

FORGING TOOLS, PATHS, MINDS—AND A SPIRIT

Terry Gorton—Editor

A while back I watched a *National Geographic* documentary in which an African ethnic group—for sacred purposes—created their own tools by reenacting an ancient process of smelting iron. First they made bricks, built furnace and bellows, prepared charcoal, found, gathered, and cleaned the ore—all this before the real back-breaking work began: long, frenzied days and nights charging and blazing the charcoal and ore, stoking and maintaining the intense heat needed to smelt and then forge a small “bloom mass” into a single traditional and now sacred tool.

I was exhausted. And I thought of Nephi. “Thou shalt construct a ship,” he was told. My next question: “Where are prefabs?” His next question: “Lord, where may I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship?” Watching that *National Geographic* special gave me an idea what kind of obedience we’re talking about in these two verses, through which I slide all too seamlessly:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did make a bellows wherewith to blow the fire, of the skins of beasts; and after I had made a bellows, that I might have wherewith to blow the fire, I did smite two stones together that I might make fire.

And it came to pass that I did make tools of the ore which I did molten out of the rock. (see 1 Nephi 17:8-9, 11, 16)

I’ve been teaching here for almost seven years, showing up just as the second coat of water-proofing was being slathered on the ship’s planks. There’s a reason that just three summers ago President Hinckley could confidently enjoin us to get on board the “ship of curious workmanship.” Now that we’ve been accredited and have graduated our first Baccalaureate-majority class, an appropriate moment arrives to say thanks to those who got us sailing so smoothly—and made it possible to continue to launch such ships.

My experience centers on my own department, but please visualize in your own mind individuals from your department who have been building and firing furnaces these many years, forging for us all the sacred tools and paths that have come in so handy lately. Certainly, such English teachers as Ralph Thompson, Dorla Jenkins, Allen Hackworth, Bill Conway, Norman Gage, John Bonner, Randall Miller, Robert Worrell, Ron Messer, Larry Thompson, and Don Hammar taught decades at Ricks as if it were a four-year school already. Could anyone better exemplify a professorial ideal than these people? In fact, when I was teaching at BYU, without exception my best students (most prepared, dedicated,

respectful, intellectually alert and innovative) were transfers from Ricks, refined by these teachers. Something else these students brought with them: a sense that a teacher was much more than a grade-giver, someone who cared about the quality of their education and was willing to take an active role in it.

And the care these teachers exhibited for their students was so integral that it continued in their other relationships. Each of these teachers—and more whom I am not naming—went out of his or her way to personally welcome me, and by tangible examples of professionalism raised my standards, increased my capacities, and gave me (and each of us) the tools needed to continue their efforts.

As we look forward to reduced loads for professional development, the exhilaration of teaching upper division classes to older, more mature students, and all the freshness and excitement a four-year university brings, let's remember those who forged such possibilities as they spent dozens of years happily and inspirationally teaching a much narrower curriculum with a consistently heavy load to a much younger and less focused clientele.

This issue of *Perspective* invites us to consider such examples of professionalism as we continue to move forward with the fluidity they made possible. We might keep their Nephi-like labors in mind as we ask ourselves two crucial questions: 1) Are we still “Building with Integrity” as they showed us? and 2) Are we faithfully “Minding and Trimming the Sails” they first hoisted? Perhaps the greatest legacy of these campus smithies was the standard they forged for us to measure our success at both these goals. This standard is summed up in a phrase introduced by their students: “The Spirit of Ricks,” which holds that each student’s success and well-being are important to each teacher in each class. We hope the contents in this issue of *Perspective* will help us all maintain the path and the spirit first forged by such teachers. ☺