



Academic excellence can and does exist at Brigham Young University, not in spite of its religious underpinnings but because of them. Photograph of BYU's Hinckley Alumni and Visitors Center courtesy Brigham Young University Photography.

Questions I Ask Myself

President Cecil O. Samuelson

At the outset, let me thank each of you for being with us at this conference. In my judgment, it has been an important morning for Brigham Young University and I hope for each of you as well. I especially want to thank our special guests, Dr. Hibbs and Dr. Elman, for their contributions today. Of course, I am also grateful to the Planning Committee and also to members of our own BYU community for the insights and observations they have made as well. As always, I am grateful to my President's Council colleagues Gerrit Gong and John Tanner for all they do generally and specifically for their involvement with this conference and their effective efforts to advance inquiry, scholarship, learning, and teaching at this very unique and wonderful university.

If you will tolerate a few moments of personal privilege as I begin my comments today, I will confess to you that for virtually all of my life I have lived with the notions that faith and learning, questions about life and help from heaven are all part of a consistent whole. My mother and father were people of great faith and religious devotion but were also not afraid to ask or pose questions about almost everything. My mother was an elementary school teacher in her early years and never deserted that role with her five children. My father was a college professor with an impressive teaching and publication record and was very secure in both his professional and religious convictions. Consequently, I learned early at their knees that both preparation and prayer were important ingredients in academic and other kinds of success. I learned by their example to expect that achievement was much more likely if prayers were focused on proper preparation rather than leaving results entirely at the mercy of faith.

Some of you have heard about this experience before, and I am still teased about it to this day. When I was an undergraduate student stressing mightily over the prospects of being admitted to medical school, I fell in love with Sharon and convinced her that she should marry me—the best decision and most successful endeavor of my life. She was teaching school, but I was still in my junior year. We decided that we would be married over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend so that we might have a couple of days of honeymoon before returning to school. I was taking an embryology class, which was viewed as the key course in determining medical school admission. Consequently, knowing that I would not be studying much over the honeymoon weekend, I was uncharacteristically well prepared for the examination to be given the Monday following Thanksgiving. My professor, a kindly man who knew of my circumstances, told his TA—a close personal friend of mine—that because I had been doing rather well in the course, he would throw out my test, which I was almost certain to fail. We got married on Wednesday morning, I went to class that afternoon, we had a reception that evening, and then we went off for a couple of days on our honeymoon. I arrived for my test on Monday, and to the surprise of everyone, especially myself, I got a perfect score. The price for that success is still being paid! Since then, however, I have continued to be a strong advocate for the notion of prayer in the process of thorough preparation.

While I was at Duke University in the 1970s, there was a national debate about prayer in the schools and whether or not it was appropriate and legal. I remember hearing on television an interview with a member of the U.S. Congress who, when asked his opinion on the debate, answered, “Well, whatever laws we make, as long as the teachers give math tests, there will be prayer in the schools!”

To briefly summarize, then, I am one who believes strongly that inquiry, scholarship, learning, and teaching have an important place in a culture that also includes serious religious values and practices. While this association of values can occur in many places, I would submit that a community such as Brigham Young University is an ideal setting for such to be found.

We are grateful to have been joined by President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Vice Chairman of the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees. While he was not able to be with us this morning, we appreciate very much that he has arrived before we conclude this session and has agreed to make some remarks before we conclude. He is a very remarkable individual who for a number of reasons gives unique value, great support, and perspective to BYU.

First, in his role in the First Presidency and as one of the officers of our board, his opinions, encouragement, and counsel mean a great deal to us. His academic background is singular. After obtaining his doctorate at Harvard, he became a tenured faculty member at the Stanford University business school and then served as president of Ricks College, now BYU–Idaho. On two occasions, he has been the commissioner of the Church Educational System and has worked closely with several BYU presidents in their interactions with the board of trustees. He understands inquiry, scholarship, learning, and teaching in the broader sense but also the unique dimensions of these endeavors in a religiously affiliated and supported institution of higher education such as BYU. We are always grateful to have him with us.

Not having been a student at BYU or a faculty member at this or a similar private university prior to assuming the presidency, I arrived having a number of questions about the topics related to today's conference. It occurred to me that in the few minutes allotted to my presentation I might mention some of these questions and my musings about them. Perhaps I can also share some conclusions or understandings that I have gained about them. Some very important issues have already been addressed and explicated with great skill and insight. I hope you have also had some of your queries treated and your understanding enlarged. Time will not allow me to be comprehensive in either the topics covered or the explanations advanced. Hopefully, some of what I say might provoke your further thinking and assist you in improving your understanding of the very broad dimensions of inquiry, scholarship, learning, and teaching, particularly at BYU.

Question 1: Why has support from the Church, financially and in all other ways, been so consistently generous and even dramatic when the trend at almost all religiously related institutes has been to the contrary?

As a general officer of the Church, I knew long before assuming my current position that BYU is very important to our sponsoring Church leadership. I had some ideas why this might be so, and I am sure they have occurred to you as well. What has become increasingly clear is the answer to the question many have had about the consistent, generous support from the Church, since there are so many other places where the Church might productively use its sacred funds. I believe the fundamental answer to this query lies in our doctrine.

Question 2: Why do we believe continuous learning by study and also by faith is fundamental and achievable for everyone?

Those familiar with our religious tradition will recognize that we believe continuous learning by study and also by faith is fundamental and achievable for everyone. Why should this be so? We believe that God has a plan for each of us and that plan includes the importance of learning to make proper choices in our lives and then execute them and live with the decisions we have made. We believe, as taught by Brigham Young—our founding namesake—and others of our prophet leaders, that all learning in whatever field or endeavor comes in part through the blessing and grace of God, whether or not we choose to acknowledge that source. Of course this assertion does not lessen the importance of serious individual effort but rather reinforces it. We believe that all people of whatever time, place, or circumstance are literally spirit children of God and thus endowed with a divine potential to learn, improve, and contribute over the life span and beyond.

Question 3: Can real, serious, consequential inquiry and learning occur in a place that puts so much credence on faith in the Almighty?

Someone hearing these things for perhaps the first time might appropriately ask this question. Our answer is a resounding “Yes!” with the explanation that academic excellence can and does exist at Brigham Young University, not in spite of its religious underpinnings but because of them. As President Eyring once put it to the BYU student body, “You are under mandate to pursue—not just while you are here, but throughout your lives—educational excellence.”¹

I could mention much evidence for this assertion of academic excellence. The external ratings of various programs, departments, and schools are impressive. The large numbers of our baccalaureate graduates who are successful in acceptance to doctoral programs and professional schools place BYU in the top ranks of all American universities. Time does not permit more on this point, except to emphasize our belief that faith is not an excuse or alternative to excellence in learning and teaching but rather a vital partner in quests for even better learning and teaching, scholarship, and inquiry. Faith is not an excuse for academic mediocrity. Rather, it gives reason and substance to the notions of excellence and striving for excellence in scholarly pursuits that include inquiry and research, learning, and teaching. Stated another way, our faith cannot be a crutch but is a powerful incentive for us to become the best we can be.

This does not excuse pride, a condition found all too commonly in the academy. Rather, a thoughtful and analytical faith, which we espouse, is a powerful source of humility, constantly reminding all who have such faith that each has so much more yet to be learned than the relatively small body of knowledge and understanding currently mastered. This guard against pride also helps us appreciate how important it is to recognize what it is that we do not know about so many things.

Question 4: What about those who have trouble seeing both sides of the question?

Because of the sometimes contentious and polarizing attitudes that exist between some who consider themselves to be the guardians of religious faith on one hand and others who advocate exclusivity for the scientific method or its equivalence in their particular scholarly discipline on the other, false dichotomies or artificial boundaries are too often created. We believe that such exclusive allegiances are not only unnecessary but unwise and untrue. In fact, such rigidity leads to stultifying learning and inquiry because, as a symptom of such unjustified pride, the notion that one already knows enough impedes listening, thinking, asking, testing, studying, and pondering. Acknowledging the God-given potential of all people colors in a very positive way the attitudes scholars can have not only in terms of development of their own personal scholarship but also the way they see and respond to their students and colleagues in their endeavors.

While we take our faith and our religion very seriously and believe that inspiration and revelation can and do come from God, we also believe that science and secular inquiry and learning are not only valid but necessary and essential to increase understanding and expand knowledge. We hold that science and religion are not enemies and that they only become so when someone purports that religion makes science unnecessary or when science becomes one's religion. In the end, these extreme positions, found rather too commonly in our larger society, impede the progress and understanding that those really serious about inquiry, scholarship, learning, and teaching must have. Such polarized postures are the stuff of both poor science and insufficient theology.

Question 5: How do I deal with honest questions that seem to avoid straightforward answers?

We are grateful for our faith, which does not require that we believe anything that is not true. Likewise, our faith gives us the comfort that answers eventually can and will come when appropriate attitudes and

effort are in place, but that they will rarely be on our timetable or anyone else's. In the meantime, we are anxious to continue to question, study, learn, and remember that many of the conclusions we and others reach are only tentative and currently best explanations of the limited data we have so far been able to accumulate. Meanwhile, we strive to gain greater clarity and understanding.

Question 6: What are the characteristics of great learners?

In this context, then, of advocating for the advantages of continuous learning “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118), let me share some characteristics or descriptions of great learners as described by President Eyring in his message to our students more than a decade ago. These might be framed as questions, even though President Eyring did not construct them as such. In his listed characteristics are found many of the answers to the queries that have occurred to me and to others as they have thought about this unique institution. He, like most of us, has observed and known some great scholars. See if you agree with the patterns that he describes.

Said he, “The first characteristic behavior is to welcome correction.”² This, of course, also means a willingness to share thoughts and questions and then listen with humility that acknowledges even the best and brightest don't know it all or always get it right. They seem to have an excitement about new insights even when the new perspective has been provided or shared by others.

“A second characteristic of great learners is that they keep commitments. Any community functions better when people in it keep their promises to live up to its accepted standards. But for a learner and for a community of learners, that keeping of commitments has special significance. That is why we sometimes describe our fields of study as ‘disciplines.’”

In my own field, we call the rules of inquiry the scientific method, but in every field, there are rules to be followed. President Eyring then continues:

What all disciplines have in common is a search for rules and a commitment to them. And what all great learners have is a deep appreciation for finding better rules and a commitment to keeping them. That is why great learners are careful about what commitments they make and then keeping them. . . .

There is a third characteristic you have seen in great learners. They work hard. . . .

You will notice that the learners who can sustain that power to work hard over a lifetime generally don't do it for grades or to make tenure at a university or for prizes in the world. Something else drives them. For some it may be an innate curiosity to see how things work.

For [those] who [have] enough faith in [God's] plan . . . to treat it as reality, hard work is the only reasonable option.

A fourth characteristic described by President Eyring is that “great learners help other people.” While we will acknowledge that some great learners are selfish, the general notion is still sound. Many marvel that so many BYU undergraduates are involved in meaningful inquiry that leads to significant publications for them in peer-reviewed journals and national presentations. We believe our remarkable BYU mentoring program is a natural outgrowth of our doctrine and the great learners who populate this faculty.

The fifth characteristic mentioned by President Eyring is that “the great learner expects resistance and overcomes it.” He used the example of Thomas Edison and his many, many failures to find a suitable filament for the electric light bulb before finally being successful. Like Edison, persistence in sustained inquiry and scholarship is almost always necessary for real accomplishment in academics and is supported by the scriptural description of most learning being line upon line, precept upon precept. When we remember that the great plan for all of us is composed of various kinds of difficulties and tests, then we recognize that learning of the greatest value almost always comes with a high price.

Question 7: What is the greatest difference you see between Brigham Young University and other universities with which you are familiar?

I brought this question with me to BYU, and in some variation it is still frequently posed to me from those outside our community. I could mention several significant differences such as the remarkable and substantial financial support of our board of trustees that allows us to operate with great stability year in and year out with tuition levels far below comparable institutions and without incurring the debt that is so common elsewhere. I could discuss the tremendous credentials of our remarkable student body and mention that, in spite of the multiple choices almost all of them have with respect to admission to other outstanding universities, four out of five who apply to BYU enroll here. Some people are surprised to learn that a very high percentage of our faculty finish their academic careers at BYU, regardless of when they joined the faculty or what other great university they have come from. Each has her or his own reasons, but one particularly resonates for me.

On a very personal note, I have found more academic freedom for myself at BYU than at any other institution where I have served, learned, or visited. I remain loyal to and appreciative of the influential people who helped and taught me, as well as the wonderful experiences and opportunities I have

enjoyed elsewhere. For me, however, this is the first time I have felt completely free to speak my mind openly about my faith and how it has shaped my attitudes and interests in my academic efforts in medicine and science. This is not to say that I could not be myself at another university, but it is to state that I am grateful to be able to acknowledge my belief and experience that what I have learned in science as well as in theology has come by serious study and also by sustaining faith.

All institutions have constraints in what responsible people say and teach. While not always a fan of what some describe as political correctness, I always understood the wisdom of not being too critical of the legislature when employed at a state institution. Presidential colleagues at other private institutions frequently describe, and often lament about, the troubling sensitivities they feel in dealing with influential board members and major financial donors.

Make no mistake, at BYU we are also guided by our honor code to which each faculty member, student, and employee has subscribed in writing. There is an important balance between individual and institutional academic freedom, which again for us has its roots in our doctrine. Individual agency and personal responsibility are twin pillars deeply planted in our religious beliefs and practices. It is this mutual respect and regard for each person and the principles on which this institution was established that so wonderfully enrich this special environment for consequential inquiry, learning, scholarship, and teaching.

All of these things and many more could be shared, but the most impressive difference to me is that almost uniformly with the faculty, staff, administration, and students, we have a community whose primary loyalty is to the mission of Brigham Young University and secondarily to their own disciplines and careers. This is the case not only with those who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but also with those of other faiths as well.

Lest anyone believe I have exhausted all of my questions, let me assure you that this is not so. When President Gordon B. Hinckley, as chairman of our board of trustees, gave me his formal charge at my inauguration, he said I was to help BYU become the best it could be. Candidly, I still do not know fully what this means, but I know who he is and I know he was serious. I think daily of his direction and often of the prophecies and predictions of his predecessors and now his successor, President Thomas S. Monson. I work very hard to make sure their general guidance and aspirations help frame our specific and proximate decisions and emphases. Since we cannot do everything at BYU, what we do focus our energies and resources on is very

important, and learning, inquiring, scholarship, and teaching in the right ways form the fundamental basis of why we are here.

Thank you for your critical roles and contributions in helping Brigham Young University along its path to becoming what this marvelous university is now and yet will become.

Cecil O. Samuelson began his work as the twelfth president of Brigham Young University on May 1, 2003. President Samuelson is a Salt Lake City native who served at the University of Utah as Professor of Medicine, Dean of the School of Medicine, and Vice President of Health Sciences. He holds a bachelor of science degree, a master's degree in educational psychology, and a medical degree from the University of Utah. He fulfilled his residency and held a fellowship in rheumatic and genetic diseases at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. Samuelson has received numerous scholastic honors and is the author or coauthor of forty-eight original publications, eight books or chapters of books, and thirteen abstracts. He has also served as a director, officer, or member of several national medical and hospital organizations. He and his wife, Sharon Giauque Samuelson, have five children and twelve grandchildren.

1. Henry B. Eyring, "A Child of God," BYU Devotional Address, October 21, 1997, available online at <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=2940&x=65&y=5>.

2. For this and all subsequent quotations, see Eyring, "A Child of God."