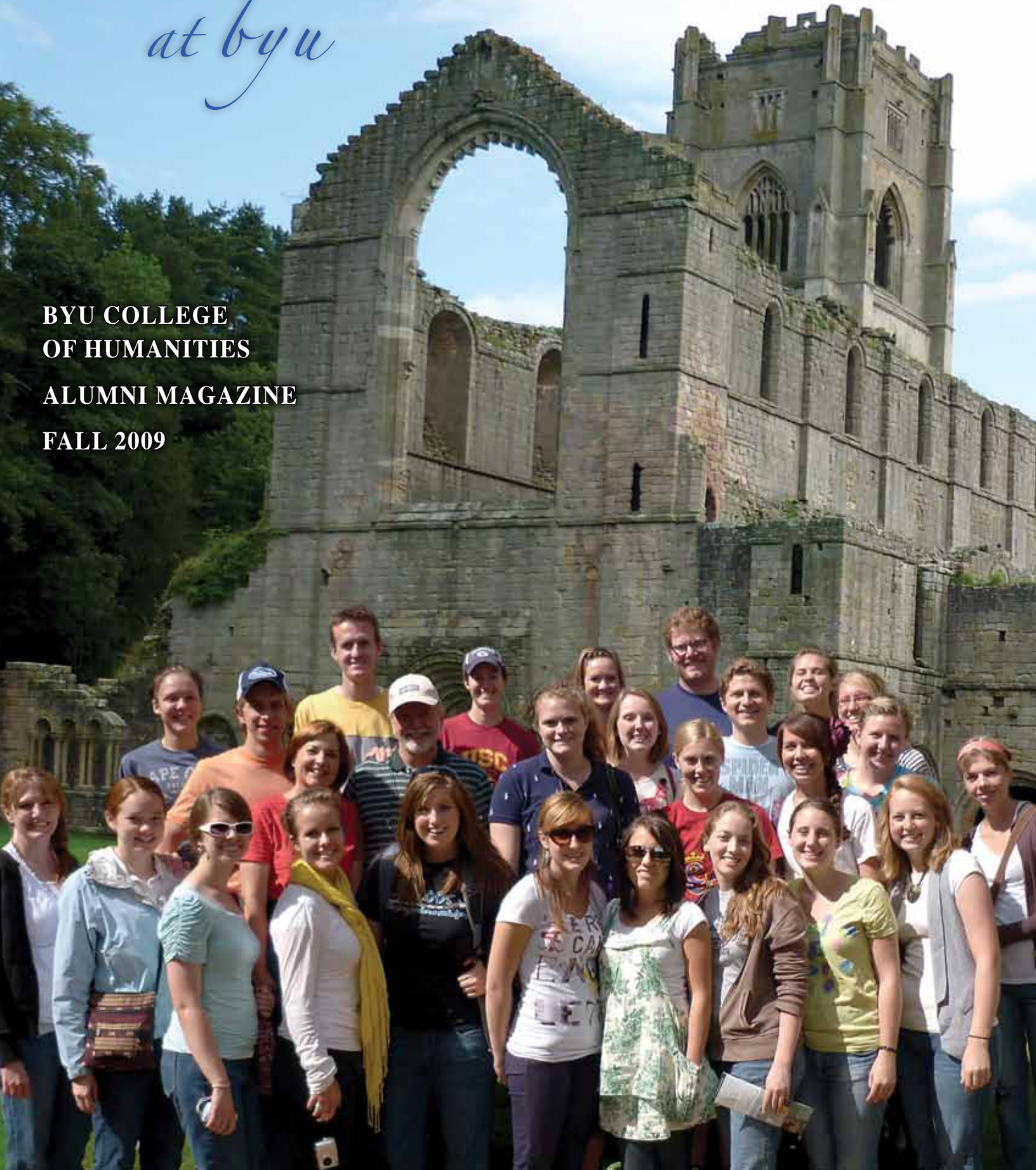


# HUMANITIES

*at byu*

BYU COLLEGE  
OF HUMANITIES  
ALUMNI MAGAZINE  
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## The Entitlement of Easiness



Dean John R. Rosenberg

At a particularly treacherous point in the journey of self discovery, Dante allows us to eavesdrop on his pilgrim, who climbs from one defiant boulder to the next, until “the breath was so spent from my lungs . . . that I could go no farther, but sat down as soon as I got there.” Vergil, the pilgrim’s poet guide, shows little sympathy for his charge’s fatigue:

“Now must thou thus cast off all sloth,’ said the Master, ‘for sitting . . . down . . . none comes to fame. . . . Rise, therefore, conquer thy panting with the soul, which conquers in every battle if it sink not with its body’s weight. There is a longer stair which must be climbed.’” “I rose then,” the traveler tells us, “better furnished with breath than I felt, and said: ‘Go, for I am strong and fearless.’” Eventually he reaches the promised destination, but not for another 76 cantos.

One of the many topics that generate political heat is entitlements—seen by some as society’s obligation to protect its most vulnerable citizens and by others as an intrusion of unwieldy and inefficient government in personal choice and responsibility. There is another entitlement, this one not debated in partisan politics but one for which I see growing evidence. It is the entitlement of easiness. The entitlement of easiness is a perversion of the idea of innate or God-given talents. It proposes that those who possess certain gifts develop and display them with unlabored ease. Conversely, the entitlement of easiness leads us to conclude that if something is hard we must not be good at it. As a consequence, we veer from challenge to challenge in search of unearned excellence. The entitlement of easiness promotes a revised translation of 2 Nephi 2:25: “men are that they might have fun.”

The entitlement of easiness reposes on new metaphors of knowledge. We are tempted to think of learning in terms of turning on, turning up, logging on, and downloading. The intensified form of searching called

research seems old school in the face of the new transitive verb “Google.” I am not critical of the new technologies themselves. Indeed, I marvel that digital databases allow me to complete in one afternoon what a generation ago required a month of tedious labor. What worries me is the illusion of instant erudition that reinforces the entitlement of easiness. Agricultural metaphors for learning were more honest. Ground was prepared, seed knowledgeably sowed, vulnerable shoots nurtured, irrelevant and distracting weeds removed, all in preparation for the harvest. In agricultural metaphors, sequence is unalterable and imposes discipline. And patience: the agricultural cycle cannot be accelerated—a full year is required for the harvest. That year is roughly equivalent to the 10,000 hours described by neurologist Daniel Levitan:

In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice-skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals . . . this number comes up again and again. Ten thousand hours is equivalent to roughly three hours a day, or 20 hours a week, of practice over 10 years. . . . No one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery.

Levitan’s conclusions happen to be one of the most persistent lessons of the Humanities. Dante’s pilgrim learns that only breathless and persistent effort will get him out of Hell, up the slopes of Purgatory and into the gates of Paradise. Cervantes’ Don Quixote described thusly the sacrifices required for mastery in the Humanities: “To become distinguished in letters costs time, sleepless nights, hunger, nakedness, headaches, bouts of indigestion, and other things of this sort.” American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson discredited the entitlement of easiness when he insisted, “That which we persist in doing becomes easier, not that the task itself has become easier, but that our ability to perform it has improved.” And a couple of decades ago one of



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## features

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Professor Susan Howe discusses how we can transcend our fast-paced and often trivial contemporary culture and write literature that expresses the enduring and personal thoughts of humanity.

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Cover: Fountains Abbey and students and faculty from the summer 2009 study abroad program in England organized by the Department of Linguistics and English Language.

Back cover: Study abroad participants at Stonehenge.

Please update your email addresses by sending updates to Carol Kounanis at [cek@byu.edu](mailto:cek@byu.edu)

### DEAN CONTINUED

my colleagues reminded us at a graduation convocation that “what is easy is never satisfying very long,” a mantra my children have long since tired of hearing.

Not only a degree, not a trick or a trade, the Humanities are a specialized language that allows us to comprehend and contribute to the human conversation. Like any language, it requires years of practice toward proficiency. A humanities degree signals a basic level of competence, but life-long learning characterized by disciplined study, practice, and vocational application is required if we hope to become native speakers.

Centuries ago the Italian printer Aldus Manutius appropriated a classical emblem captioned by the Latin phrase *festina lente*: hasten slowly. The emblem depicted a dolphin entwined around an anchor. The anchor suggests to me discipline derived from studied historical consciousness, a rootedness in grounding values and traditions, and the need for

static reflection; the dolphin’s velocity points to an urgent drive to move forward and to apply the lessons earned and learned to our life’s work. Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam described the *festina lente* adage in these words:

If . . . to make haste slowly is not forgotten, which means the right timing and the right degree, governed alike by vigilance and patience, so that nothing regrettable is done through haste, and nothing left undone through sloth that may contribute to the wellbeing of the commonwealth, could any state be more prosperous, more stable and firmly rooted than this?

Vergil was right: there is a longer stair that must be climbed, and as the pilgrim learned, it leads to opportunities, lessons, and graces that only our Creator fully understands. In accepting His invitation to climb, we renounce the false promises of the entitlement of easiness.



# Moving *ON*

*The College says farewell to two faculty members who will retire at the end of Fall semester. We value their years of devoted service to thousands of students. Readers who would like to wish them well may e-mail [karmen\\_smith@byu.edu](mailto:karmen_smith@byu.edu) for contact information.*



**WALTER WHIPPLE** (Germanic and Slavic Languages) joined the BYU faculty in the fall of 1993, after having taught music at Rockford College for fifteen years, and after having served for three years as the first president of the LDS mission in Poland. In May of 1998 he was invited to the Polish Embassy in

Washington DC, to receive that year's Amicus Poloniae award, and later that year was elected to be a regular member of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America (PIASA). Each year from 2003 to 2008 he directed a BYU Study Abroad program, in which he and his students spent six weeks each summer in intensive language study at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.

As a connoisseur of Polish folk art he has amassed a world-class collection of commissioned works on biblical themes from many of the leading folk sculptors and glass painters of Poland. (See the Spring 2009 issue of *Humanities at BYU*.) Walter played cello in the Utah Valley Symphony and appeared several times as organist in their performances of the Symphony No. 3 of Saint-Saens. He served as a member of the LDS General Music Committee, involved chiefly with the production of children's hymnals in various languages, and also with the selection, evaluation, and maintenance of pianos and organs throughout the church. Since 1988 he has played approximately one hundred guest organ recitals on Temple Square in Salt Lake City and numerous recitals in Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, Poland, and most recently in Israel, where he moves from retirement into a term as organist at the BYU Jerusalem Center.

Walter says, "My two-fold career has been a happy one. I earned my living by doing what I enjoyed. It didn't make any difference whether I taught music or language, because music is language, and language is music."

**ALAN KEELE** (Germanic and Slavic Languages) began his university career as a chemical engineering student at the University of Utah. After a mission to Germany, however, Alan was lured to Provo by a job teaching German in the newly founded Language Training Mission. After earning his PhD at Princeton, it was back to BYU in 1971 as an Assistant Professor of German.

Alan has loved every minute of his life at BYU, including the opportunity to serve twice as a campus bishop. He often reminded students that the message of the restored gospel of the Prince of Peace was to do good to one's enemies, to feed the poor and



to help the sick, globally as well as locally, and to avoid unthinking political choices that can negate our goal of establishing Zion. Along the way, he discovered the example of three LDS German youths, Helmuth Huebener, Karl-Heinz Schnibbe, and Rudi Wobbe, who joined forces

in a non-violent resistance to Hitler, and in articles, books, and films Alan has told their courageous story.

Alan's real labor of love has been to show that important LDS doctrines such as that of the pre-existence of the human soul, the destiny of humans to become like the gods, and eternal, temple marriage are in fact some of the highest themes in some of the finest artistic creations of Germanic artists. His analysis of opera and film, in particular, shows that LDS ideas—far from being quaint or bizarre—are really in the mainstream of serious artistic thinking about Big Questions.

In retirement, Alan and Linda Keele hope to spend some time each year in one of their favorite cities, Berlin, where they plan to explore the possibility of offering LDS Institute courses on Mormonism in the Arts.



☞ RAY CLIFFORD, Associate Dean of Humanities, was named recipient of the 2009 Award for Distinguished Service to the Profession by the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL). This award is given annually to an individual who

has earned a national or international reputation in foreign language education. Dr. Clifford's experience as Chancellor of the Defense Language Institute, his two terms as president of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and his current position as Director of the BYU Center for Language Studies, as well as decades of advocacy of foreign language education, made his selection "at once very easy and deeply satisfying," according to the ADFL selection committee. The award will be presented in Philadelphia in December.

☞ SHANNON TORONTO was selected as the Humanities Honored Alumni Lecturer for 2009 (B.A. English '88, M.A. English '91). Her lecture was delivered on campus on October 22. She serves as Chief Operating Officer of the Philanthropy Roundtable, a national association of foundations and charitable givers located in Washington DC. Shannon considers her degree in the humanities exceptional preparation for her work in philanthropy. Previously she was the executive director of the Marriner S.



Eccles Foundation in Salt Lake City, and she has also served in positions in the Leadership Institute and the Waterford Institute and has consulted on a major proposal between Hill Air Force Base and the Boeing Company. She serves on the executive committee of the Washington DC chapter of the BYU Management Society.

## Voices in the Humanities Conversation

☞ From ancient papyri to the Doctrine and Covenants, from sonnets to jazz, and from the Popol Vu to Dostoevsky, the range of research interests of Humanities College professors range widely. In the last several months, some of these professors have taped lectures on these topics as part of our series, "Voices in the Human Conversation." The tapings were done in the KBYU studios for later broadcast on BYU TV worldwide. At this time, the following lectures are available for viewing at any time by accessing the college web page ([www.byu.edu](http://www.byu.edu)), navigating through "campus" and "colleges and schools" to "Humanities," and clicking on the "media" icon.

Royal Skousen, "The Critical Text Project of the Book of Mormon"

Donald Parry, "Seven Striking Features of the Dead Sea Scrolls Bible"

Allen Christenson, "Popol Vu: The Creation"

George Tate, "The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead: Some Contexts for D&C 138"

Dale Pratt, "Wheels, Windmills, Webs: Don Quixote's Library and the History of Reading"

Roger Macfarlane, "Illuminating the Papyri from Herculaneum and Beyond:

BYU, Multispectral Imaging, and Ancient Texts"

Greg Clark, "Civic Lessons from Jazz Music"

Michelle James, "The Fruits are Exquisite: G. E. Lessing, Zion, and the Search for Truth"

Michael Kelly, "Lovingkindness and Compassion in Dostoevsky"

Russell Cluff, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: From Sonnet to Song"

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## OF NOTE CONTINUED

🔊 The National Endowment for the Humanities announced that the Ancient Textual Imaging Group (ATIG) has been awarded \$350,000 to pursue a two-year suite of projects. Using the resources made available by the grant, ATIG researchers and scholars will collaborate with partners at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, and the University of California-Berkeley. “We are thrilled that this grant enables the Ancient Textual Imaging Group to continue our multi-spectral imaging work,” said ATIG director Roger Macfarlane. “We will apply our expertise in the most engaging papyrological collections in the United States at these three institutions.”

The ATIG team will capture multi-spectral images of the partner institutions’ most intractable papyri, process the images, and make them available to scholars across the globe. The grant allows the ATIG to build upon successful imaging projects conducted in recent years at Naples and London (Herculaneum), Thessaloniki (Derveni), Berkeley (Tebtunis), Oxford (Oxyrhynchus), and Vienna (Rainer Herzog Papyri). Multi-spectral imaging is a process adapted from NASA. The space agency used it to study planet surfaces; ATIG uses it to read texts so blackened with age that often the human eye can discern no ink whatsoever. Support from the BYU College of Humanities has helped fund these projects since 2004.

## Honors

Congratulations to several College of Humanities faculty members who were recently awarded college or university professorships, lectureships, and awards.

### HUMANITIES PROFESSORSHIPS



Allen J.  
Christenson  
Humanities, Classics, and  
Comparative Literature



Mark  
Davies  
Linguistics and English  
Language



Van C.  
Gessel  
Asian and Near  
Eastern Languages



Lance  
Larsen  
English



Nicholas  
Mason  
English

### PART-TIME FACULTY EXCELLENCE AWARD



Debra  
Robins  
Asian and Near  
Eastern Languages

### P. A. CHRISTENSEN LECTURESHIP



Hans-Wilhelm  
Kelling  
German and  
Slavic Languages

### JAMES L. BARKER LECTURESHIP



David  
Eddington  
Linguistics and  
English Language

### ALCUIN FELLOWSHIP



Daryl  
Lee  
French and  
Italian Languages

# Millions and Millions and Millions

# of Words!

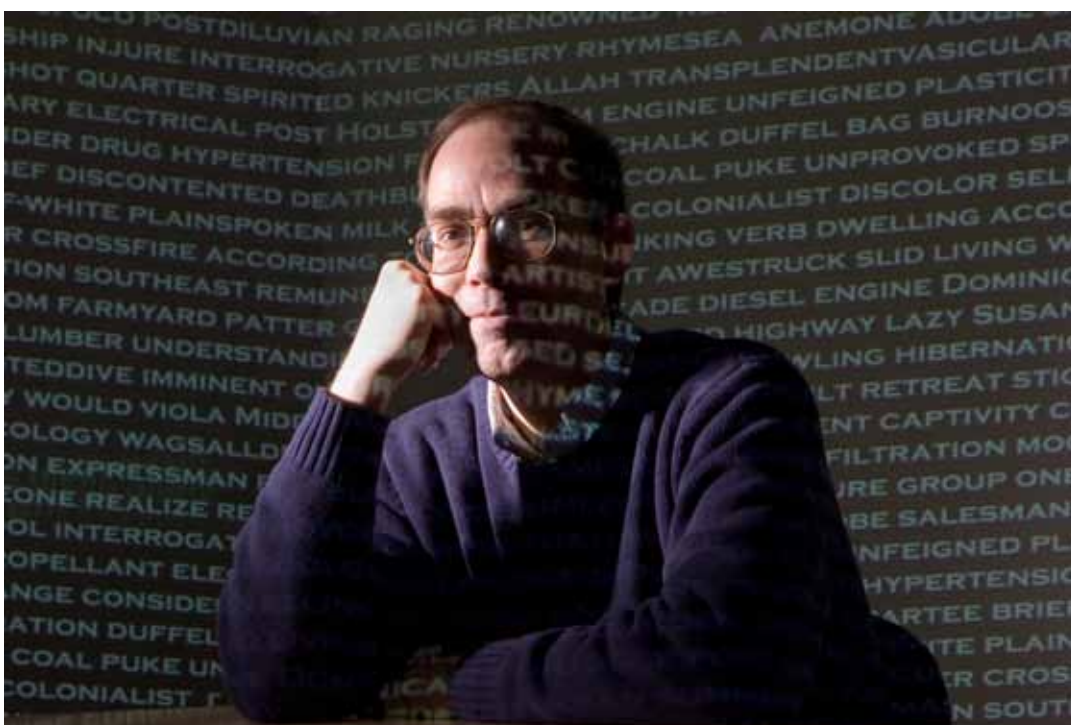
Mark Davies of the Department of Linguistics and English Language has received a \$200,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This grant will be used to create a 300-million-word corpus of American English from the early 1800s to the current time. The corpus—a highly searchable collection of texts—will include fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and other nonfiction writing, and it will be the first of its type in existence.

Unlike other resources such as Google Books or Project Gutenberg, the corpus will allow for many types of searches that are not possible elsewhere—giving researchers a tool to examine many different types of language change. Searches could reveal the frequency of words and phrases over time, changes in word formation, grammatical constructions, and word meanings. Large databases allow researchers to study changes in all of these categories as they occur over time.

This is the third large grant that Dr. Davies has received from the National Endowment for

the Humanities. In 2001 he received a grant to create a 100-million-word corpus of historical Spanish ([www.corpusdelespanol.org](http://www.corpusdelespanol.org)), followed by a grant in 2004 to create a 45-million-word corpus of historical Portuguese ([www.corpusdoportugues.org](http://www.corpusdoportugues.org)). He has also received a grant from the National Science Foundation to use corpora to look at genre-based variation in Spanish grammar. In addition, Dr. Davies has used these materials to create three frequency dictionaries that have been published (or will soon be published). The upcoming Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) will complement the 400-million-word Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; [www.americanacorpora.org](http://www.americanacorpora.org)). The latter corpus has been online for about a year, and it attracts more than 25,000 different researchers, teachers, and learners each month. Another corpus created by Dr. Davies is found at [corpus.byu.edu/bnc](http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc) and uses the 100-million-word British National Corpus as its database.

Dr. Davies invites other word-aholics to look at <http://corpus.byu.edu>, where there are a number of other large, and free, corpora. ☑



# Contemporary Culture and

## *Literary Art*

**A**lthough English studies is a varied and complex discipline, those of us who work under the aegis of the English Department share many values. Whether we are poets, novelists, essayists, literary scholars, composition specialists, teachers, folklorists, or rhetoricians, we are all writers. We take our language seriously, knowing that it can be artfully arranged to convey human ideas and experiences. We value story. We are aware that literature both shapes and is shaped by culture.

It is these values that I would like to address. In the past year, I have heard two stories arising within our contemporary culture that have haunted me for different reasons. The first I heard from my husband Cless Young, a chaplain in the Air Guard. Last year he spent four months at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, the military hospital where the injured soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan are evacuated as soon as they are stabilized.

What Cless shared about these soldiers taught me to respect them greatly. In each unit a deep loyalty develops among the soldiers because they trust their lives to each other. Many re-enlist for second and third assignments because they feel their absence might make their buddies less secure. If someone in their unit is killed, they experience tremendous guilt for surviving and keep asking themselves if there wasn't something they might have done. Their work is extremely difficult. On patrol they wear body armor and a rucksack that together weigh fifty pounds in temperatures reaching 115 degrees. In such conditions they patrol roads and neighborhoods and try to tell the difference between those Iraqis or insurgents who are trying to kill them and those who are just trying to live

their lives. They may come under fire at any moment and are constantly on guard.

That background makes even more poignant the story my husband told me about one of these soldiers, an LDS woman. One day on patrol in Ramadi, this soldier was assigned to operate the machine gun mounted on top of the Humvee. Patrols were carried out in convoys so that if one vehicle was attacked the others could come

to its defense, and her Humvee was the last in the file. Suddenly, a local vehicle (I imagine a vegetable truck or an old van) pulled into the street between her and the next Humvee and then stalled. The rest of the convoy continued, and when the stalled vehicle was finally moved out of the way, the convoy was long gone. To make matters worse, her driver turned into the wrong street, which got narrower and narrower. It was a tactic of the Iraqi fighters to separate one vehicle from the group and then attack it, so this soldier was intensely alert. She scanned the street ahead, trusting the second gunner, inside

the vehicle and facing backwards, to take care of the rear. Then a young boy of ten or eleven darted into the street and ran towards her. The insurgents regularly used children to carry and throw bombs, and this boy held his right arm behind his back, hiding something. She called to him to stop, but he just smiled and kept running. She was well trained; she did not hesitate to point the machine gun to shoot the kid, but when she squeezed the trigger, the gun jammed. Then she tried to pull out her nine-millimeter pistol as she simultaneously yelled to the other gunner to turn around and shoot the boy. Her pistol stuck in its holster—no matter how she yanked, she couldn't get it out—and the other gunner didn't hear her. By then the boy had reached the vehicle. He held up what he had been hiding—a vase he wanted



**Susan Elizabeth Howe**  
Department of English  
(photo by Jessie Evans)

to give her. She later showed the vase to my husband, a small brown glass ornament decorated with beads.

I think this is an incredibly important story: Because this soldier didn't shoot a child who was trying to bring her a gift. Because the child might have been carrying a bomb that could have killed them all. Because, unfortunately, war being what it is, other soldiers probably did shoot the child, or the pregnant woman, or the elderly man who thought of Americans as liberators and tried to welcome them in a way the soldiers did not understand.

I would like to contrast this story with another I heard on the national evening news about the economic downturn and sacrifices Americans were having to make. To illustrate, the reporter interviewed a woman in Los Angeles whose business was to plan parties for wealthy corporations and individuals. Hard economic times had cut her clientele in half, she said. In turn her income was way down, and she had to cut back on her own expenses. For example, she was no longer able to have her eyebrows waxed. The story then moved to the eyebrow waxing salon to reveal that it was closing for lack of business. The reporter, before returning us to the studio, commented on how the economy was hurting all Americans. I hope you are all with me on this, but just to make it clear, I was appalled that a journalist

could present the loss of eyebrow waxing as an economic sacrifice.

I have been as aghast at the second story as I was absorbed by the first. To consider them together is to reveal something about the culture of these United States in the twenty-first century: on the one hand there are very serious concerns being enacted in our culture, but on the other hand the excesses of American consumerism have made many aspects of our lives incredibly trivial. When physical appearance is elevated over every other value, then eyebrow waxing becomes not a silly indulgence but a necessary beauty ritual.

And this is but one area in which contemporary American life has been trivialized. The media and the internet bombard us with so much information at such speed that it is hard to pick out the significant from the insignificant. As an experiment, I clicked through television channels two to twenty-five on an ordinary weekday at 9:10 in the morning. Here are some of the fragments I heard:

... as close as you can get to the price  
without going over ...  
... how to cope with a clingy kid ...  
... This car will turn into a dinosaur or  
a turtle or an elephant ...  
... Club de la moda—cambia su vida! ...



Acts of kindness in the midst of war. Photo courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

... Men move at a snail's pace when it  
comes to emotional intimacy ...  
... spots and age spots until she underwent  
facial resurfacing ...  
... Look at how shiny the stove's surface is ...

As Tony Hoagland has said, “the contemporary civilized world feels to me like a wild, disparate, disorganized cascade of data, merchandise, noise, stimuli, selves—quite horrible in its volume if not its particulars” (164); “life in a first world culture at the start of the twenty-first century ... is so corrupted, distorted, so informationally dense, and so disconnected, it elicits a longing for perspective” (165).

These cultural conditions ought to concern those of us who care about English studies and consider them to be both useful and important. Literary art has always reflected the age in which it was written. In 1916 Amy Lowell wrote, “The exterior world is changing and with it men's feelings, and every age must express its feelings in its own individual way” (16). Thirty-two years later, in 1948, William Carlos Williams said, “what we are trying to do is ... to seek ... a new measure or a new way of measuring [the poetic line] that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past. It is in many ways a different world from the past, calling for a different measure” (52–53). Similar quotations could be provided up until the present day. They lead to the question I ask: What types of poetry, fiction, and essay are appropriate for our age?

Given the trivial nature of much of our culture, it is to be expected that a similar trivialization would occur in our literature, and, indeed, there has been, for the last several years, a movement towards literature that is witty, intelligent, and playful, but dissociated, fragmented, and random; literature that refuses to assert value or even discernable meaning. To use poetry as an example, Tony Hoagland describes what he calls “the skittery poem of our moment”: “Systematic development is out; obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in. Especially among young poets, there is a wide-spread mistrust of narrative forms, and, in fact, a pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative” (173–74). These poems are based in the play of language and often express cultural excess but engage their content only superficially, randomly, and without emotional connection. They are much easier to write than poems that have an emotional center and try to communicate something about experience, or about the value or dif-

ficulty of human life. In fact, I can use one of my own as an example:

The American Shopper  
Fish strips at the mall,  
creole gumbo, jambalaya.  
Rattlesnake jerky with  
jalapeno jelly. Swank streets  
outside, slippers on the freeway,  
an azure duck, obviously.  
Chaka Kahn, Bill Murray,  
do you dance the salsa?  
Amber. Turquoise. Baby teeth,  
bicuspid. Alligator pears.  
Alligator-skin wallet.  
Alligator farms. Alligator tears.  
Ritalin. Feng-shui. Avalanche  
probe. Eucalyptus-steam  
sauna. Green tea. Iguana.  
Navajo blanket. Inuit  
totem pole. Bolo ties,  
earbuds. Election aftermath.  
After math and poolside,  
Italian ice. Hundred-thousand-  
dollar-credit-limit clothing  
catalogues. Backlogged  
American tackle sports, all-  
encompassing, all starred.

I hope this poem points out that in our country cultural productions are reduced to consumer goods, indeed that everything is for sale. I hope you noted the clever word play and interesting rhythms. Nevertheless, “The American Shopper” is merely a list that never explains why the random availability of all goods might be hurtful, or in which situations such goods mean something, and to whom they are important. I hate to criticize my own poem, but what Tony Hoagland wrote of another poem of this type applies to mine as well: “The poem ... has no consequence, no center of gravity, no body, no assertion of emotional value” (179). Furthermore, because the poem is an ironic negation, I negate myself as its author: my own values and assertions are nowhere present. Poems like this one trivialize not just the cultural moment, but the people who live in that moment, including those who have written the poems. To trivialize people I think is the greatest danger of this type of literature.

Because despite what our culture tries to tell us, we are not trivial. “If there be two spirits,” said the Lord to Abraham, “and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits . . . have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are . . . eternal” (Abraham 3:18). And speaking to Moses, God said, “behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). As we are God’s work and the source of His glory, He must not consider us trivial. Nor would He want us to lead shallow, superficial lives.

Furthermore, I don’t think that any individual considers himself or herself inconsequential. We are important to ourselves. We care about earning high grades, being accepted into prestigious graduate programs, getting our papers into the best scholarly journals. We care about our dating relationships blossoming into love, our marriages bringing deep and abiding happiness, our children being healthy and finding joy in their own lives. We care about each other, about working and serving in meaningful ways, about the well-being of our Church, our country, and our culture, and about our relationships with our Father in Heaven and our eternal selves. We care about these serious and significant aspects of life even as we join in many of the trivial pursuits our culture throws before us. And so, despite the cultural excess we live in, we should care about expressing these extremely significant concepts in our art.

As Latter-day Saint writers and literary scholars, we should, it seems to me, resist the trivialization of

our culture and our literature. How will we do it? That’s not a question that is easily answered. I can’t give you five quick solutions; I can only ask you to think at some length about this question: What type of poem or story or essay—in language, form, and content—is appropriate to our culture and can say what needs to be said to help us re-imagine it?

It won’t do to pretend that we don’t live in this cultural moment, but, remembering the story about the soldier in Iraq, I find there is much to write about that is of great consequence in individual experience.

It has always been the province of the next generation to rebel against established conventions, as Amy Lowell did in 1916 and William Carlos Williams in 1948. I hope you students, poised to take over the production and consumption of culture, will say, “The conventions of the current literary moment are in every way inadequate to convey what I have to convey. In my art, I will do the difficult work of indicating what I value. I refuse to represent life as so bereft of meaning that readers will experience themselves as superficial, inconsequential, and shallow and seek fulfillment in acquisitions rather than relationships; in jolts of sensationalism rather than the exploration of ideas and a growing understanding of truth; in appearance rather than service and self-knowledge.”

Finally, we can read and study, and learn from art that we perceive to be significant. With that purpose in mind, I’d like to conclude by quoting the last part of Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses.” The beginning



Fishhouse in New England. Photo by George Burba, © Can Stock Photo, Inc.

of the poem is Bishop's detailed observation of a scene at the fishhouses: an old man repairing a net as he sits in the midst of fish tubs and wheelbarrows near a boat ramp that goes down into the water, and then the sea itself, silver in the evening light. The poem's conclusion focuses on the sea, which becomes a metaphor expressing the great worth of the essential and hard-won knowledge that gives value to our lives. Bishop describes the sea as "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / element bearable to no mortal" (ll. 47–48). The poem continues:

The water seems suspended  
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.  
I have seen it over and over, the  
    same sea, the same,  
slightly, indifferently swinging  
    above the stones,  
icily free above the stones,  
above the stones and then the world.  
If you should dip your hand in,  
your wrist would ache immediately,  
your bones would begin to ache  
    and your hand would burn  
as if the water were a transmutation of fire  
that feeds on stones and burns  
    with a dark gray flame.  
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,  
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.  
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever, flowing and drawn, and since

our knowledge is historical, flowing  
and flown. (ll. 65–84)

In a few years most of the students assembled here tonight will be scattered across the world, engaging in our profession as parents, teachers, scholars, editors, and writers. We all have different gifts and will serve in different places. Many of you will do more substantial, more influential work than any of your professors. Most of you will be in the minority, wherever you are, in terms of your religious community and your values about literature and art.

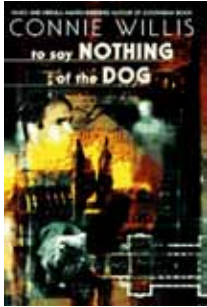
It might seem that you can make little difference, in your small world, regarding what literature people value, what they read. But consider Christ's answer to the question, "Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God?" "It is like leaven," he said, "which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened" (Luke 13:20–21). A bread recipe calls for just a half-ounce of yeast to be combined with six cups of flour and several other ingredients. That tiny amount of yeast can make the dough rise so that it becomes two loaves of delicious bread. Think of yourselves as the yeast, that little substance that brings about great change. I have faith that you students—your generation—are of the stature to meet the considerable challenges of your future, and that you will make contributions in the various disciplines of English studies. By suggestion, by what you write, by your scholarship, and by the works you teach and promote, be the yeast that will help contemporary literature rise into a wholly different thing than it might be without you. [Y](#)

From a talk delivered at the 2008–2009 English Department Awards Banquet April, 2009

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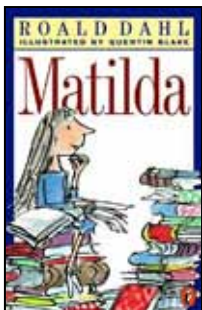
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Ruth Lapioli Merriman  
South Jordan, Utah  
English, 1973; MLS, 1974

*To Say Nothing of the Dog* by Connie Willis

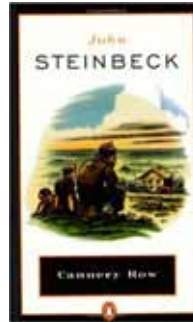
I was such a literary snob—I wouldn't read science fiction if you paid me. Give me the classics or give me nothing. Little did I realize what I was missing until a few years ago, when someone handed me this book. (Thank you, Emily.) What a great introduction to science fiction for me—time travel back to Victorian England, medieval England, and World War II England! The book is one big laugh after another, and the parallels to Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)* (another great book) are unmistakable. For pure fun, this book is number one. I have bought and loaned out about nine copies, which are unlikely ever to be returned. I'm so happy others love it like I do.



Lauren Bauer  
Burbank, California  
English, 2008

*Matilda* by Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl has a wonderful way of writing for children, yet speaking to them as if they were his equals. This book and others, like *James and the Giant Peach*, kept me up nights reading under my covers with a flashlight, even though I'd already read them ten times. I felt like Matilda was my friend, that her story was my story, and that it was written just for me. This was the catalyst for a lifelong love of reading, and a never-ending quest for more books that are not just stories, but also conversations between authors and readers.



F. Mark Spiller  
Pleasant Hill, California  
Humanities, 1983

*Cannery Row* by John Steinbeck

As I grew up in a blue-collar home of five boys, my world hardly extended beyond the fences of our sixteen acres. At the age of fifteen, fortune attracted me to the colorful jacket of *Cannery Row* on our small home bookshelf. In this book, where Steinbeck looks through a knothole at the denizens of the area—the sinners and the saints, who were often one and the same—I came to see the world anew. *Cannery Row* ignited the fires of my mind in such a way that they have never been extinguished. I began to devour Steinbeck's works and other books depicting the world in all its variety. For me, *Cannery Row* started a love of learning and an appreciation of the range of characteristics—good and bad—that constitute humanity. Steinbeck's realism still colors the way I view the world—from the temporal and mundane to the Savior and all of God's creation.



Let us hear from you. Tell us about a book, or several books, that made a difference for you. Please include your name, your major, year of graduation, and current city of residence, with a short write-up about the book's influence on you. Please e-mail [ron\\_woods@byu.edu](mailto:ron_woods@byu.edu)

# Alumni News

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**June:** The threat of a thunderstorm moved “Poetry and Popcorn on the Plaza” to move inside to the Foreign Language Activity Center. Attendees enjoyed a delightful discussion by Professors Kimberly Johnson and Susan Howe on interpreting and appreciating poetry and introducing poetry to young audiences.

**July:** Over 100 alumni and family members packed Provo’s Crandall Historical Printing Museum to hear about the Gutenberg Press, Benjamin Franklin’s Print Shop, the press used to print the first copies of the Book of Mormon, and the role of the printed word throughout history.

**August:** We held our first-ever Humanities alumni reunion during Education Week. What we lacked in numbers we made up for in distance traveled, as Dean Rosenberg greeted alumni from Alaska. Thanks for coming and we hope to see even more of you next year!

**September:** Chicagoland alumni enjoyed a wonderful presentation by Dr. Eric Eliason, Professor of English and former LDS Chaplain with the Utah Army National Guard. Dr. Eliason related his experiences in Afghanistan and discussed “Building Bridges with the Muslim World” at the Naperville Stake Center.



Alumni and families visit Crandall print museum in Provo.

## Alumni Careers Part 3: Is There a Doctor in the House?

We have had wonderful responses from Humanities alumni who have gone on to careers in business, finance, and law. Another major portion of our graduates continue on to the field of medicine, and this month we’d like to hear from them. How did your Humanities degree assist you in your medical studies? How do the things you learned in your Humanities classes help you as you practice medicine? What advice would you give to students who are considering a similar career path? Send your responses to Carol Kounanis at [cek@byu.edu](mailto:cek@byu.edu) or 4019 JFSB, Provo, UT 84602-6704.

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## Upcoming Humanities Alumni Events

**Dallas-Fort Worth area:** You and your friends are invited to two different presentations by Dr. Daniel Peterson, Professor of Arabic. On Saturday, November 7, he will talk about “Mormonism as a Restoration of Ancient Ideas.” On Sunday, November 8, he will be the featured speaker at an interfaith presentation entitled “Of Translation and Bridge-Building: The Dialogue of Civilizations.” For more information, please contact Carol Kounanis, [cek@byu.edu](mailto:cek@byu.edu) or 801-422-8294.

**Phoenix area:** Start planning now for the Humanities fireside on January 24, 2010, featuring Emeritus Professor and former Humanities dean Todd Britsch. For more information, please contact Carol Kounanis at [cek@byu.edu](mailto:cek@byu.edu) or 801-422-8294.

Don’t forget to check the alumni events calendar on the Humanities website (<http://humanities.byu.edu/humcoll/home.php>) for additions and updates to activities.

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# Why I choose to *give*



Todd Britsch, Professor Emeritus of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, with his wife, Judy.

Early in my teaching career at BYU, I realized that there were student, teaching, and research needs that could not be filled by our regular budget, despite the great generosity of the Board of Trustees. I also was aware that I would never be able to make the large contributions that some of our fine supporters have made. But I still wanted to make some financial difference to the university where I had studied and where I had met so many extraordinary students. I decided that small donations, spread over a long time, could help. For most of my career, I asked the university to take a monthly deduction from my paycheck. Since retirement, I have tried to make annual contributions to the College of Humanities.

The reasons for contributing seem obvious: students need research contact with scholars, professors need more support for their investigations, students with limited means need study abroad experiences, language learners need more contact with native speakers, and professors need to travel to conferences and research sites. The list is almost endless. And as the university becomes even better, the needs will grow larger and more urgent. Thus it will be even more important to contribute in the future. That's why I choose to give.

## How we have been *blessed*

The following comments were received from students who participated in a study abroad program during summer 2009 in England organized by the Department of Linguistics and English Language.

- ☪ Thank you so much for making this trip possible for me! While I love taking classes at BYU, nothing compared to learning things firsthand. . . . This trip has brought such depth to the phrase "learning experience." ~ Marianne Jack
- ☪ Your contributions made it possible for me to participate in this program and I am so thankful for that. . . . I have grown both educationally and spiritually. ~ Janet Leishman
- ☪ I feel that I have gained a greater appreciation and understanding of the culture, history, and language of Britain. . . . I thank you for supporting this remarkable opportunity. ~ Julianne Long
- ☪ I would like to express my deepest appreciation for the opportunity you have afforded me. . . . This amazing experience was only possible for me because of your generous contribution. . . . Thank you for helping to make the world my campus. I will never forget the experiences and knowledge I have gained here, nor your part in that blessing. ~ Rebekah Atkin

*Those* who donate to the Humanities Annual Fund make it possible for the college to provide students with study abroad, mentored learning, and other education-enhancing experiences. For more information, please contact Carol Kounanis, LDS Philanthropies at BYU, 801-422-8294, [cek@byu.edu](mailto:cek@byu.edu), or visit our website at [byu.edu/giving/humanities](http://byu.edu/giving/humanities).



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