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As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me (D&C 138:11).

Lessons Learned

Michael K. Young

Michael K. Young was reared as a Latter-day Saint. When he enrolled at BYU he carried only modest expectations for his future. But one professor changed forever his outlook on the value of education. As a result, he graduated from BYU with highest honors and went on to a distinguished graduate career at the Harvard University law school. After serving two clerkships—one for Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist of the United States Supreme Court—he taught at the school of law of Columbia University, where he was the Director of the Center for Japanese Legal Studies. While on leave from Columbia University, he also served as Deputy Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs and Ambassador for Trade and Environmental Affairs. Currently he serves as dean of the George Washington University Law School. He has been a visiting professor at the law faculties of the University of Tokyo, Waseda University, and Nihon University. He is also a member and vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1988. Dean Young and his wife, Suzan, are the parents of three children.

When Professor Jim Kearl asked me to contribute to a book of essays on the topic of finding God at BYU, my first response was typically flippant: I did not know that he was lost, and lost at BYU of all places. However, I have enormous respect for Professor Kearl, great affection for BYU, and a deep and abiding testimony of the existence of God. The combination of all those sentiments persuaded me that the topic deserved more serious reflection and consideration.

As is often true, moreover, my lame joke provided a useful starting point. After all, just how pervasive was the concept of God at BYU? How much did that idea of God shape and inform my studies? How central to the enterprise—at least my enterprise—at BYU was the thought of God or the quest to discover his reality in my studies and work? All these questions suddenly seemed important. I am, after all, of an age when fundamental questions emerge after long suppression and demand serious attention. And at this time in my life I have the experience and background at least to understand their importance, if not necessarily to provide any better answers than I did when I was twenty-one. But most important, I have three college-age children. I thought I could use this essay to tell them something about my college experiences, especially as those experiences related to the development of my testimony. Perhaps that would help them avoid some of my mistakes and maybe even help them develop stronger testimonies than I had at their age. Perhaps my experiences would give them some small additional help as they attempt to answer those critical questions for themselves. Professor Kearl’s request seemed timely and useful. I agreed to try.

Not surprisingly, the answer to the questions I posed for myself did not come easily. It may not even have come at all. Nevertheless, the inquiry has been useful, and I hope my reflections may be of some small utility to others.

A number of negative conclusions occurred to me. First, I realized that I did not secure my testimony at BYU. Rather, I first learned of the gospel and felt the quiet whisperings of the Spirit at the feet of my family, especially my mother and her parents. For those who knew my mother’s family, this is not surprising. My grandfather, who passed away in his late nineties and worked at his small corner grocery store serving countless BYU students until just a few days before he died, served three missions for the Church, two in the deep South, including two after he was married. To give you some idea of just how far back into the Church’s past his life reached, when he served his missions, missionaries still lived in genuine fear of lynching. Indeed, in Kentucky, he replaced a missionary who had suffered just that unfortunate fate. A few years later, while on another mission, he and his companion opened up the city of San Diego for missionary work. Upon his return, he was called as bishop of a ward in Provo where he served for thirty-two years. That was when men were men, and bishops really were bishops, often for life!

I spent many days and evenings literally sitting at his feet, listening to him tell of his missionary experiences, of his close brushes with death, and of the Lord’s intervention and protection. Those were dramatic stories for a young boy, full of high adventure, of close calls, of too many rescues to count. But in the midst of the excitement, I learned of my grandfather’s deep and abiding conviction of the truthfulness of the gospel, of the Atonement of the Savior, of the reality of God, and of his place in the heavens. I learned that the Lord could truly be counted on to save and protect those who were on his errand. And I learned that in the end, his errands were all that mattered in life; indeed, they were

life itself.

Second, I concluded that contrary to the experience of some, my sense of the Holy came not from religion classes but from secular classes. That is, my religion classes at BYU did not play much of a role in expanding my understanding of God or strengthening my testimony. For the most part, they were perfectly acceptable classes. They did not light me on fire, but they were adequately instructive. That they were not more might well have been my fault, of course, but, too frequently, I felt that perhaps the priesthood lessons in my local ward were better than anything I heard in my religion classes. (Of course, in all fairness to my instructors, Hugh Nibley was in my ward and generally taught those priesthood classes.) Still, when I think of finding God at BYU, I do not think of my religion classes.

What then do I think of? What did shape and influence me? What really made a difference at BYU in terms of my relationship and understanding of God? Indeed, did *anything* happen at BYU that made a difference in this regard? The truth is that I now strongly believe that I had experiences at BYU that influenced me deeply, pervasively, profoundly, and permanently. But to understand how and why requires a bit of background. I need to confess at the outset that, for the most part, I engaged my undergraduate studies rather too casually. I found that if I took the right classes, I could get by largely with some last minute study. This initially seemed to suit me well. I had a pretty good short-term memory and could generally remember most of what I read, at least for the few hours necessary to repeat it back on the examination. More important, this approach to education left time for my real passions, skiing and girls (probably in that order, as my wife will attest). I am not proud of this, of course. Indeed, I have spent much of the remainder of my life trying to secure the undergraduate education I so casually avoided. I did not understand what I was missing and continued to work assiduously to ensure that I continued to miss it as much as possible.

A few professors were unwilling to let me off the hook quite so easily, however. They taught classes in which I could not do as well—indeed, could not do well at all—through mere memorization. To my initial annoyance, those classes required real thought and effort. I not only had to memorize the material, but I had to think about it and understand it as well. Those professors were not satisfied with anything less than a genuine attempt to wrestle with the broad implications of the material they were presenting, and they never neatly packaged those conclusions or served them up in a finished manner. For the first time in my life, I encountered educators who forced me to think, really think.

My initial reaction was, of course, high irritation. After all, I thought I understood the game pretty well, and I had certainly mastered it, at least as I understood it: the teacher would present me with prepackaged material, and I would memorize it quickly and repeat it back on the examination. The teacher would then give me a good grade, and we would both pretend that I was smart, even though we both knew that all I had done was demonstrate a good short-term memory, rather than produce any real evidence of intelligence or even effort. But then I met professors who departed from the accepted pattern. They were even prepared to give me a low grade if all I did was repeat back to them the materials in the textbook. They seemed to want something more. They wanted me to think.

This was a remarkable turn of events, and it took me some time to come to grips with it. Having always done relatively well in school, however, I thought I would at least give this startling new form of education a chance, at least during one fall semester, before the snow fell. Perhaps I could find an easy way out of this as well.

In the end, I never did find an easy way out. Rather, the experience was exhilarating, indeed, life changing. The whole enterprise was so extraordinary that now, three decades later, I am still at it. This exercise was so exciting, so novel, and, in the end, so meaningful that it became the focus of my entire professional life. I so fell in love with the academy, with the life of the mind, that I have never been quite able to leave it. Thirty years later I am still trying to learn how to think carefully, critically, and with insight.

What was unusual about virtually all those classes, however, at least for purposes of this essay, was something quite different. It was the way each one of those classes started. I am relatively sure the professors never consulted with each other on this matter; I suspect some of them did not even know the others. Nevertheless, each started their class in much the same manner. Sometime during the first class or two, virtually everyone of those particularly demanding professors would pause and bear a testimony. They would go to great lengths to ensure that we understood that the inquiry upon which we were about to embark did not diminish or threaten their belief in God or the gospel and that the questioning and analysis we would undertake was not intended to, nor, if done correctly, would destroy our faith. Interestingly, it seemed very important to those professors that we understand this central tenet, that we understand that study, thought, and analysis were not antithetical to a life of faith. Indeed, to the contrary, for them at least, such an approach was almost essential to their faith. What was particularly noticeable about this phenomenon, moreover, was that these were the only classes that started this way. In my more conventional classes, no one seemed to feel it necessary to profess their faith or defend their approach.

This contrast was striking, and I was initially a bit offended. As a nineteen year old, moreover, I felt completely entitled to be offended by both groups of professors, those who confessed their faith and those who did not seem to

think it necessary. Why, after all, I reasoned, should someone have to defend his own personal orthodoxy just because he intended to make us think for ourselves about some matter of legitimate academic inquiry? This seemed to suggest rather bad things at various levels about the degree of intolerance or lack of free inquiry at BYU. At the same time, if the whole purpose of my education at BYU was to strengthen my testimony, then why didn't every professor intersperse professions of faith throughout lectures and classes? The answers to both of these questions were revealing and taught me a great deal about testimony and about God, who wasn't, it seemed, lost at BYU after all.

Turning first to those professors who felt compelled to defend their faith, I learned from them something that has been extraordinarily important to me throughout my life. I learned the exhilaration and thrill of discovery. I learned how deeply exciting it can be to use one's mind to discover more about the world and how it actually works. I learned that a better understanding of the world was not only extraordinarily exciting in and of itself, but that such understanding was essential to my efforts to make that world a better place. I learned that thought and analysis could, and should, shape my behavior, and shape it for the better. In this regard, I discovered that I was actually moved to action by understanding, and the better the understanding, the better the action. I learned that mere exhortations to excellence, to do good, were not enough for me. I need to understand not only what to do but why and how I should do it. I found that ideas and thoughts truly shape my behavior, and the better the thoughts and ideas, the better my behavior and the greater my contribution to the world which I study and in which I live.

But I learned from those professors an even more profound lesson. Over time, I eventually began to understand that most of them were not starting their classes with a testimony as a defensive gesture; nor did their actions derive out of a perceived need to protect their jobs. Rather, they were engaged in teaching of the highest order. Their testimonies were profound and, at least for me, extraordinary teaching moments, though the full impact of those moments wasn't realized until many years later. What I have finally concluded is that those professors were trying to teach me the most important lesson in their subject matter: they were making clear by their statements and by their example that rigorous and demanding intellectual inquiry was not incompatible with faith.

Those professors were demonstrating through their own life experiences that a life of the mind—of deeply engaged analytical and empirical inquiry, of intellectual rigor, of academic pursuit—was completely consistent with a life of faith. Indeed, I believe some of them may have been going even farther; they may have been testifying that a life of intellectual inquiry just might be essential to faith, at least for some people. For some people—I am one—testimonies start with a deeply engaged intellectual analysis. We study it out in our minds first. Then we seek confirmation through fervent prayer and fasting. Each of those professors taught me that this approach was entirely acceptable to the Lord. They showed me that I could study the world and things in it, and that I could learn from great works, and that I could even take seriously the gospel as an intellectual discipline.

They also taught me the most important component of that approach. In order to understand genuinely the world and all the things that we learn from secular sources, we should start the inquiry first from the perspective of the gospel and its basic truths. The rest of the world then begins to make much more sense. It isn't so much that secular learning necessarily confirms the truth of the gospel in every instance, though I am frequently surprised with just how often it does exactly that, but rather that we much better understand the world and everything in it when we put the secular learning in a gospel context. In other words, if one first seeks the light of Christ and inspiration from the Lord, then inquiries about matters of science, politics, economics, history, indeed, society in general, are not only entirely acceptable, but likely to lead to a better understanding of the gospel and a stronger, not weaker, testimony. If we seek first the kingdom of God, then indeed all things will be added unto it.

That lesson has been perhaps among the most important that I took away from BYU. I have a deep and abiding testimony of the gospel. But, I must confess, I am not always entirely sure of everything that comprises the gospel. I think I know what the essentials are. But even those occasionally elude me. After years of study, for example, I understand the importance of the Atonement, and I think I have at least some rudimentary understanding of what I must do to take advantage of its tremendous blessing in my life. But I certainly do not understand the Atonement itself, how it came about, how it works, or even quite how it fits into the broad, eternal scheme of things. I have learned that I can have a testimony of it, even though based on incomplete understanding. I have also learned that I can have that testimony while I continue to study and learn more about its essential components. I have learned that it is entirely acceptable to have a strong testimony of the gospel, and I do, even if I am not entirely sure of the precise meaning or content of the gospel. I have learned that I can remain an active, deeply committed Latter-day Saint, even while I continue my inquiry into exactly what that means. I can have a testimony even as I continue to inquire about exactly what the gospel means and how the gospel is consistent with things I learn and observe from more secular sources. That lesson has been a source of tremendous comfort and support throughout my life, and I can hardly express my gratitude for it. Nor do I imagine that I would have learned it anywhere else but at BYU.

At the same time, I also learned an important and useful lesson from those professors whose classes comprised more rote learning and who did not feel compelled to defend their faith in class. From those professors I learned that not everyone is wired like me. For some, a testimony does not derive from a deepening intellectual understanding of the world and things in it. It has an entirely different wellspring. Theirs is truly an otherworldly understanding. For them, the life of the mind is not the center of their being and is not necessarily an essential component of their testimony or their life of good works. By reflecting on their contribution to my education, I have come to understand that while each of us may have quite different approaches to the gospel, to the development of a testimony, and to a life of faith, this is perfectly acceptable. Just as different people may have different gifts of the Spirit, different people may obtain the Spirit in quite different ways.

The importance of this lesson became clearest to me when I had the opportunity to serve as a stake president. In that capacity, I found myself constantly urging others, as well as myself, to higher degrees of effort, to deeper levels of engagement in the gospel and in the Church. But not everyone responded equally well to identical types of encouragement. It became very important for me to understand and tolerate all sorts of different approaches to the development and retention of a testimony. As a church leader—and as a father and even simply as a Church member—it is imperative for me to understand, tolerate, and love those who approach the Church and the gospel quite differently than I do.

Indeed, I do not think the words tolerance or acceptance even quite capture the essential attribute or behavior that the Lord expects of us. Rather, I believe that he expects us to embrace these differences in our community, to welcome them, to revel in them, to love them every bit as much as we love and embrace our own peculiar approaches to developing a testimony.

So, after all, if I didn't quite find God at BYU, I certainly learned better how to live more devotedly a life of faith and dedication in his kingdom. I learned a profession, a profession in both senses of that word. I learned to love the life of the mind. I learned that a life of the mind and a life of faith and practice are entirely compatible. And I learned that the gospel is constructed to allow many different paths to faith, and all are to be welcomed and embraced.