

# EDUCATION THAT CHANGES YOU FOR GOOD

by Christopher Oscarson, Associate Dean of General Education

At BYU, faith and education, the sacred and the secular, feed into and strengthen one another.



**A** few years ago, I invited several colleagues from various universities to come to BYU for a multiday workshop in Scandinavian studies, my specialty. The work was going to be intense, so I suggested they pack good shoes so that one evening we could take a break and go for a quick hike up our unparalleled Rock Canyon.

A professor who taught at a large public university on the West Coast took advantage of this downtime to ask me questions about BYU, about the Church, and even about my personal faith and convictions. She did so somewhat sheepishly and excused herself for asking questions that, to a native Scandinavian, are deeply personal and rarely discussed except with close friends or family in a sauna. I assured her that I really didn't mind; in fact, as a returned missionary from Sweden, I found it refreshing for a Scandinavian to ask *me* questions about religion. My colleague expressed how impressed she was with the beautiful buildings on campus, the capable students, the generous support for our research project, and the clear commitment the university and the Church had to education. She confided in me that she had grown up in a devout religious home and that she recognized many things in our BYU community that reminded her of her own upbringing.

"But," she said, "there is one significant difference that I just cannot wrap my head around. When I finished *gymnasium* [the Danish equivalent of high school], I had a burning desire to continue my

formal education at a university—something my parents and faith community strictly forbade."

She continued, "I was forced to make a choice between my faith community and my education. But here at BYU, faith and learning seem to coexist. They do not just tolerate each other but seem to embrace each other."

Since that time, I have thought a lot about her comments. There are two important interrelated lessons that I have taken away from this conversation: first, how distinctive a BYU education is, and secondly, how education and learning fit into God's plans for all of us.

## **A Unique University in All the World**

In her short time on campus, my colleague discerned one of the most distinctive qualities of this remarkable institution. Indeed, at BYU faith and education do not merely tolerate each other. They embrace each other. They catalyze and strengthen each other. The sacred and the secular feed into one another. The Lord plainly states in the Doctrine and Covenants that "all things unto me are spiritual."<sup>1</sup> Understanding and believing

in these truths helps us more fully to love and appreciate God, His great mercy, and His creations, and to recognize how we are connected and how we can love and serve others. This fusion of the sacred and the secular in the pursuit of truth is exactly what President Spencer W. Kimball called BYU's "double heritage." He admonished both faculty and students to embrace being "bilingual" in "the language of scholarship, and . . . literate in the language of spiritual things."<sup>2</sup> Such a bifurcated view of the world opens new possibilities and realities to us. Our lives are qualitatively richer and our capacity to see the world with gratitude and charity increases with each "language" that we learn, especially the language of the Spirit.

### BYU's Double Heritage

My colleague's observation about BYU's unique pursuit of truth has also pointed me to another insight. At BYU we are not just open to revealed truth that is found, for instance, in scripture, but also to the capacity of all of God's children to receive revelation, wisdom, and understanding through study and learning. Remember, the scriptures say to "seek learning, even by study and also by faith."<sup>3</sup> BYU, with its double heritage, is not just a university among others, nor is it just a seminary or theological school. Learning at this university may well start, and even end, with the scriptures and the prophets, but it takes seriously its bilingual obligation to engage in "secular" scholarship on its own terms, patiently but unabashedly and without fear—and not just because it might help us professionally but because education and what it takes to become educated have spiritual value in their own right.

And while grasping truth has obvious merit by itself, the *process* of seeking that truth is as important as obtaining it. The process—learning as Christ did in His mortal sojourn, "grace for grace"<sup>4</sup>—changes and refines us. Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants explicitly links learning with sanctification. At the same time that the Lord was admonishing these pioneering brethren in the School of the Prophets to learn from the best of books, He was also commanding them to "sanctify yourselves; yea, purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, that I may make you clean."<sup>5</sup> The very act of learning, with all the discipline, sacrifice, and

focus it requires, can have a sanctifying effect on us when—and this is crucial—we do it with an eye to the glory of God and to the service of others. This is precisely what you should expect from a BYU education.

The Lord established a pattern from the beginning of the Restoration: as soon as the Saints gathered, they built schools and temples. The Lord said, "I, the Lord, am well pleased that there should be a school in Zion."<sup>6</sup> And while there were undoubtedly positive practical outcomes that came from these schools, neither graduation nor successful career placement was or is today the ultimate goal. The aim of a BYU education is something far more ambitious, even audacious: "The mission of Brigham Young University . . . is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life."<sup>7</sup>

This mission statement might, out of context, seem more like something one would expect of a church rather than a university. How can a university education at BYU help someone in their quest for perfection and eternal life?

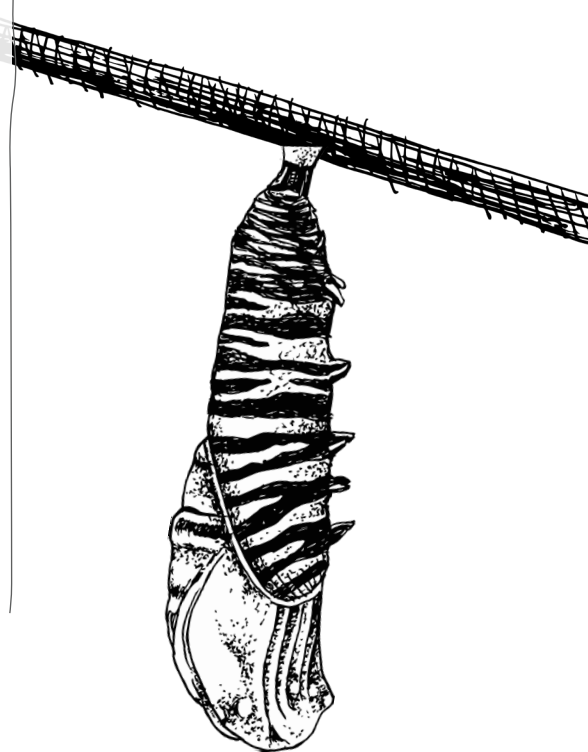
Before venturing an answer, I need to make clear that I am most definitely not saying that a university education generally—or a BYU education specifically—is in any way *necessary* in this quest. Good women and men who have not had access to formal education have indeed learned and experienced what the Lord required of them and will be denied no blessings. An education does not make anyone better than anyone else, and education is certainly not the only or even the primary resource that might help us, but it is a valuable one. It is a blessing—a "talent," in the words of the parable<sup>8</sup>—that can profit us when we are wise stewards. Even if we don't have the opportunity for formal education, the Lord expects us nonetheless to become lifelong learners because of how learning changes us.

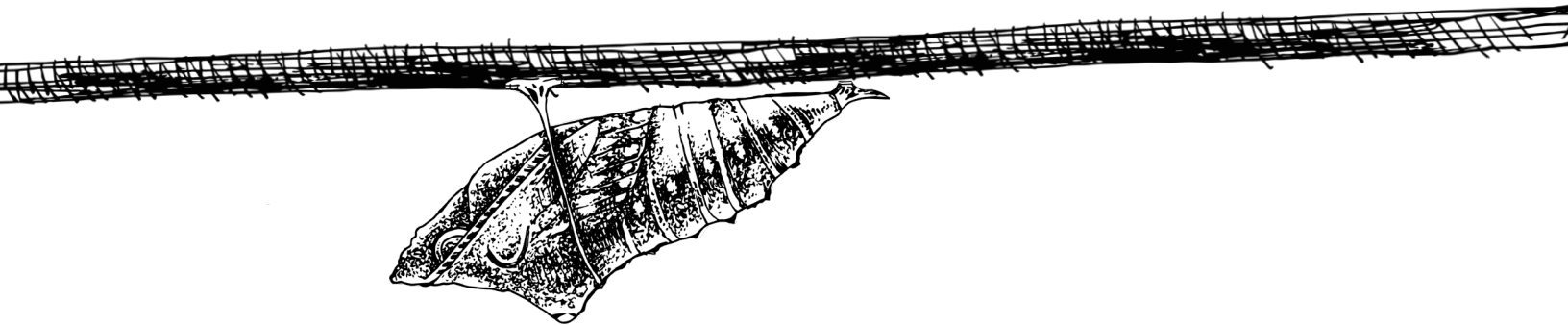
When talking about our BYU education, we tend to focus on what we need to do: complete applications, finish assignments, read books, take classes, earn grades, fulfill requirements, secure internships, receive a

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degree, and find a job. While all of these things have their place, none of them are ends unto themselves—either from an educational point of view or from an eternal perspective. The value of the experience is in how it shapes us and how it changes us. If we take another look at the BYU mission statement, notice how often it focuses not on what we are but on the process of becoming—the “quest” for perfection and eternal life, not its realization. Further down, the mission statement says BYU is intended to be “a stimulating setting where . . . the full realization of human potential is *pursued*.”<sup>9</sup> The “instruction, programs, and services” should contribute to “the balanced *development* of the total person.”<sup>10</sup>

The point here is that if you finish an educational experience—whether it be reading a book or completing a degree—as essentially the same person you were when you started with the addition of a few new facts and skills, you will have missed out on the great blessing of transformation and sanctification that comes from opening yourself up to truth. This demands that we see education not as a transaction but as something that requires vulnerability, humility, and sacrifice on our part so that it might affect us.

#### Four Parts of a Transformative Education

In the scriptures we are given instruction on how to be transformed by our education. First, we are admonished repeatedly to seek earnestly and honestly for truth. A transformative education requires earnest and honest seeking: “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”<sup>11</sup> The first step requires our agency.

A transformative education also requires humility and sacrifice. Idle curiosity that is not accompanied by a willingness to sacrifice and change is not motivated by faith. Humility and meekness signal that we desire to be impacted by an encounter with truth. But it is important in this process to stay focused on those things that are worth sacrificing for: God and His work.

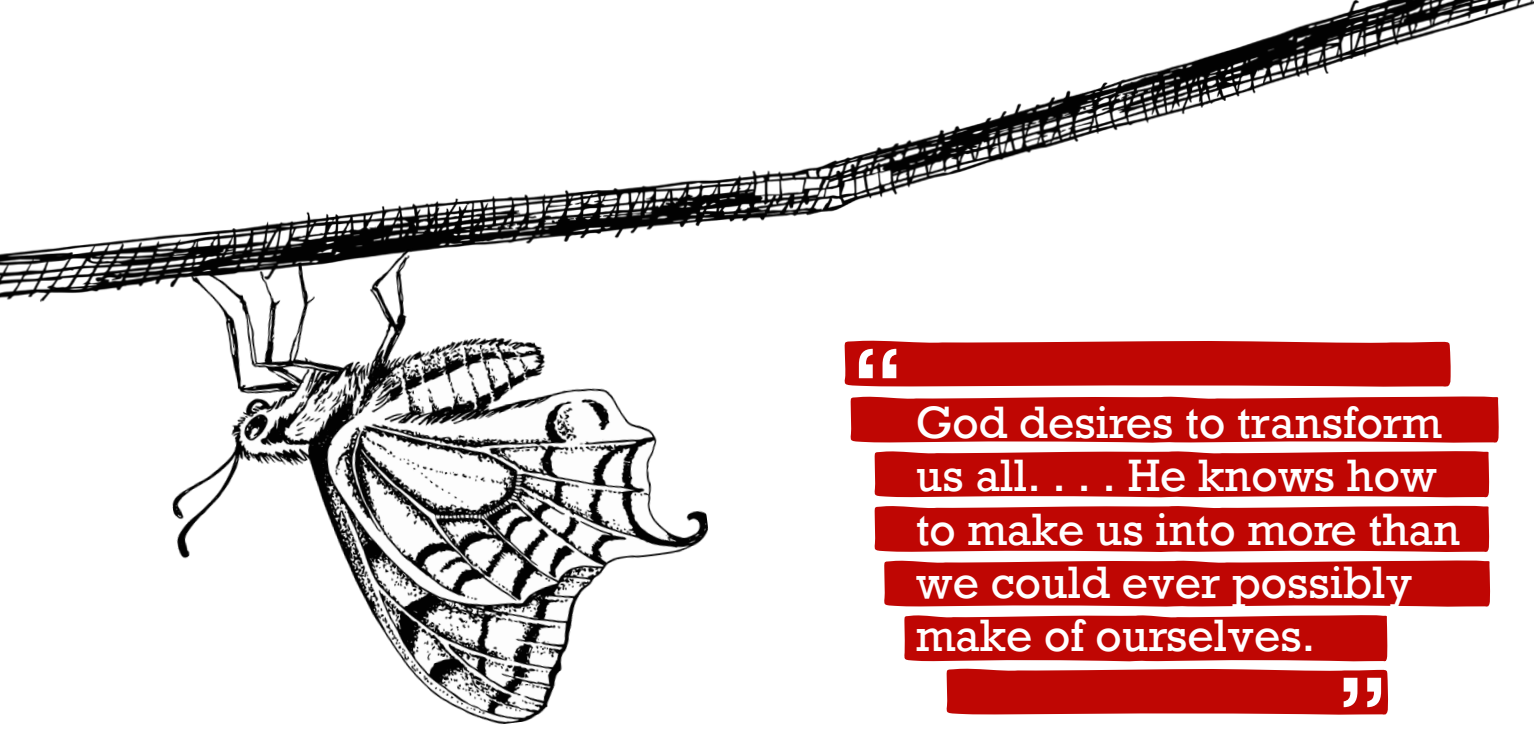
A third attribute of someone who can be transformed by education is patience and the ability to withhold rash judgment. When we are learning, it is not uncommon to come across new ideas that challenge what we think we already know. Sometimes we feel challenged because the new information is simply not true. But just because something is difficult does not make it necessarily false. We run a great risk when we dismiss true concepts too quickly simply because we lack the imagination to see how they might fit together with what we think we already know.

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There is a danger in simplistic binary thinking in which, when confronted by two competing ideas, one automatically assumes that one idea is completely right and the other completely false. This is a trap that can cause us to make serious missteps, to demonize others, and to even turn away from truth itself. The teachings of the prophets, the scriptures, and the values inspired by our faith in Christ are crucial components of this education and of what you have to offer to the world.

And the Lord has given us an additional gift to guide us and help us distinguish between truth and error: the Holy Ghost. The fourth important requirement of a transformative education is to make the Holy Ghost a constant companion in learning. This requires virtue in our lives and the careful cultivation of spiritual sensitivity.

The companionship of the Spirit is as important in our study of secular and scholarly pursuits as it is in our study of overtly spiritual topics. Moroni stated boldly that “by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of *all* things.”<sup>12</sup> All things—not just the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon or the veracity of God’s love for you, but all things. I have felt the power of the Spirit guiding me both when I have prepared to teach a lesson for my ward’s priest quorum and when I have prepared for my courses in Scandinavian literature and film. I have been guided with strokes of inspiration in my research in the environmental humanities and have heard colleagues remark how the Spirit has led them, sometimes in dramatic ways, to new insights, techniques, and knowledge that have, in some cases, shaped the course of research in their fields.

### Preparation Through Education

The Lord uses both the process and product of our education to refine us, to change us, and to prepare us for work in our homes, in our communities, in the Church, and in the world in ways and places that we often cannot foresee. Our own dispositions—how we embrace the process of learning—makes the difference between understanding that is bounded in its impact and an experience that transforms how we understand who we are and our place in the world. God desires to transform us all. Transformation and repentance are at the heart of Christ’s Atonement because He knows how to make us into more than we could ever possibly make of ourselves. □

*Adapted from a BYU devotional given June 2023*

### ENDNOTES

1. Doctrine and Covenants 29:34.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.
3. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.
4. John 1:16; Doctrine and Covenants 93:12, 20.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 88:74.
6. Doctrine and Covenants 97:3.
7. Mission of BYU.
8. See Matthew 25:14–30.
9. Mission of BYU; emphasis added.
10. Mission of BYU; emphasis added.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.
12. Moroni 10:5; emphasis added.

