

## THE MUSIC OF MORALITY



I LIKE LISTENING to the carillon bells at BYU as they call students to and from class every hour with the refrain “Come, Come Ye Saints” or fill the late afternoon air with hymn and folk tunes or greet us after commencements with lively classical anthems. The sonorous music of fifty-two bells reverberating on campus and out across the valley can be moving, majestic, magical.

The ringing bells call to my mind ringing words from President Spencer W. Kimball’s dedicatory prayer of the then new Centennial Carillon Tower in 1975. Immediately following his historic “Second-Century Address,” President Kimball bowed his head and dedicated the new Carillon with these words: “Just as these bells will lift the hearts of the hearers when they hear the hymns and anthems played to thy glory, let the morality of the graduates of this University provide the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet.”<sup>32</sup>

The bells thus remind me of one of the Aims of a BYU Education: character building. In their peals I hear a prophetic appeal, that BYU must strengthen character such that the lives of those who leave this place will provide music of hope for a world out of tune with heaven.

Instilling moral virtue has ever been core to BYU’s mission. Every BYU president has reinforced the principle that character education must accompany intellectual education. So have Church Presidents. As a boy, I resonated

to an oft-repeated statement by President David O. McKay, an educator by profession, which I later learned originated with Emerson: “Character is higher than intellect.”<sup>33</sup> This saying sank deep into my soul.

When President McKay came of age as an educator, most if not all colleges in the country embraced character education as an integral part of their mandate. However, as consensus about moral values disintegrated during the sixties and seventies, higher education narrowed its aims to the purely cognitive. It seemed enough to teach academic content and wrong to “impose” moral values on students. What students did outside of class was not a university’s business, it was argued. Such views prevailed on most college campuses—at least until higher education began to reap the whirlwind in campus epidemics of binge drinking, sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse, violence, and other behaviors deeply disruptive to learning.

The abandonment of character education effectively attenuated the thick relationship that was once presumed to exist between students and schools. In earlier times, schools were thought to stand in the place of parents (*in loco parentis*). Likewise, universities historically aspired to become their students’ *alma mater* (nourishing mother). Such parental metaphors seem quaintly out of place in modern universities concerned with cognition over character, *veritas* over *virtu*.

But not at BYU. Here we care about not only what our students know but also who they are becoming. A commitment to character education is deeply imprinted into our institutional soul and has been from the days of Karl G. Maeser, whose moral rectitude still inspires each new generation of students.

Moral education, however, is easier to affirm than to achieve. One can teach it in ethics courses, but these likely have limited impact on the formation and reformation of character. Character can and must be reinforced by campus culture, which in BYU’s case intentionally tries to perpetuate the ethical home and church cultures from which our students come. But ultimately, strong character is built

individually, one small virtuous choice at a time. We become good by doing good, over and over. As Aristotle recognized, “Moral excellence comes about as the result of habit.”<sup>34</sup>

The word *character* is instructive as to how it is acquired. Note that *character* can refer to writing and to conduct. Both uses come from the same idea of something inscribed, whether on the page or on the person. We write upon our souls as we make virtuous choices. These choices develop habits constitutive of character and build the strength to make righteous decisions when it takes courage to do so. Moral courage is an essential component of moral character. As C. S. Lewis said, “Courage is not just one of the virtues, it is the form of every virtue at the testing place.”<sup>35</sup>

May BYU ever strive to prepare its graduates to pass such tests. When the carillon bells toll, let their soaring sounds lift all hearts heavenward to aspire to greater goodness and virtue. May their peals become appeals to each of us to become men and women of good character, in whose lives a discordant world may find music of hope.