

Frank T. Rothaermel, “Chance,” in *Finding God at BYU*, ed. S. Kent Brown, Kaye T. Hanson, and James R. Kearl (Provo, UT: The Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 16–24.

Yea, I tell thee, that thou mayest know that there is none else save God that knowest thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart (D&C 6:16).

Chance

Frank T. Rothaermel

Frank T. Rothaermel is a native of Butzbach, Germany. After high school, he completed a vocational training degree in wholesale and retailing and played semiprofessional hockey. At the point where he had to choose what he would do as his life’s work, he left the hockey team, to the dismay of many, and continued study for undergraduate and master’s degrees in economics and history at Duisburg, Germany. He studied for an academic year at Sheffield Hallam University in the United Kingdom before he entered the MBA program at BYU, where he met the Church. He has now completed his Ph.D. in strategic management and economics at the University of Washington. He is an assistant professor at the Eli Broad Graduate School of Management at Michigan State University. Dr. Rothaermel married Kelley Quinn in August 1997, and they are the parents of one child.

I was born and raised in the rural, small-town community of Butzbach, Germany, near Frankfurt. I grew up in the Protestant (Lutheran) faith. I remember my mother reading the scriptures to my sister and me at night when we were little. She used a Bible written for little children; I still clearly remember the brown linen cover with golden print. This service of love by my mother planted the seed in my heart which eventually developed into a knowledge that Jesus is the Christ. Since my earliest childhood I had a testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Subsequently, in my youth I was quite active in our Protestant church. I recall that I could feel the Holy Ghost quite strongly at times. I indeed had a fairy tale childhood, growing up in a loving home where my mother chose to be a homemaker and my father provided well for our family. However, this beautiful family life was interrupted by a sudden tragedy.

When I was thirteen years of age my father died unexpectedly. Suddenly, my mother was a young widow in her early thirties with two young children and a large mortgage on our home. The years to follow were the hardest of our lives. Unfortunately, my mother received little support from our extended family or from anyone else. Being a young boy, I could not fathom why this happened to us. I could not comprehend why God took my father and why we had to experience so much hardship. I loved my father very much, and I lost him at a time when a boy needs a father perhaps more than at any other time in his life. Subsequently, my interest in active church attendance waned. During the next few years, I attended church only at Christmas, often only to do my mother a favor. But in my heart I still believed in Christ.

After graduation from high school, I became more serious about life. I started to focus first on my sports career playing ice hockey in semiprofessional German leagues and later on my academic goals. At this time something interesting happened. The question “What is the purpose of life?” came into my mind and would not leave me. I even asked some of my closest friends what they thought the purpose of life was. However, their answers were not satisfying. I also felt that there had to be more to life than the life I had known or observed in the people around me. But I did not know what I was searching for.

Besides my career in ice hockey, I was enrolled at the Gerhard-Mercator University in Duisburg, Germany, to study business and economics. During my undergraduate studies, however, I focused more on my sports career than on academics. I was basically unable to attend any classes during the winter semesters since my team practiced twice a day, and we played about sixty games a season, often three games a week. During my four and a half years as an ice-hockey player, I was traded several times. During those years, I experienced the best and the worst of human behavior. Due to my focus on sports, I neglected my studies. But at age twenty-four, I decided to quit ice hockey in order to complete my undergraduate degree. This was one of the hardest decisions in my life, because I loved the sport and considered it to be in some way an inheritance from my father, since he had introduced the game to me. However, it was the correct choice, and I did very well in school. Subsequently, the dean of the school, Professor Cassel, hired me as a research assistant. Through the opportunity to work for him, I started to discover my love for learning.

In the meantime, I had completed my undergraduate studies and enrolled in a master’s program in economics and economic and social history at the same university. After a year as an exchange student in England, I returned to Germany with the intent to pursue an M.B.A. degree in the United States after completing my master’s degree. I talked about my idea with Professor Cassel, my former mentor, and he was surprisingly supportive, given that I had just been

gone for a year. He said he would talk to one of his friends. This friend, Professor Bryson, a professor at Brigham Young University, happened to be in Germany on a sabbatical. Within weeks after my return from England, Professor Bryson and I met in Duisburg to discuss my future academic plans. He was the first LDS member I ever knowingly met, which is not surprising in a country with eighty million inhabitants and only about thirty thousand Latter-day Saints. Professor Bryson conducted that interview very professionally and focused on academic matters only. However, I was very much touched by his spirituality and had a strong desire to know more about his church. Indeed, I asked him questions about the Church and the gospel and also asked for a copy of the Book of Mormon. A few weeks later, he presented me a copy in German and prefaced it with a beautiful dedication in German. Translated into English, parts of his dedication read: “Dear Herr Rothaermel! I’m delighted to have the privilege to present you with this book. It is the most important book in my life. I have read Keynes and Schumpeter once. However, I have read this book about fifty times. I know through better methods (Moroni 10:3–5) than the scientific method that this book is true and from God. If you follow the principles of this book, you will discover the true purpose of life.” After reading that dedication, I opened the Book of Mormon for the first time and read the marked passage in Moroni 10. After reading that passage, I instantly felt in my heart that the Book of Mormon was true and that indeed it contained the word of God.

My meeting and further correspondence with Professor Bryson sparked such an interest in me about the restored gospel that I decided to apply to BYU for a master’s in business administration (M.B.A.), not only to pursue an academic degree but also to continue and intensify my investigation of the Church. I had a strong academic record, and I would have been accepted into many different MBA programs throughout the United States. However, I was eager to study at a school which aspired to such honorable principles as does BYU. I had learned much about BYU by studying its catalogues, including the Honor Code in which some of the principles for which the school stands are explained. In reading the Honor Code, I was particularly impressed by the thirteenth Article of Faith: “We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men . . . If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” I even attended a night class in Germany conducted by a stake president. I felt a strong desire in my heart to study, live, and associate with people who aspired to such honorable goals and values. I wanted to be part of a community whose explicit goal for the individual member is to follow Christ and to strive to be one’s best in all endeavors. During this time, I also started praying off and on.

Finally, I decided that I would apply only to BYU and reasoned that if the Lord wanted me to find out more about the restored gospel, I would be accepted. I was subsequently very excited to learn that I had been admitted into the highly competitive Marriott School of Management.

I came to BYU in August 1993 with a strong desire to learn more about the Church and the restored gospel, and with the personal resolution to live a better life. Friends picked me up from the airport in Salt Lake City when I first arrived. On our way to Provo we stopped at Temple Square. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the buildings and by the beauty of the people serving at Temple Square. I felt at that moment a strong desire to be baptized and to become a member of the Church. I did not know why I felt that way, but today I feel that the Spirit had testified to me. I did not act upon this prompting, however.

At BYU I began to transform my life to one of applying gospel principles. But the extremely competitive environment in graduate school was completely new for me. In Germany, students are not graded on a curve but on absolute performance. One year, for example, five students in a class may receive an A and the next year no one would. Students are graded compared to an absolute ideal and not relative to one another. Therefore, the first few weeks in MBA school were very frustrating for me. Not only was I not sure whether I would measure up in the program, but also the very competitive atmosphere among students was intense. In addition, my living conditions in the dormitory were not ideal. Those were very stressful weeks for me. In general, coming to a foreign country to attend graduate school is always a challenge.

However, I adjusted, and I started praying again regularly and reading the scriptures off and on. Shortly after the semester started, the missionaries visited me with a professor of mine in the business school, Dr. Ned C. Hill, who himself had served his mission in Germany. I was very touched that he would take time out of his busy schedule to visit me with the missionaries in my dormitory room. That night, Dr. Hill and the missionaries bore powerful testimonies. At the end of the visit they asked me to offer a word of prayer. This was my first vocal prayer in more than twenty years, and I could feel the Holy Ghost very strongly.

In the meantime, I had also made good friends in the MBA program. Many of my friends were returned missionaries from Germany. Those friends truly fellowshiped me, which helped through the difficult adjustment period at the beginning of my stay at BYU. In addition, I found the cultural understanding prevalent at BYU amazing. Not only did quite a few of my fellow students and professors understand the culture and language of my home country, but the entire BYU campus was permeated by a cosmopolitan culture. As a student from outside the country, I found this to be

very comforting.

With one of my very good friends I began attending church shortly after the semester started. On my first Sunday, I had such an incredible spiritual experience that I could not wait for the next Sunday to come. Sundays instantly became my favorite day of the week. In my heart, I had long before made the decision to be baptized, but in my mind I was reluctant to act on my promptings. I decided to put off my decision whether to be baptized until the Christmas break when I would have more time to think about it than during a crazy first semester in graduate school. I promised the missionaries to start taking the discussions then. However, Thanksgiving came around, and I became very ill. I was by myself in my dormitory room. On top of that, there were problems with the heating, and I felt very lonely and miserable. So I decided to purchase a ticket to fly home to Germany for Christmas rather than spend the time in Provo. I knew that I would be happy to be back home for Christmas. But I felt I would be betraying the missionaries because I had promised them that I would take the discussions in Provo over the Christmas break. I shared this dilemma with one of my good friends in the MBA program, and it so happened that his father was currently serving as the mission president of the Germany Frankfurt Mission. So he said to me, "No problem, I will talk to my father, and he will arrange the discussions for you in Germany." This friend was a very special friend to me during my time at BYU. He truly exemplified humility. It was not until much later that I got to know from someone else that he is the grandson of President Benson. He himself would never have mentioned it.

I took the discussions in Germany in the Frankfurt mission home as well as in my own home in Butzbach. My friend from the MBA program was also able to attend the discussions with me, since he was visiting his parents in Frankfurt over Christmas. I also had the opportunity to talk to my mother about my intended baptism while we were on a train ride back from Duisburg, where I had been awarded a prize by the university for my master's thesis. It was very difficult to tell my mother that I wanted to join the LDS Church. People in Germany do not know much about the Church, and parents often feel they have lost their children once they join. My mother was not happy, to say the least, as I shared with her my desire to be baptized. She was really worried about me, and she did not understand. As a matter of fact, when I invited her to attend my baptism, she said: "I have baptized you into the Protestant church, this now you must do on your own." Despite her unhappiness, I felt I needed to go forth with faith. I knew I needed to be baptized since I had felt the truthfulness of the restored gospel with all my heart. I could not deny this feeling.

I was baptized on the BYU campus in January of 1994. What a special day it was for me, and how grateful I was for the many friends who attended my baptism and who made me feel so special and loved! I had felt the Spirit off and on before my baptism. At my baptism I felt the Spirit more powerfully than ever before, particularly when I was confirmed a member of the Church and given the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Looking back, I realize that it was a tremendous blessing to be at BYU during the crucial time after my baptism. In few places in the world is it possible to partake of an education that combines spiritual and temporal learning. Not only did I have a great exposure to doctrine, but I could also observe strong LDS families and communities first hand. For example, one of my professors from the Marriott School of Management, Dr. Robert J. Parsons, basically adopted me as his son. In his home I saw and experienced the workings of a family who truly lives the gospel. Not only did my classmates and wonderful professors inspire me, but the devotionals and firesides where I had the chance to hear the inspired words of modern-day prophets particularly touched me.

It is impossible for me to name all the people who influenced me at BYU. However, I would like to express my gratitude for President Rex E. Lee. The first time I met him was shortly after my arrival at BYU as I attended a reception for a friend of mine. During the following two years, I saw him several times on campus. Even though his illness must have been extremely painful, he was always cheerful and said "Hi" to me every time he saw me. He truly exemplified the meaning of living a Christlike life. What a privilege it was for me to attend one of his last receptions at my graduation. President Lee gave me a big hug, a moment I shall never forget.

Professor Janet Howard nurtured me like a mother after I underwent two knee surgeries following a skiing accident. She truly taught me what selfless service means. I was also touched by the brief visit I had with President Bateman. Shortly after my own baptism, I was baptized by Dr. Parsons for my deceased father in the Provo Temple. There we ran into President Bateman. Brother Parsons introduced me to him. President Bateman took some time to talk with me and, when he asked where I was from, I replied "a small town near Frankfurt." He interrupted and asked, "Frankfort, Kentucky?" This was his way to compliment me on my English. All these outstanding individuals were role models for me, and even now I try to emulate them since they truly exhibited Christlike attributes.

Through constant repentance, fasting, prayer, searching the scriptures, and trying hard to keep the commandments, the Savior helped me to become a better person. He helped me to heal, to change my heart, and to be closer to him. Exactly one year after my baptism, I received my endowment in the Salt Lake Temple. This was a day I will never forget. I was fasting and was well prepared. I felt the Spirit stronger than ever before. As a pioneer in my

family, I had no family member with me. Even so, it was a very joyful day for me. Later, I had the privilege to stand as proxy in an endowment ceremony for my deceased father. On that occasion in the temple, I felt I was able to communicate with him. I once again could feel how it felt when he hugged me when I was a little boy. This brought much joy to my heart. Subsequently, I did the genealogy for deceased members of my family and performed the temple work on their behalf—what a privilege!

Eventually, I completed my graduate work at BYU. Shortly after my graduation, I even had the chance to visit with President Gordon B. Hinckley for a short while. My family was visiting me for graduation, and the following Sunday my sister and I attended a sacrament meeting in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building near Temple Square. My family and I had just enjoyed the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. My sister, who is not a member, and I attended that sacrament meeting, which President Hinckley also attended. After the meeting, President Hinckley visited with several members of the congregation. I thought that this might be a good opportunity to shake the prophet's hand and have my sister do the same so that she might feel that President Hinckley is indeed a prophet of God. Graciously, he shook both of our hands. However, to my complete surprise he then began a conversation with me. Later I understood why. It was I who needed a stronger testimony of the divine calling of President Hinckley. What a highlight that was during my stay at BYU.

Before leaving BYU I spent the summer attending classes in the religion department. My goal was to get a thorough understanding of the Book of Mormon. Brothers Judd and Wilson both did an excellent job teaching the Book of Mormon. So after graduating from the MBA program I spent the summer studying the Book of Mormon for several hours each day. Not only did I receive a wonderful temporal education at BYU, but I found God at BYU and, through God, found myself. This is a priceless possession which I will cherish throughout eternity. I marvel sometimes how these things came to pass. Why was I so lucky? I know that these things did not happen by chance. I know that the Savior's hand guided my search for happiness.