



President Dieter F. Uchtdorf warned: “Your students will love, admire, and be most grateful to you. Brothers and sisters, be thankful for this. But don’t you ever inhale it.”

Dan Burr, *A Battle of Pride*, © 2008

The Hazards of Being a Religious Educator

TERRY B. BALL

Terry B. Ball (terry_ball@byu.edu) is dean of Religious Education at BYU.

.....
This address was given at the Religious Education Annual Conference on August 23, 2012.

A riddle I find amusing asks the question “What is the difference between a bad golfer and a bad skydiver?” The answer: A bad golfer goes, “Whack—oops,” but a bad skydiver goes, “Oops—whack!”

Every occupation, every endeavor, every profession has its risks and rewards, but the reward-to-risk ratio between occupations can vary considerably. Whether we choose to engage in an occupation often depends on whether or not we feel that the potential for reward justifies the associated risks. For example, recently I have chosen to try to learn how to golf. I understand that it is possible to experience the joy of consistently hitting long straight drives on the golf course, a phenomenon that has eluded me to date, but I still choose to risk the embarrassment of playing the game in hopes of someday reaping that reward. On the other hand, I would never choose to be a skydiver. While I’ve been told that throwing one’s body out of an airplane and floating safely to the ground can be tremendously thrilling, in light of my

natural and well-developed propensity for error, it seems wise to me to avoid any occupation where mistakes are fatal.

Like you, I have chosen to be a religious educator. There are many wonderful rewards that can be realized in our chosen profession, but there are also some occupational hazards that come with the job. It seems to me that the rewards of our occupation are abundant and obvious, while the hazards are perhaps more obscure. Lately I've been thinking much about the hazards of our profession and how to avoid them. Because I believe that identifying and defining those hazards is an essential step to avoiding them, I decided to make a list of the occupational hazards of being a religious educator. I found the endeavor to be amusing at times, but mostly very sobering. This list has been informed by my personal experiences and observations over the more than three decades that I have had the privilege of being employed as a religious educator. I'm sure it is not a complete list, nor perhaps the best list, but it is a list that has been helpful to me to consider, and I hope it will be for you as well. Let me forewarn that as I share my list of hazards, there will be times when I will use both hyperbole and understatement. Please know it is not my intent to be sarcastic or offensive in the use of hyperbole or to trivialize the seriousness of the hazards in the use of understatement. Rather I will use these rhetorical devices in hopes of clearly defining and illustrating my understanding of the hazards.

Pride

Each of you is a remarkable individual with a wonderful set of God-given talents. Many of you were gifted children blessed with a bright intellect and an outstanding work ethic that prepared you for our profession. Others of us were just lucky overachievers. What a blessing it is to be able to use our talents to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we do so, we help God accomplish his work to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of others. What a privilege, what a blessing it is to be engaged in an occupation of such great and eternal consequence. You are so very good at what you do—so talented, so inspirational. But therein lies the hazard. Because you are so good at what you do and your curriculum is of such eternal import, you often receive the praise, accolades, and even adoration of those you teach. They love you and are so grateful for what and how you teach them. In their evaluations, students say glowing things about you and your teaching. They leave notes thanking you for the way you have blessed their lives. They speak in superlatives to their

peers and families about your mastery. If we are not careful, such praise can lead us into the hazard of pride. We might start to believe that we actually are as good as, in fact, likely even better than others say we are. We might even begin to suspect that we are actually so much better than everyone else that what we do, think, research, or teach is much more valuable and important than what others do, think, research, or teach. The consequences of such pride can be devastating. It can cause us to lose the humility requisite to improving and learning and loving and teaching by the Spirit. If pride overtakes us, we will fail in the things that matter most. So while you are being told how wonderful you are, and usually deservedly so, be wary of the hazard. None of us are so good, none of us have so much deposited in our personal bank of skills, that we can afford the luxury of pride. I appreciate the way President Dieter F. Uchtdorf counseled religious educators in this regard. He warned, "Your students will love, admire, and be most grateful to you. Brothers and sisters, be thankful for this. But don't you ever inhale it. When you begin to inhale it—when you become obsessed with your own greatness and importance as teachers, when you begin to dwell on your influence or reputation—that's when pride will begin to corrupt your motives and behavior. Remember that it is the Savior, not you, who must be the focus of your service."¹ As we enjoy the blessings and privileges of being religious educators, let us work together to avoid the hazard of pride.

Complacency

As we experience success, we must also be wary of the hazard of complacency. What a waste of training and opportunity it would be should we think that receiving the praise and thanks of others, or becoming a full professor or obtaining tenure at a university, is a license to go on cruise control, having no need for further improvement or any obligation to further contribute to our discipline. If such complacency is not checked, we soon become stagnant and outdated. We risk not understanding the Church's current position on issues. We can lose touch with the challenges, questions, and issues our students are facing, thereby abrogating our ability to help them find answers and perspective in the gospel.

Think how much our students will miss if we assume that we have reached perfection in our teaching and no longer need to prepare for classes or deepen our own understanding. Ask the brother of Jared to explain the consequences of squandering our time sitting on the beach thinking we have arrived at our

promised land, when in truth God has a far greater vision and blessing for us if we continually seek his guidance (see Ether 2:13–14). What a tragedy if we are content to maintain the status quo rather than looking for ways to improve. What a shame if we allow ourselves to be lulled away into a sense of professional security, myopically concluding that “all is good enough in Zion.” David Mills, a friend and fellow religious educator, labeled this hazard the “Rock-a-bye Baby Syndrome.” He notes that we softly sing that lullaby to our babies and toddlers to lull them away into slumber, but asks, “Do you think they would fall to sleep if they understood the words of the song?”

Rock-a-bye baby
 In the tree top,
 When the wind blows
 The cradle will rock.
 When the bough breaks,
 The cradle will fall,
 And down will come baby
 Cradle and all.

We sing the lullaby in soothing and soft tones to help the infant feel safe and secure, when in reality we are describing their very precarious position and forecasting their likely fatal crash to the earth. So too, if we allow the praise we receive or the success we experience to lull us into complacency, we may convince ourselves that it is safe to professionally slumber, becoming oblivious to the desperate needs and rich opportunities around us. Our students, our employer, and our Heavenly Father deserve better from us. They deserve the best we have to offer throughout our careers. What a wonderful contribution we can make to our discipline if we are deeply engaged throughout our careers. What a blessing we are to our students if we are constantly striving to improve our pedagogy and deepen our faith and understanding. As we enjoy the blessings and privileges of being religious educators, let us work together to avoid the hazard of complacency.

Priestcrafts

Priestcrafts are another occupational hazard that haunts our profession. Nephi’s warnings on the subject suggest that there are two ways that those who teach the gospel, like religious educators, can fall into the hazard of

priestcrafts: one, if they preach to “get gain and praise of the world” and another, if they “set themselves up for a light unto the world” (2 Nephi 26:29).

As religious educators, we are well compensated for our labors by our employer, but I do not think that in itself constitutes priestcrafts, for we are not paid directly by the students we teach. If we were, then we might be tempted to teach only the things our students want to hear in order to increase our income and thereby be guilty of that form of priestcrafts. Fortunately, we get paid whether our students appreciate what we teach or not. However, if we were to begin sacrificing academic rigor and high student expectations in our teaching in hopes of being more popular with the students or of receiving higher student evaluations, then we most certainly would be guilty of teaching to get the gain and praise of the world.

I think the second type of priestcraft that Nephi identified, that of setting oneself up as a light to the world, is a much more pernicious and harmful hazard. Our students trust us and look to us to help them understand the gospel. It is a sacred honor and responsibility to have that trust. When we are being true to that trust, we guide our students to the light; we help them come unto Christ. But if we succumb to the hazard of priestcrafts, we interpose ourselves between the student and the light of Christ. At worst we cast a shadow over the Savior’s light. That eclipse must never occur. If we are not careful, we can set ourselves up as the light in several ways. For example, if in our efforts to be helpful we take over the role of a student’s ecclesiastical leader in the repentance process, are we not then a hindrance rather than a help to that student needing to be perfected in Christ? Or if we present ourselves as a rare teacher of the “deep doctrine,” the purveyor of real gospel truth that only we and perhaps some of the Brethren truly understand and claim that students are privileged to be let into our inner circle of knowledge, are we not guilty of priestcraft? Or if we profess to be the sole practitioner of the perfect pedagogical method, which is far more enlightened than other methods, then are we not seeking the praise of others rather than Christ? Or if we feel we have all the answers and it is our unique gift and responsibility to answer every difficult question and resolve every ambiguity, are we not drawing students to our light rather than our Redeemer’s? What a slippery slope such a practice can become! I think we have all seen instances where attempting to answer some questions can lead us into strange speculation that may be confused for doctrine and even create crises of faith for our students. It is imperative that we avoid such speculation when responding to the

questions of students or the media. In speaking to religious educators, Elder Paul V. Johnson reminds us of Alma's example. He explained, "There are some cautions we should remember as we try to help students with questions. We may feel such a desire to help students who are struggling that we grasp at straws to give them any answer, even when there is no real answer available. Even the great prophet Alma explained to his son, 'Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear' (Alma 37:11). It may have been easy for Alma to speculate, but he didn't."²

I think most of us recognize that there actually can be great value in not having all the answers. When we help students recognize that there are some difficult questions to which we do not currently have answers, we demonstrate to them that one can have deep faith and trust in God without a perfect knowledge of all things. Even if we do know the answer to a question, there may be times when rather than being given the answer, the questioner would be better benefited by being directed to a source where they could discover the answer for themselves. What a wonderful opportunity and blessing it can be for us to help students deal with ambiguity and learn how to learn in this way. As we enjoy the blessings and privileges of being religious educators, let us work together to avoid the hazard of priestcraft in all of its manifestations.

Monasticism and Extravagance

In our occupation we have the opportunity to engage with and learn from remarkable colleagues. We also enjoy a great deal of discretion in the use of our time and in setting our research agendas. Outside of our scheduled classes and some required meetings we are given great freedom to decide how, when, where, and what our activities will be. This freedom is a great blessing and a reflection of great trust, but there are two hazards that come with agency. The first we can call the hazard of monasticism, which comes from a term literally meaning "the act of living alone."³ If we are not careful, we may become so engaged in our personal research agendas that we become academic hermits, even to the point of being annoyed by students, classes, colleagues, meetings, or administrators who make demands on our time. We can find ourselves hiding out in our personal monasteries—our offices, the library, or even our homes, rigorously researching but unaware of the blessings and strength we can receive and give by being regularly engaged in a community of learners. The second hazard of the trust we are given is the antithesis of monasticism. We can call it extravagance, meaning to be excessive. If we are not careful,

we can spend so much of our time in meetings, visiting with colleagues, or dealing with committee assignments or even interests, diversions, or businesses outside of our occupation that we fail to develop, grow, and reach our potential as scholars and teachers. We also may find ourselves being careless or wasteful with financial or other resources our employer provides. As we enjoy the blessings and privileges of being religious educators, let us work together to avoid the hazards of monasticism and extravagance.

Cynicism and Contempt

In our preparation to become religious educators and academics, we have experienced the blessing of being trained to think critically and the expectation to do so. That training helps us to review and strengthen one another, to be wise in creating policy and practices, and to help students sort through difficult questions and concepts. The hazard that comes with the blessing of being trained in critical thinking is cynicism. By cynicism I don't mean critical analysis or personal doubts—rather, I mean the knee-jerk distrust of colleagues, leaders, students, or policies. Cynicism is often a precursor to the kind of contempt and murmuring that proved so spiritually detrimental to Laman, Lemuel, and others. By contempt and murmuring I do not mean having frank, open, and critical discussions and review to clarify and improve our thinking, decisions, practices, and policies. My own teaching, writing, and administrating have been deeply improved and richly blessed by such discussions and review. By contempt and murmuring I mean belittling, demeaning, deriding, ridiculing, insulting, distrusting, or discounting the thinking, discipline, motives, contributions, value, or sincerity of others. Let us strive in giving critical review to avoid being cynical or mean-spirited. For example, in reviewing an article wherein you find a paragraph that is difficult to follow, wouldn't it be better to simply comment, "I find the logic difficult to follow here" or "This does not make sense to me," rather than rudely rebuking, "This is an inane piece of gibberish. What makes this idiot think he can write!"

Likewise I hope that as we are being reviewed, we will be grateful for critical suggestions rather than offended, even if we may have reason to be. I love Peter's example in this regard. There were times when Peter received very critical feedback from the Savior, but he was remarkably resilient, never showing any animosity for it. For example, recall when Christ tried to forewarn the disciples of his approaching death. Peter was distressed by the warning and said to Christ, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee," to

which the Savior gave the critical response, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me” (Matthew 16:23). I think some would choose to take offense at such a rebuke, but not Peter. I find it instructive to note that the text does not subsequently say, “And Peter was deeply offended by the harsh critique, and so he chose to never speak to Christ again.” Rather, the great Apostle’s subsequent life of service and sacrifice demonstrated that his love and devotion to the Savior were not diminished by the censure. What a truly remarkable example for us to emulate. Let us work together to maintain the virtue of critical analysis while avoiding the hazard of cynicism and contempt.

Rewards and Risks

I hope these observations have adequately illustrated that in our chosen occupation as religious educators, like other professions, there is the potential for great blessings and rewards, but also associated risks and hazards. Like ancient Israel, we have our own blessed Gerizim and cursed Ebal (see Deuteronomy 27–28; Joshua 8:30–35). As you may recall, to remind the Israelites of the covenant of righteousness associated with their promised land, they were instructed not long after their arrival to have some tribes stand on Mount Ebal and some on Mount Gerizim. The tribes on Ebal were to shout out across the valley the curses of the covenant and those on Gerizim the blessings. Applying that practice to our profession, from our Ebal we could cry, “Cursed⁴ are they who allow themselves to succumb to the hazards of pride, complacency, priestcrafts, monasticism, extravagance, cynicism, or contempt.” From our Gerizim we could assure, “Blessed are those who humbly strive for and achieve excellence; who are enthusiastically engaged in their occupations throughout their careers; who labor for the love of their students, colleagues, and disciplines; whose primary goal is to help others come unto Christ; who are involved in the academic community while giving due diligence to their personal teaching and scholarship; and who love, respect, and trust others enough to give critical analysis and review without contempt or cynicism.”

It is my belief that we are remarkably successful as religious educators at realizing the blessings of our profession and avoiding the occupational hazards. But I also believe that most of us have or will have times when we may teeter upon the brink or even stumble into one of the hazards. May we be wise in recognizing such times and do all we can to find safer ground, and may we love one another enough to help a colleague who may have succumbed to

a hazard find his or her way back to the blessings of being a religious educator, with our support, our encouragement, and if necessary, our forgiveness.

I believe that the best way to inoculate ourselves against the hazards of our occupation is to strive to let charity dictate and direct all we do. May I invite you to think of how the attributes of charity offered by the Apostle Paul can protect us against the hazards of pride, complacency, priestcrafts, monasticism, extravagance, cynicism, and contempt. Paul explained, “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4–7).

Let us continue to work together to cultivate such a culture of charity in our profession, appreciating each other’s gifts and contributions, celebrating each other’s successes and trusting in each other’s goodwill.

It is that very culture that has made my career as a religious educator such a joy and inspires me to strive to be and do my very best. I love my colleagues for it, and I feel privileged to be counted one of you. **RE**

Notes

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “A Teacher of God’s Children,” address to CES religious educators, January 28, 2011, Salt Lake Tabernacle, Salt Lake City.
2. Paul V. Johnson, “A Pattern for Learning Spiritual Things,” Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Satellite Broadcast, August 7, 2012.
3. The use of this term should not be construed as a derogatory statement about the dedicated men and women who devote their lives to service in monasteries. Rather, I use the term to simply refer to the act of professionally isolating oneself from colleagues and students.
4. *Cursed* is perhaps too harsh of a word for the consequences of stumbling into one of the hazards of being a religious educator, but for the sake of the analogy, I have chosen to maintain the terminology.