community action. And because the consequences of our plans will be real enough—if we should flub the design, future generations will pay the price—it’s also a summons to *wisdom*. One begins to appreciate how substantive are the virtues of wisdom implied in the Lord’s commands to Mohonri and to Nephi that they were to build ships which would cross the seas, enduring thunderous tempests and all kinds of vicissitudes. It’s enough to make armchair mariners like me cringe. I recognize that my individual efforts, though they’ve tended in the right direction, have been puny indeed.

As LDS educators at this time and place we need this wisdom more than even educators in general, for we are being asked, after all, *to do more with less*. My original motives for being here were idiosyncratic, but now, if I understand the President’s plans correctly, I am to assist in putting my personal agenda into a matter-of-fact, functioning framework. Something that will be measured in practical, communal results. The accreditation teams will continue to press for evidence of professional currency. Any number of directives will come down the pike, asking for our time and energy. Meanwhile, our institutional researchers will attempt to keep us informed regarding just how many of our alumni have actual jobs. We, like Joseph Smith, cannot escape this hullabaloo of agenda, all forcing themselves upon us crying, “Lo here!” We, indeed, lack wisdom. “I reflected on it again and again,” Joseph tells us, “knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know.”

My years here have taught me that, with the tides sweeping over us, we *all* lack wisdom simply because we cannot see the whole picture individually. That includes those at the top. We can get that unified vision only by seeking it together. “We are wise together,” Scott Samuelson recently told me, “or we are not wise at all.” Aren’t the questions before us daunting? What kind of place shall BYU–Idaho be? What decision can we make at this juncture that will effect miraculous developments in our future? The thought of this place becoming just another “academic institute” disappoints me deeply. But the prospects of matching my individual styles to fit it are also daunting. To be sure, we can go to our tasks in faith, knowing that a new sense of purpose and design is

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manifesting itself piecemeal though inexorably. There is urgency in it all as well, and a summons to be more intelligent—more wise, actually—than we’ve ever been. We must seek greater unity because it is one of the real expedients available to us. You might feel ambivalent about communal action, like me.

#### ADJUSTMENT AND ADAPTATION: FINDING A FIT

For the rest of this presentation, I would like to offer a few observations prelusory to that upcoming discussion. These observations will deal first with what the discussion can mean for us as a BYU–Idaho faculty. Like many of you, I have had to redefine “my scholarship” in the light of my vocational interests. My philological education has, in fact, prepared me with training more than with particular insights to be dispensed to undergraduates. But it has schooled me to be an adequate judge of student competencies. And I simply cannot let those be sacrificed to the expedients of merely engaging students.

That probably applies to many of us. I’ve impressed my training into the service of teaching: selecting texts, studying scriptures, conversing with colleagues, preparing lectures, and learning exercises. I seldom consult the *Année Philologique* these days, but I have employed my library skills in creating learning exercises; my reading skills have often been recruited for homiletic purposes. Etymology and synonymy have long been special interests of mine, but when it has not proven palatable, I’ve had to adjust and adapt. I’ve occasionally balked at the necessity of having to repackage what I consider to be a heartfelt gift, but I’ve always returned, confident somehow that neither my idealism alone nor the self-will of my students has got it quite right. The answer seems always to lie in the middle.

And so adjustments and compromises have always been possible. I’m not ashamed to say that. I have learned that by promoting a straightforward agenda of academic excellence I am going counter to the overall “fit” of this place. Perhaps that has to do, as my friend Robert Jameson tells me, with the conflict between Greek *arête* (usually translated as goodness or perfection) and the three cardinal Christian virtues: faith, hope, and charity. I choose instead to describe academic exercise as part of character building: an ethic of hard work that should appeal to the LDS community universally (this is not to say, of course, that the Truth does not exist; only that Truth must be “properly arrived at” in order to be Truth).

For whatever reasons, I don’t espouse a doctrine of “Academic Excellence.” I don’t think that I’m to teach the sturdy “middle-class virtues” that will get our students to the top of the socio-economic ladder. On the contrary, I consider them to be helpful additions to the saintly life.

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This perspective implies a certain readiness to join hands with colleagues across campus. I think I can speak the same language as they.

This focus on work also implies an ethical responsibility. We all must work hard and often do without in order to set a moral example, not simply to show professional competence. Those of us who look carefully at student writing and student preparation understand how important that moral example is. Those of us who counsel students in the diverse temptations incident to living in this materialistic world will also understand. Time usage and personal honesty fit naturally into the regimen of the saintly life, and academic training is one of the most efficient ways to instill those virtues. For me, that is the essence of my professional life: it amounts to the learning how simply to deal with less and to put my shoulder to the wheel with the rest.

What I've said above is considered by some to be our local tragedy, that teacherly absorptions here have shorn from us our scholarly competence. I suspect that such a concern lies behind this particular lecture series. I've always considered myself, for whatever reasons, to be a critical case in point; for that reason I've tried to show how I'm not an academic at all in a traditional sense. I've never spent time reminiscing about how my dissertation might have been a scholarly monograph. Or that I "coulda been a contender." I'm aware, however, that this personal scenario might not apply to some. I've seen in many of my colleagues certain special needs. For such cases, I doubt that three-hour leaves can compensate for the losses incident to teaching such heavy loads. I, for one, am willing to agree that some of us might need special treatment. I'm prepared to look to my own needs and not to let myself be governed by status envy. Avoiding such envy is, in my mind, a key to self-knowledge.

#### BECOMING A TEACHER IN ZION: A PRECARIOUS PATH AND PROJECT

I do want to say three things to those who might well become exceptions to our rigorous policies at one time or another. First, that the need for "scholarly competence" should never blind us to what we see in the classroom. We cannot ignore teacherly responsibilities by using the excuse that we are "academics" and have bigger fish to fry, deadlines to meet, "big doings out West" (as Willie Loman says).

Second, that sacrifices need not be permanent institutions. Nor should any special status be. For many of us a version of scholarly competence might be possible if we are resilient enough, switching hats between teacherly and scholarly pursuits over time, if these special cases are administered wisely and generously. I suspect that we belong elsewhere if our motives are to be permanently switched off the classroom and maintained in a lab or reading cubicle someplace.

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And third, that we are living at a time and place ideal for the pursuit of *wisdom*. The essence of that virtue, in my mind, is the power to choose between extremes. To judge particulars, to note exceptions, and without losing one's desires to join with others to follow an individual course resisting mere pressures to conform: all this, also with patience and grace. The wise person is the truly free person.

I must end by giving myself a promise and an admonition that I hope might have some general applicability. Policies will come; if they are too equitable, I will suspect demagoguery. I seek peace and fulfillment here at BYU-Idaho. That fulfillment is not in distinguishing myself as a scholar, a project that was probably beyond me in the first place, judging by the standards of excellence prevalent in my field.

More deeply, I came here desiring to find both individual fulfillment and to fit into a religious community. I came to desire both knowledge and wisdom. I'm convinced that I can confirm both my identities, as a thinker and as a teacher in Zion, as long as I can keep myself rooted in communal concerns. That requires collaboration, because I'm not capable of realizing such a quest individually.

Academic high-mindedness will play a significant role in my teaching agenda, as long as it is part of helping students grapple with real Christian issues. And as long as my teacherly goals speak to real problems and to correct ideals. As long as my students are convinced to do the things I ask them to do because they sense that it will make them better disciples, I will be on firm enough ground. I must also remember that all elements of truth, both great and small, must somehow pass the tests of actual application. And they should fit eventually into our group wisdom.

All this has implications for our discussions. If we ask on those grounds, and in faith, we shall receive. In our case, we faculty are asking a grand synthetic question which is a compound of many smaller and more individual ones. It amounts to asking just how we are to employ the resources we have in solving the problems we have identified. It involves many real perplexities. We cannot minimize this. Are we afflicted with weaknesses and limitations? Yes. Will we achieve our goals by putting our heads together and working at these problems with faith? Yes. All of this understanding and envisioning will, I am sure, put us in a most precarious situation. And is there any project more precarious, I say (the word means "requiring prayer"), than that of instilling virtue in students through faith? ∞

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