

Academic Responsibility

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Robert K. Thomas

At an educational conference a few years ago, a speaker told of sitting in a bus on his way home from work and overhearing a conversation between two laborers who were in the seat in front of him. They were obviously elated at the thought of some overtime work that had been promised them, and they were hard at work in trying to figure out what next week's paycheck would be. One man listed the hourly rate that they were being paid and—to the side—the number of hours of work that had been promised to them.

At this point he turned to his companion and asked, a bit dubiously, if his friend knew how to multiply. After a moment's hesitation, the friend took the paper and pencil, wrote the number of hours beneath the hourly rate, drew a line under both, and placed an x to the side. Then he waited expectantly; they both waited. Nothing happened. Finally, the one who had hoped to set the multiplication in motion by writing an x to the side of his problem crumpled the paper disgustedly and said to his companion, "That's what's wrong with multiplication; you've got to know the answer before you begin the problem."

Begin at the Beginning

We smile sympathetically at such frustration because we share it whenever we fail to begin at the beginning. If we have not learned to add, the relative sophistication of multiplying will escape us. If we neglect faith—the first principle of the gospel—true repentance is simply not generated. Those we honor here today are persuasive evidence of what skilled and dedicated Latter-day Saints can do and be. If we would emulate them—their lives and their achievements—we must prepare ourselves to succeed.

We are told, poetically, that "the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts." As good poetry always should, this suggests more than it seems to say. For while it bids us to appreciate the vision of youth, it also hints at a major limitation of the juvenile: his willingness to be satisfied with a single dimension. "Long" thoughts may be profound, but they are often only tenuous. The breadth and depth that make an adult out of an adolescent, that unite vision with judgment, are earned—and learned. There are no short cuts and few substitutions. Apprenticeship precedes mastery, and first steps may not be very sure.

All steps are really first steps if our vision matches our developing ability. It is some comfort to take tentative steps together, and formal schooling provides the security of growing with our peers. In this sense college should be both culmination and promise. We assemble as a community of faculty and students in a university setting, as the Scriptures suggest, “to teach one another.” (See D&C 38:23; 88:77, 118.)

In a truly dynamic learning situation, nothing escapes change. For the instructor, teaching can be a continuing intellectual implosion. The material that is being studied comes to fruition, and the student is released from the bondage of ignorance and superstition. For the moment, however, let me concentrate on what can happen to the student who is “anxiously engaged” in his collegiate education. To begin with, attitude, far more than training, distinguishes the halfhearted pupil from the aspiring scholar.

Ordinary Student or Scholar?

The ordinary student finds his relationship with faculty and administration both vague and awkward. He tends to symbolize them: the teacher becomes a grade and the administration, a big stick. At the risk of sounding defensive, I believe that most teachers sincerely regret this and are eager to achieve at least an intellectual rapport with those whom they instruct. But here the teacher’s authority works against him. Since he can command, his invitation is suspect. Yet, even when a student, on his own volition, meets with his instructor or administrative officer, real communication rarely takes place. For one who comes to such an interview to *learn*, a hundred come to *explain*.

Too many young people today believe the defensive assertions that attempt to justify student dereliction. They have been told so often that they are not responsible causes—they are only unfortunate results—that they believe it. After all, a result does not have a future, only a past. The establishment is to blame, or the Vietnam war, or broken homes, poor teachers, or comic books. Such a list becomes a litany of extenuation.

In a rather moving poem, John Holmes tells of his boyhood experiences with an old, deaf New England shipbuilder who provided him with some of the profoundest “talk” he ever heard—without speaking a word. As young Johnny watched the skilled hands of the old craftsman, it suddenly came to him with the force of a voice shouting in his ear that, no matter how you build it, “your ship has to float: you can’t explain to the ocean.”

How many students have come to me to “explain to the ocean.” Their work will be late; they have not been feeling well lately, or—a reflection of our mind-obsessed times—they have always had a psychological block

against spelling or grammar. The ultimate, or perhaps nadir, of all such “explanations” in my experience occurred when a student, a mite plaintively, excused his absence from my daily ten o’clock class by telling me that he needed to have his teeth fixed and that ten o’clock was the only “free period” he had.

How significantly different are the attitudes of the student-scholar. He recognizes in the administration not discipline so much as direction, and his teacher is not an opponent but a component in a dynamic process. The student turned scholar expects, nay insists, on being inspired by his instructor—and is not often disappointed. The material is always ready; the teacher is usually ready. But when the material, student, and teacher are ready, there is fusion, not the amalgamation that we often rather unctuously call education.

In the real learning experience, the teacher is not outside or above or detached; he is an integral part of the reaction and is, himself, never quite the same afterward. How easy it is for the student to settle for something less than scholarship on his own part and in so doing make it impossible for the teacher to provide more than mechanical direction.

Give your instructor grudging attention, and you will turn him into a policeman; fawn upon him, and you tend to corrupt him. Even the least of you, however, can never completely escape the gnawing realization that dull students are invariably taught by dull teachers, and scholars are taught by scholars. You will never know how much steel there is in your instructor’s mind unless your own mind is file hard!

Three Rs for Our Day

Now, may I shift for a moment to those in the audience who are teachers. Our forefathers fought for the three *Rs* of elementary education. May I today suggest an additional three that have distinguished the best teachers I have known and that seem particularly appropriate for our day. Almost reluctantly I have come to believe a statement that struck me as overstated when I first heard it. That statement was: “It is better to be loved than understood.” I am sure that this was meant to shock a little, perhaps even provoke that opposition out of which knowledge can come.

In retrospect, the people who have influenced me most were not those who provided me with the most information. I remember these with gratitude—just as I remember some books with a feeling of obligation. But those who have helped me hear the key in which I was trying to compose the little tune that I would sing throughout my life gave me more than information. Over the years I have tried to decide what they did give me. I am now convinced that it was not so much what they gave this varied—but that they all shared the memorable quality of *radiance*.

Radiance

Radiance is not merely enthusiasm; this is only one of its manifestations. One of its basic meanings is *root*, for radiance is always more than surface sparkle. In a relative world it rests on ultimates. As one grows in experience and through training, he realizes more and more that all problems are finally theological ones, that the unproven premise precedes every rational conclusion. A formal religious commitment provides that premise for most of us. Radiance is also a philological cousin of our word *twig*—that oft-spoken metaphor of one person's influence upon another. But no connotation that this word carries is so meaningful as its suggestion of *light*.

A few years ago a relatively uneducated contractor, who was installing refineries in India, was having astounding success in training natives to operate high technical equipment. Since his success was not shared by others similarly engaged, he was asked to reveal the tests that he used to discriminate between those who could and could not be trained as technicians. Insisting that he really did not have a formal test, the contractor said that he would be happy to demonstrate his method of selection.

At a central employment center, he simply asked applicants for work to file by him slowly. From time to time he pulled a man out of line. Finally, pointing to those whom he had chosen so informally, the contractor said, "I just look at the eyes. If they shine, that person can be taught anything. If they don't, I can't take a chance on him."

Granting the questionable validity of such subjective evaluation, I yet submit that almost all the eyes shine in kindergarten and in Junior Sunday School. I am sure that many factors combine to dull them, but lackluster teaching would not be far down the list. I insist that large classes and inadequate facilities compromise radiant teaching only slightly. In a telling description, Thoreau talks about what he means to be awake: "To be awake is to be alive. I have never met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?"

He goes on to say that the highest of arts is to affect the quality of each day. Radiant people not only affect the quality of the day, they also change the direction of lives. I am not sure that radiance can be taught, but I believe it can be evoked and nurtured. I submit to you that no teaching function is so critical as inspiring students. A teacher will never inform as successfully as a library. He will always be overmatched at calculation by the computer. But in the blazing radiance of his own conviction, he can kindle fires that will warm and light generations.

Respect

My second R is *respect*—a word with an old-fashioned ring. Yet, love that is more than infatuation or indulgence must add respect to affection

to achieve wholeness. I cringe a little when I hear that a teacher has established himself as a “pal” to his students. I think it revealing that such a description usually comes from the teacher and not from the students themselves. The generation gap may be receiving faddish attention today, but it can be real.

To begin with, there is a security in respect that counters some of the self-consciousness that deters needed growth. Unfortunately, phrases such as “demanding respect” emphasize only coercion. Real respect is never demanded successfully. You can force conformity, but obedience is always given. This is not to imply that conformity is wholly negative. In most situations the Old Testament ideal of conformity to law must precede the New Testament doctrine of obedience to love. Awareness of this may keep the beginning teacher from pleading for cooperation with unruly students who translate their guilt into dislike for the teacher who indulges them.

Fairness is the ethic of the young. Youngsters do not have the thoughtless adult’s reverence for consistency. If the phrasing is beyond them, all children get the point of Emerson’s dictum that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” The explanation of many teachers, “If I did it for you, I would have to do it for everyone,” strikes most youngsters as being ridiculous, which it is. Such a statement is neat, and it has the aura of fairness; but no child is fooled. The teacher is simply saying, “I don’t have enough respect for you to hear your story or to evaluate the special circumstances you would like to plead.”

No two cases are the same; rarely are they more than superficially similar. The student instinctively knows this and is resentful at being lumped with others to suit a teacher’s convenience. It just will not work to explain that the size of your class precludes your taking time to hear a student out. You must make your decision in the light of fact, instead of expedient similarity, to retain a student’s respect. Faced with any other attitude on your part, the student feels driven to fall back on the tactic that he uses so successfully at home—whining. If you think that listening to a student’s reasoned plea takes time, just try cutting off a whiner.

Perhaps one of our difficulties is that we lack respect for our own ignorance. Possibly the creeping security of advanced degrees blunts the sensitivity that keeps us aware of what we really do not know. I suspect that I am as guilty as the next man here, but I would like to cite as an example our willingness to measure students. Dramatic cases of misjudgment are commented upon disapprovingly, and educational journals grow shrill in their defense of individual differences. It is a rare teacher, however, who has such respect for human potential and such an awareness of his own limitations that he remains flexible and alert to budding abilities and groping sensitivities.

Restraint

The final R I hope to discuss today is *restraint*. To action-oriented contemporaries, impatient with any system and heady with success as a result of direct involvement, restraint is almost synonymous with cowardice, or a lack of integrity. I feel that I have a special competence to speak about restraint because of my own undergraduate experience. My Alma mater, Reed College, underwent twenty-five years ago what many campuses are just coming to.

While I was not really a participant, I was part of a militant student body that not only negotiated in strength with the administration, but they also defied local and federal authorities in a massive demonstration against the draft, war, and any restriction upon personal lives. Most of the students involved were very bright, overwhelmingly articulate, and determined to change the world *now*. As I read the papers today, I often have the eerie sensation of living over my youth. The very slogans are the same—and those intense, imploring faces.

I do not remember those years in disgust; I remember them in sorrow. They were far from useless—the intellectual challenge was immense—but those years were not ones of controlled growth. Students throbbed when they should have meditated. They marched when they might have examined. They learned to live by symbols—and, although they would have denied it then, the simpler the symbol the better. They were skillful scorners and rabid partisans. Their adrenaline ran all the time. Whatever else they were, they were not apathetic. The teachers they usually followed were graying copies of the students they aroused. They were not all that way, however.

The teachers who are now unforgettable, whose features do not blur into the mass and whose words still tingle, never took the easy, emotional way of mob power. They tried to help me see that uncontrolled effort is essentially wasted. It may seem to solve immediate problems, but, in fact, it sets up antagonisms and solidifies stances until only surface agreements are possible. Alexander took the activist's part in solving the riddle of the Gordian knot when he contemptuously cut it; but it needs to be noted that he ruined the rope.

Now I would not be misunderstood. Restraint is not retreat. Just complaints must be heard, and problems are not solved by ignoring them. If, however, you turn your relations with those that you attempt to instruct into adversary proceedings, you license their rebellion.

Education is always a matter of discrimination, a skillful selection of alternatives. Significant innovation may begin in intuition, but it must be established in order. No one ever learned order in fomenting disorder. A teacher's self-discipline sets the behavioral tone of his classes. A teacher who loses his temper turns respect for authority into a struggle for power.

Yet the most profound results of restraint on the part of the teacher lie not in his keeping control, advancing order. The teacher who embodies and teaches restraint can also inculcate taste—an attribute fast disappearing under the aggressively gross onslaught of mass entertainment. An ancient Proverb warns us that tastes are not to be disputed, but we have almost made this point irrelevant in our capitulation to the tasteless.

Yet taste is only an expanded term for that sensitivity that makes civilization possible. Laws cannot be detailed enough to settle every dispute. Technology cannot surround us with riches so great that all will have enough. It is only taste that helps us recognize the unspoken yearning of another's dreams—and leads us to call decent that which builds community and makes love more than lust. A teacher at BYU might well help a student develop what James Russell Lowell has called "that good taste which is the conscience of the mind, and that conscience which is the good taste of the soul."

A Teacher's Responsibility

The teacher, by training and by opportunity, must help the young person set his knowledge in a moral and social context that cannot always be spelled out. But the restraint that helps him function as a truly human being, capable of a developing interaction with his peers and a willingness to earn his part in society, must be taught.

It is the enviable opportunity of the teacher to help reveal gradually, but irresistibly, the exciting world that is the province of cultured knowledge. Not all such opportunities are restricted to the classroom. I remember a brief exchange during World War II with a welder on my crew in a shipyard. As our graveyard shift was coming to an end, the dawn broke in a soft flush over the water; I quoted some lines from Homer. My unlettered friend found Homer's phrase "rosy-fingered dawn" interesting but inadequate. Yet it stirred him to his own fresh but somewhat awkward description of the coming day. As we punched out, he casually inquired, "What was the name of that fellow who talked about the dawn's hands?" Homer may not have gained an immediate admirer, but something besides the sun was dawning that morning.

I also remember the young cowboy from Montana who came to BYU some years ago. I was new at the University, and he was in a freshman English class that I was instructing. His lack of preparation for the class was almost outrageously obvious. He had very little concept of coherence and no skill at all in developing an idea. We suffered together. One day, after class, he handed me a much folded piece of paper and confessed that it was a poem that he had written. The thought of this boy subjecting himself to the discipline of poetry was almost beyond belief, but I assured him that I

would like to read his poem and that I would be happy to talk with him about it.

I am afraid that the opening lines were about what I had expected. And yet, on down the page, as he tried to tell me what it was like to be in a summer thunder storm out on the ranch of which he was a part, suddenly out of that page came a line of unmistakable poetry. He talked about thunder “rumbling, bumbling, grumbling like a God in disgrace.” I envied that line, and it suddenly occurred to me that this boy perhaps only lacked preparation and that I—who manifestly was not a poet—might yet teach one.

In the Vanguard

Finally, may I speak a word for those administrative officers of the University whose duties give them little time to be students or to experience again the exhilaration of teaching. Perhaps some of you are aware of the investigative teams that descend upon the University and whose often uncivil questions must be answered civilly—and interminably. Some of you may even realize the hours that are spent in adjudicating trivial complaints or just listening to those who would help run the University but who have seldom seen any of the ramifications of their suggestions.

At national conventions, identification as a BYU representative is usually good for an exhortation or two from utter strangers. We are constantly asked to assume roles for which we have neither the inclination nor the authority. BYU cannot speak for the Church—nor do we want to—but in the cross-fires of controversy, the administration is fair game for all sides.

Lest such an assertion claim more sympathy than I intend, let me hasten to add that most of us are here because we think that this is the greatest opportunity in the world to unite professional training and religious commitment. We deeply appreciate the sensitive concern of our Board of Trustees, and we want them to know that we serve gladly. May I lift a brief experience from my own youth to speak for us all.

On the evening of the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked, I sat by a radio in the town where I had spent most of my youth on the coast of southern Oregon. It was the only deep-water port between San Francisco and Portland, and its harbor was well known to hundreds of Japanese seamen who had loaded lumber at its docks. We sat in darkness and heard our local radio station report that a Japanese cruiser had been sighted off northern California headed toward Oregon.

In a thousand homes there was but one thought: we were liable to be under attack before morning. Suddenly, Pearl Harbor seemed very near, and the war was no longer a distant abstraction. The radio announcer, trying to keep his voice calm, suggested that the local sporting goods stores open and distribute what ammunition they had.

I pulled out my hunting rifle, which had never been fired in anger, and then set it down again, remembering the size of the guns on the Japanese cruisers that had often visited us. Through the night I reflected that I was not disposed for battle, but I knew that there was no place in the world that I would rather have been that night than sitting in that room, in that city, at that time. What was to come would find me willingly in the vanguard.

We share with all of you a love for BYU—that for which it has stood and now stands—and that for which it is destined to be. At this appropriate time, as we honor those who exemplify its finest ideals, we pledge to you the concerted, best efforts of faculty and administration to support the cause in which we all serve, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Maeser Awards Assembly address which was given at Brigham Young University on April 27, 1971.

Academic Vice-President and professor of English for Brigham Young University, Dr. Thomas is also co-author of five volumes of *Out of the Best Books*. He is well qualified to speak on his subject.