

HOW BEAUTIFUL UPON THE MOUNTAINS

Henry J. Eyring—Advancement Vice President

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Ricks College—and now BYU–Idaho—has always been a place where Rinspired instructors help students discover transcendent truths. That selfless service is the hallmark of all who work for the University. In fact, more than some may permit themselves to see, it is a service related to the Savior’s work of bringing to pass the eternal life of man. Fully appreciating the scope and significance of our labors requires stepping back from the day-to-day and the here-and-now. One way to do it is through the eyes of students, as they look back on their lives.

I first took that kind of backward look one November morning at Bountiful High School. I shouldn’t have been completing my college application in Donna Parker’s AP English class. But the application was due that day, and Mrs. Parker would forgive my temporary distractedness, as she did so many other faults (including the C grade I was pulling at the time). Mrs. Parker was a woman of tremendous literary gifts. Her knowledge and insight extended, though, well beyond the discipline of English. She made time for students after class to talk about any subject of interest. I had counseled with her confidentially on matters of life and even love. She once confided, with twinkling eyes, a worry of her girlhood: “Where, when people kiss, do the noses go?” With her lifetime of experience and fresh schoolgirl memories, she knew how to give counsel as sensible as the patent leather pumps she wore.

In any event, I didn’t intend to tax Mrs. Parker’s patience much that November day; I only needed a few more minutes to complete the college application. It was all done except for an optional section inviting a declaration of major, something I’d never given much thought. Of course I’d dreamed for years of following my father’s footsteps to graduate from business school (Harvard, to be precise). But the business schools weren’t partial to any particular major, and so neither was I. Nonetheless, it seemed a good idea to declare a major from the beginning so as not to waste time. In a first scan of the long list of options, I found many potentially attractive. I highlighted all of those and then reviewed the refined list.

On this second pass, my eye came to rest on one major, geology. The word brought with it a flood of boyhood memories. I began to see images of teachers. In my mind’s eye there was Glenn Embree, intently inspecting a fire opal I’d found amid the rubble at the Spencer Mine. In the next instant I could hear Ed Williams calling encouragement as he left footprints for my father and me to follow; we were trudging through an early snow that caught us climbing slippery rocks on the South Teton.

I next saw the intricate chalk illustrations of Dr. Vernon Parkinson Scott (“Doc Scott”), my eighth grade earth science teacher; those drawings had brought the blackboards at Madison Junior High School to life.

Ricks College geologists Glenn and Ed, along with Roger Hoggan, made a rock hound of me before my ninth birthday. For Christmas that year I got a rock hammer, and thanks to their field trips my collection of specimens flourished. Soon my enthusiasm naturally expanded to include the whole of earth science.

But what really grew was my enthusiasm for the learning itself. That was the thing about all these geology teachers. Regardless of the topic—whether fossils or fault lines—they loved to explore and to tell. The telling always included reverential recognition of the Creator. Significantly, in all of our discussions my mentors made me their peer in discovery, their equal in exploration. From the depths of mines to the tops of mountains, we roamed a loving Father’s specially designed classroom. The exhilaration was not so much in solving the puzzles but in exploring them, in opening divine gifts of learning.

And so, as I sat there in AP English, it was Glenn’s intentness, Ed’s easy laugh and surefootedness, and Doc Scott’s blackboard artistry that carried the day. With nothing but eighth-grade coursework behind me and no intention of becoming a practicing geologist, I checked the “geology” box on the college application.

In hindsight, I can’t recommend this decision-making process without reservation. I might have done things differently, for instance, had I known that the Harvard Business School would send me packing in 1985 when I tried to win admission without having first found a job as a geologist, something very hard to come by then, with oil selling for eight dollars a barrel. That ended the dream of following in my father’s footsteps—at least in the literal sense.

However, there is no doubt that Heaven blessed me to consider the most important factors that day in Mrs. Parker’s class. My rock-hound mentors had taught me by example that learning is a labor of love. I picked geology because I had seen them love it and because I had felt some of that love myself. Even as a high school senior, I sensed the importance of loving learning. I wanted to have the benefit of passion and inspiration as I studied; subject matter seemed then—as now—less important than zeal.

That may explain why I’ve bounced from geology to law to business with a Japanese minor thrown in. Undoubtedly, it explains why the things I really remember about those subjects are linked more to personalities than to concepts.

There was the day, for instance, when smartly tailored, wing-tipped Rex Lee was leading a discussion of a constitutional law case that he

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had actually argued before the U.S. Supreme Court (he still holds the individual record for appearances before the Court). We first-year law students sensed the privilege of studying the case at the feet of the person who knew it best. But the unforgettable moment came when a curious student raised what the rest of us considered an off-the-wall question.

Professor Lee stopped. He smiled, put his hand to his forehead and said, “That’s a good question. I’ve never thought about it before.” For several spellbinding minutes he explored things he’d never considered. The rest of us envied our inquisitive colleague, whom Professor Lee engaged in dialogue as though he were talking with a law partner. I can’t remember now the case, the student’s question, or Professor Lee’s answer. But we aspiring attorneys learned as much about the law in those few minutes as we ever did during our long days and nights of briefing cases and writing exam outlines. In a moment of unselfconscious candor, Rex Lee taught us that the law is attractively ambiguous even for the experts, that there is no such thing as a stupid question, that genius is best complemented by humility, that discovery is joy. His love for learning changed not just what we knew, but who we were.

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Something similar happened the next year, my first year of business school. In the fall of 1986 I was a student in the organizational behavior class of Bonner Ritchie. Bonner (as he was happy to be called) quickly distinguished himself as my least-admired teacher. He was everything I thought a solid business executive shouldn’t be: liberal, questioning of convention, skeptical of “the numbers.” It wasn’t hard to imagine his days as a graduate student at Berkeley in the 1960’s; even twenty years later, he still had a long-hair look about him.

In late October, Bonner missed a Monday class. He arranged for a substitute, but his unexplained absence supported my hypothesis that he didn’t take our program seriously. When, at the beginning of our next class, he confessed to having skipped out to see two World Series baseball games, my hypothesis was confirmed beyond doubt; I could barely conceal my contempt.

It was the year the Boston Red Sox played the New York Mets for the championship. Bonner had tickets for the sixth and seventh games. Without a hint of apology, Bonner took a chair at the front of the class. Putting his Hush Puppies up on a table, he began to talk about the baseball games:

The underdog Red Sox came into game six, on Saturday night, with a three-two Series lead. At the end of nine innings, the teams were tied at three. In the top of the tenth, the Sox scored two runs to go up five-three. In the bottom of the tenth, after two outs and two strikes thrown past a third batter, they were one strike from the coveted trophy. The Shea Stadium scoreboard ran a congratulatory message from the Mets to the Red Sox.

As Bonner spun his yarn, something began to happen to me. I'd actually seen the game in question, glancing at a TV screen as I did my homework and paying more attention as the game got close. Along with millions of others, I'd seen the Mets score two more runs to tie the game and then win it on a ground ball to first that spun forward and bounced low under the first baseman's glove. I also had the TV on when the Mets decisively won game seven and clinched the series. But Bonner was describing something far more important than a mere baseball game. That night in Shea Stadium, laying aside his sports fan's mask, he had seen an organizational behaviorist's version of a Greek tragedy:

A 68-year championship drought. Redemption and glory in the palm of the hand. An improbable rally. An unthinkable error! The Curse of the Bambino. Perfunctory game seven. Boston doom; New York destiny.

For the first time, I saw Bonner and his discipline in a new light. He didn't try to draw firm conclusions from the game. In fact, he seemed keen to get our help in making sense of what he had experienced. It was clear, though, that he perceived dimensions of the game that I had never imagined. The players were members, not only of a team, but of an organization encompassing umpires and fans and players from decades past. The game was a metaphor of organizational life. There were lessons even for narrow-minded MBA students. Like Rex Lee's moment of wondrous candor, Bonner's epic tale of the '86 World Series sparked change in me. I've spent the twenty-plus years since studying the lessons of organizational life. And Bonner is my lifelong friend and colleague in learning. When he traveled to Tokyo several years ago, we spent an afternoon together exploring the puzzles of the organizations we live in and love.

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We have all traveled many miles. Rex Lee passed away in 1996, after a heroic battle with cancer that had already begun on the day he smiled memorably and said, "That's a good question." Doc Scott moved from Madison Junior High School to the University of Oklahoma, where oil expertise is much in demand (crude sells for \$100 per barrel these days), but they don't have a lot of interesting rocks. Roger Hoggan is a mission president in the Amazon, an even harder place to find rocks, at least without serious shoveling. I often see Ed Williams on campus; he reminds me of our trip over Hurricane Pass. Donna Parker now lives a block from my parents' home in Bountiful; she has forgiven my distracted, sub-par performance in her class, as well as my choice of geology over English as a major.

Glenn Embree took my son Henry Christian and me on field expedition last Labor Day. We went to the mountains above Glenn's cabin in Gilmore. He led us down into an abandoned mine shaft and up the sides

of precarious cliffs. We had a fourth expedition member, Ben Jordan, new this year to the geology faculty and, in fact, Glenn's replacement in the department. Glenn and I talked about the old times. Ben and Henry looked forward to their Geology III course, scheduled to start the next week. I could see the next Eyring family para-geologist in the making. I could also see, in my mind's eye, a scriptural image:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! (Isaiah 52:7)

Of course Isaiah's joyful declaration is a tribute to missionary work. There is no doubt that the feet of the missionaries—even in the most ragged shoes—are beautiful to those who receive their good tidings; converts' love for "their" missionaries is profound. I learned the motivating power of that love in Japan, as I interviewed members and asked them what led to their conversion. The most common reply, by a wide margin, was something like the following: "I saw the goodness and the happiness of the missionaries; I wanted to be like them, so I joined the Church."

But it is not only the missionaries who bring good tidings on beloved feet. Often when I hear the phrase "how beautiful upon the mountains," I think of mountains in their literal, geological form. When that happens, I am likely to see also the boot-clad feet of my geology mentors who taught me to love not only the physical world but also the kind Father who created it for us. I am closer to him because of their teaching, and the image of their boots evokes feelings of deepest gratitude. So, too, do the images of Bonner Ritchie's Hush Puppies and Rex Lee's wingtips and Donna Parker's pumps. Thinking of these different shoes, fit for the classroom but not for the field, brings to mind another scripture, one written by Paul. He taught the Romans that they must call upon the Lord to be exalted. But, as Isaiah did, he made clear that exaltation wouldn't be possible without the help of teachers:

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?

And how shall they preach, except they shall be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (Romans 10:14-15)

Paul, who echoes Isaiah's praise of peace publishers but omits reference to the mountains, was right: beloved are the feet not only of the geologists, but of all who teach truth and inspire students to love it. ∞

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