

## DESTINY OF ANOTHER SORT

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**M**y sister paid bills for me one summer while I lived abroad. We coordinated business and exchanged news on the phone weekly. One sunny evening in St. Petersburg, I called from a phone on the side of a building in Vostanaya Ploshad, the green fiberglass dome over the phone broken, the ground under the phone bare and dusty. Caryl and I wrapped up conversation and said goodbye. Removing the handset from my ear, I heard her voice again and asked, “Is there something else?” “I don’t know if this will mean anything to you,” she said, “but President Hinckley announced on Wednesday that Ricks College will become a four-year university.”

Wandering on strange shores that summer, I realized that a grand experiment was beginning in Rexburg. Considering my age, I would have about a decade to be part of the experiment. I felt grateful for the opportunity to travel a meaningful distance into it. In the years since, I have felt sympathy for colleagues who retired almost before BYU–Idaho got started, and sympathy, too, for young colleagues expected to ascend farther than I feel fit to climb. Gratitude for my part continues growing.

Since coming to Ricks College in 1983, I had wrestled with the oxymoron “church-school.” My CES interview was with Elder Rex Pinegar—a professional educator—who would know what a church-school was if anyone knew. In a stake president’s office in Moab, Utah, Elder Pinegar said to me something very like this:

Brother Waddell, Ricks College has a certain reputation. It is not a reputation of academic excellence. Here is a story from my own scholastic experience to illustrate my counsel to you. I was a grad student at USC and went to my professor’s office to pick up a paper I had turned in. As I entered his office, he held up my paper in his hand and said, “Mr. Pinegar, this is not your best work, is it.” Now, Brother Waddell, as you assume a teaching post at Ricks College, you are to see that each of your students does his [or her] best work.

Hearing the story, I drew a deep breath, for I too knew the reputation of Ricks College—an excellent place for one’s first two years of college, with both a literal and a euphemistic meaning. As for Elder Pinegar’s counsel, it was not merely his ephemeral fancy. He was the guest speaker at the Ricks College employee meeting on 24 August 2000 and again at the banquet that evening—in both speeches he related that same story.

My meditation in these pages flows from a quarter-century of Elder Pinegar’s advice remaining fresh in memory, and it accompanies eight years’ immersion in the experiment promised by President Hinckley. With

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hope of prompting a discussion that could stretch beyond the horizon, I set down a statement of faith and a speculation about epistemology.

“BUT WE ARE SPIRITS OF ANOTHER SORT.”<sup>1</sup>

BYU–Idaho is a university of another sort. I do not suppose that President Hinckley meant less than what he said or that the Church needs a university (or another university) in the ordinary sense of the word. Until 1953, Ricks College was an educational oasis in thirsty southeastern Idaho. When, that year and against odds, the college was retained in church ownership, the religious mandate received new emphasis and eventually came to be called the Spirit of Ricks. President Hinckley’s directive<sup>2</sup>—

a four-year university without postgraduate programs,  
a university of learning and teaching,  
a faculty without faculty rank,

—now begins to bear fruit as graduates depart Rexburg directly into business and industry.

Within the institution, we strive to actualize President Eyring’s prophecy of the steady, upward course<sup>3</sup> and the imperatives given by President Clark. We understand these to be among the most immediate of the prophetic directions by which BYU–Idaho should attain a peculiar destiny, the Spirit of Ricks becoming leaven in the world.

In my undergraduate days at the University of Utah and Utah State University, I was sensible of a spirit permeating the halls, oozing from the very floorboards. Perhaps it was connected with scent or inaudible sound, or maybe it was not sensory in any literal sense. But I knew what it was. It was the spirit of academe—of the thirst for knowledge that inspires the scholastic mind, a kindred appetite to that which impelled Adam and Eve to their conscious, cosmic descent into mortality. The Spirit of Ricks was not this same spirit.

After being part of BYU–Idaho for its first two years and then spending the 2003–4 year teaching abroad, I returned to Idaho on a Friday in June and on Monday at 8:00 o’clock met a section of English 311, Advanced Composition and Critical Reading. You know how, at the Thanksgiving dinner, nieces and nephews are a foot taller than you remember them? Being off campus for a year had that effect for me scholastically. That fine, bright morn, the students leaned forward in their chairs, gave eye contact, took notes, and asked the right questions. On 24 June 2004, I felt a scholastic spirit I had not previously felt on this campus.

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After class I went outside, onto the quad between the Smith Building and the McKay Library, reveling in the rare morning air of our high desert valley, watching the lawns and walks covered with couples and their children, remembering Elder Pinegar and the musty hallway of Old

Main in Logan. The college students had grown about a foot since I last saw them. BYU–Idaho had not merely superimposed seniors and juniors upon the lower division populace, but freshmen and sophomores, too, were inspired with a spirit of another sort. A deeper spirit of academe had found place in Rexburg.

Here are my articles of faith in BYU–Idaho:

- I am thrilled to be part of the grand beginning of the University. I believe the work is unique and yields unique fruit. As higher education in the United States stands at the forefront of higher education in the world, so BYU–Idaho has the opportunity to lead out in learning and teaching in America. This is not about eminence but—in a fruitful field—about thinking about thinking and learning about learning. Excellence of BYU–Idaho will not be a tic on the linear scale along which universities jostle for seedings, but of another sort.
- BYU–Idaho has this opportunity because its mandate is divine, its methods directed by prophetic insight and refined through spiritual gifts. As 125 temples have an immediate impact on members of the Church worldwide and their opportunities for spiritual growth, so BYU–Idaho will have both a present and an eventual impact on the worldwide membership of the Church and their opportunities for scholastic growth. This is not hubris but one way in which the Lord will leaven nations.
- The Spirit of Ricks, the ship of curious workmanship, rethinking education, the steady, upward course: these are names of living elements in the University. The ship is under sail. The upward course is an extension of Father Lehi’s iron rod—with a steeply ascending angle. The Spirit of Ricks has its downside still, but its upside enables vision into the extraordinary. This is not an apology for concepts without substance but an assertion that something of another sort is and must be afoot at BYU–Idaho
- I am privileged beyond imagining to be part of BYU–Idaho for a season. I am inadequate to the fearful summons because of not knowing enough, because of faith that sometimes falters, and because of limited ability to communicate the message to students. This is not self-indulgence or even modesty but an expression of gratitude.
- I recognize that preparation at BYU–Idaho is by inspiration. In my case the best results have followed a simple formula:
  - listen to instruction,
  - think about my students,
  - ask what I can do.

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“WHAT DOTHTH IT PROFIT A MAN IF A GIFT IS BESTOWED...?”

Doctrine and Covenants 88:33

If BYU–Idaho is to be a peculiar university, then it must develop peculiar traits or methods. What these may be we do not yet see clearly. As there is to be no stopping point in developing BYU–Idaho, the answers may be numberless, as may be the points of origin.

One trait, for example, might originate from the scriptural discussion of gifts:

All have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be edified thereby....

And all these gifts come from God, for the benefit of the children of God.

(Doctrine and Covenants 46:10-26)

If the variety of gifts includes distinctions among the gifts through which God’s children may attain knowledge, then the study of learning would entail studying various epistemologies.

It is said that the Renaissance was a flowering of learning and the arts. This is secularist nonsense derived from an onward-and-upward theory of cultural evolution as opposed to a cyclical one. The Renaissance was a shift from the paradigm that God is in heaven to the paradigm that God is in man. Its byproducts were learning and a flowering of the arts, since the upside of the times was belief in value of the human soul and the power in man to create. There have always been conservatives, like Solon of Athens, to say to the rising generation, “You must follow your muse, but the old ways are best.” And there have always been progressives, like the romantic Robert Browning, to say, “Man’s reach should exceed his grasp, else what’s a heaven for?”<sup>4</sup> Human history is a cycle of progressive and conservative notions seesawing in popular opinion.

It is also said that the Church sponsors universities so students can hear testimonies from professors, not attacks on faith. Again interesting and again not the kernel. The efficaciousness of hearing testimonies is not primarily to supplant the negative but to supply the positive. For testimony in a scholastic setting, the positive premise is that faith is not an ornament but an epistemology.

Elder Oaks draws a sharp distinction between two methods of learning, guiding us from nominalist empiricism to revelation, the epistemology of faith. Nominalism is the notion that abstract concepts have no objective reference but exist only as names. Examples would be “virtue” and “deity.”

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Observation and induction underlie the epistemology of empiricism, the scientific method. Says Elder Oaks:

The source of the ancient conflict between (1) reason or intellect and (2) faith or revelation is the professor's rejection of revelation, not the prophet's rejection of reason.<sup>5</sup>

He announces, "We cannot know the things of God without the Spirit of God.<sup>6</sup> This is the epistemology of faith. The problem is that things have so fallen out that the world is near to recognizing only empiricism as worthy to squeeze knowledge out of the lime.

Rationalism is not quite dead as an epistemology, but about all philosophers have proved recently is that nothing can be proven. Nor are classes in logic main fare in universities, crucial though reason is in the simplest human endeavor. As an academic discipline, logic is withering. So ascendant is empiricism that anyone can stop any discussion by saying, "That's the science," ironically inducing people to slam the door on their own observation.

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For the sake of discussion, let us suppose that the curriculum of the medieval university, the seven liberal arts, does not represent seven subjects flickering to light after a dark age, or even seven subjects chosen for promoting the offspring of the elite. Suppose, rather, that the seven liberal arts welled up from the primordial character of humankind, that they represent seven separate manners by which individuals may achieve mental coherence, seven spiritual gifts to seven distinct character types among the children of the Heavenly Father, for each to be given the only epistemological gift by which he or she can learn, for example, the principle of the redemption or the periodic chart or Greek grammar.

Seven epistemologies is only a hypothetical number, yet history shows that means of learning even recently were thought multiple. In the 60s and 70s, the "social sciences" were in a headlong rush to remake themselves as sciences. Grad students keypunched stacks of cards and agonized until their half-hour rendezvous came round with the campus computer. Data is useful, but my point is that adding to the data stack did not prevent declining social conditions—because empiricism is not the epistemology of the human condition. To find a thing, you have got to look for it where it is at.

It took until the 80s and 90s for secularist streamlining to convert my academic field, literature, to a science. The first step was to objectify the works of art. The result of observing art objectively was its removal from the universes of aesthetics and morality, so today pupils are not permitted to privilege Rembrandt's *Night Watch* over the label on a soup can, and academics preach against distinction between Michelangelo's *Pietà* and the filthy *Piss-Christ*. Than this, better indeed to remain

among unwashed masses, whose sense of difference between hawks and handsaws is secure.

Western education is increasingly founded on the single premise that every kid comes into the world with the same epistemological gift, and the gift is for observation, for empirical learning. Continually the system advocates more math and science for the children. Increasingly, life—society itself—is dominated by technology, a product of empirical science. And life really is better for technology, each of us living in a castle of comfort, speeding about in automotive comfort, adjusting our chemistries for comfort.

But if empiricism is only one of seven (for the sake of discussion) gifts for learning, then the Western university falls epically short in making education possible for six sevenths of the human family. If the medieval university had seven epistemologies, half a dozen centuries later the university tradition has whittled it down to one. Postmodernists already are convinced that there is no way of knowing anything. What will be left of learning by the end of this century? If our first parents walked away from Eden in order to have knowledge, then it would serve the opposite purpose if their children had access to only the narrowest spectrum of knowing. A glance at an epistemology's demise is instructive.

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The epistemology of art is aesthetics. Until Old Scratch ramped up efforts to pervert the exploding empirical knowledge of the industrial age (the age of restoration), people spoke unapologetically of aesthetics—that through the study of beauty they could have knowledge by which to make sense of the universe. In 1819, the aesthetically gifted John Keats theorized that “what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth,”<sup>7</sup> and concluded an ode:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>8</sup>

Emerson could still write in 1834, “If eyes were made for seeing/ Then beauty is its own excuse for Being.”<sup>9</sup> By 1872, however, Nietzsche lamented the loss of aesthetics as a method of knowing: “We have a new antithesis—the Dionysian and the Socratic; and on that antithesis the art of Greek tragedy was wrecked.”<sup>10</sup> To underscore my point, we need only ask whether Keats’ and Emerson’s lines might be read in 2008 as serious commentary on learning. Each was a serious man seriously gifted.

Aesthetics as epistemology is dead. School districts and boards of regents are in a continual dither about whether to shut down the art department or only cut from under it its budgetary legs. Advocates of art argue that the youth “should learn something of the cultural past” and society “is richer and more interesting” for acquaintance with the imaginative urge, arguments no less abject for their being ever so valid. But defenders are

back on their heels. In an objective world it is hard to fund refinement of the soul because “refinement” is exactly as elusive of definition as “obscenity,” and anyway, who knows what is a soul? In the end, they all throw their hands in the air and say, “Let’s muddle on.” Ironically, the art department is preserved by conservatism in the school system in the very spot where the school system ought to be progressive.

Someday someone may say: We need the art department because without it one seventh of the children cannot make any sense of things and will be consigned to lives of frustration and uselessness. What is needed is epistemological credence for this proposition. Energies are wasting in education, and students are badly served in a system with narrowing epistemological options, as sheep crowded into a chute. Come to mind the proliferation of neuroses, dropping out and doping up, apathy, anger, promiscuous consumerism, and growing need for prison cells.

Since experts call for more scientists, science departments are awash with students who have little gift for it. If that’s not bad enough, those with the gift can’t make themselves known for the crowd, and professors are too busy teaching general education to pay them attention. More students are not needed to study science, but more attention paid to those who are gifted in it. The original Nauvoo Temple was not built by a hoard of architects but by a troop of willing hands and a handful who knew their stuff.<sup>11</sup>

I do not know the latent but lost epistemologies; I am speculating that they might be rediscovered at BYU–Idaho. Maybe under the heading “restitution of all things.” Socrates is reputed to have learned by questioning, Plato by logic, and Aristotle by observation. Scriptures listing spiritual gifts usually mention a half dozen or more. If gifts for learning are somehow parallel to them, that, at least, is a hint how many to look for. Returning to the seven liberal arts, as if they actually were epistemologically individual, here are suggestions about how each tries to focus itself:

- grammar—exploration of the possible
- logic—exercise in the rational (vestiges of which remain)
- rhetoric—applications in the societally effective
- geometry—perception and practice in space
- astronomy—expanding the mind to limits of conjecture
- arithmetic—possibilities among the numerical and proportional
- music—synthesizing dimensions of harmony (aesthetics again)

This list must be laughably naïve. So far as I can tell it does not bend the suggested epistemologies into anything like an eternal round, and surely it should. Since faith is an epistemology, it would have to be a superimposed layer to all these, like the next record up on the old fashioned record player. Other record albums in the stack may be communicative

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(language and math) and behavioral (moral choice and repentance), with faith itself probably being the disk that encompasses activity (work and service), and so on. Only if we were convinced that spiritual gifts include epistemological gifts would we exert the energy to search them out and make them parts of pedagogy. The furor about learning styles has not yet gone deeper than style.

If it is true, what they say, that education and training are separate, then in the empirical university education is already absent, for the emphasis is on systems and technologies, necessary to feed, clothe, and shelter us, but of themselves without moral import. If a church-school can exist, it could not operate other than on moral ground, thus Brother Brigham's injunction to not teach even the alphabet except by the Holy Spirit.

My supposition about multiple gifts for learning is connected with experience, experiences that arise anywhere. One fine day at a family reunion my son Chris was teaching a sculpting class for cousins. He mashed a couple of balls of clay together and started shaping the mass into a head. Then he turned to the model, Brianne (with her big, luscious lips, as he said), and transferred her features to the sculpture, his eyes on her and his fingers on the clay. I had not known that a sculptor's fingers have the same visual accuracy that eyes have, or that eyes and hands can be taught laser-guided spatial correspondence.

A principle in which I have confidence is that of intelligence—my theology does not allow otherwise. Half a century ago people got lathered up about IQ, and the best and the brightest were invented. The premise was a linear continuum of inborn brainpower. I am of course not suggesting that some do not learn math or language more readily than others; I am pointing to the fact that all are children of God, having started out as intelligences. Nobody has yet defined intelligence, so it seems unlikely that anybody has devised accurate measures for it. Minority members have protested that traditional tests measure cultural conditioning rather than native ability, and no one has come forward with a wisp of refutation.

A more accurate continuum might be one extended a great distance in each direction, not the short one with Einstein at one end and idiocy at the other, but a much longer one with a rutabaga at one end and God at the other—with the human family as we know it all in a tight cluster at the middle. Could I believe that God has children who lack godly potential across a vast gap greater than others lack potential? Some carry the burden of neurological damage through mortality, but among the rollicking enrollment of BYU-Idaho they are rare.

What would be the implication for education if it became known that:

- Each student has unlimited intelligence (or maybe the element “intelligence” is by its nature unquantifiable so that being made of it is to be made of an infinitely magnifiable atom of it).
- The task of teachers is to match the material to the epistemological gift (Preach My Gospel looks like an attempt to teach the message of the restoration in such a manner).
- The purpose and intent of education are to lead learners to become like the Father in Heaven (with the prerequisite recognition that each one has the intellectual potential to do so).

It is not hard to see that Eton School was organized to promote sons of the aristocrats by ascribing value to aristocratic traits. Not to discount the praiseworthiness of the traits, but the obvious conclusion is that the powerful prepare systems to promote their own.

Maybe the prophetic destiny of BYU–Idaho includes preparations of another sort. Maybe our assignments entail an element not yet wot of: “Behold, you are they who are ordained of me. . . to declare my gospel, according to the power of the Holy Ghost. . . and according to the callings and gifts of God unto men” (Doctrine and Covenants 18:32–33). Maybe we can study epistemological gifts and organize classrooms in which each student can magnify her or his gift, can become educated after the manner of God’s tender mercy to each and his wisdom in granting to each one—of many gifts—that one gift. ☺

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## NOTES

- 1 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 3.2.388.
- 2 Brent Kinghorn, “Another Day in June,” *Perspective* 1.1 (Fall 2000): 61. Brother Kinghorn, Community Services Vice President of Ricks College, records events of the day and contents of President Hinckley’s initial announcement of BYU–Idaho.
- 3 Henry B. Eyring, “A Steady, Upward Course,” BYU–Idaho Devotional Address, 18 Sep. 2001.
- 4 Robert Browning, “Andrea del Sarto,” lines 97–8.
- 5 Dallin H. Oaks, “Reason and Revelation,” *Thinking about Thinking*, ed. M. Kip Hartvigsen, 3rd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Custom Publishers, 2000), 124–5. Originally published in Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord’s Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1991).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 7 John Keats, “Letter to Benjamin Bailey,” 22 Nov. 1817.
- 8 ———, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” 1819.
- 9 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Rhodora,” 1837.
- 10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, chapter 12, 1872.
- 11 Roger Jackson, “An Interview with the Nauvoo Temple Architect,” *Perspective* 2.2 (Fall 2002), 96.

