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Lessons Learned at BYU

Donald Q. Cannon

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This address was given at a Friday faculty forum at BYU on April 13, 2007.

Reflecting on my career at the university, I have titled this lecture “Lessons Learned at BYU.” You may be able to apply some of these ideas in your work. The lessons are not in any particular order.

Do not publish everything you write.

The people who read your papers usually help with that. I had an experience with this very early in my career here at BYU. I had taught colonial history and studied a lot about George Fox, the founder of the Quakers. I found some really fascinating parallels between George Fox and Joseph Smith. When I got here, one of the things I did was write a paper and submit it to *BYU Studies* and had it rejected right away, which does happen. I thought I would have it published elsewhere. I showed it to Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, who was then the dean of Religious Education. He said, “Come in and talk to me,” so I knew there was something coming. He said, “First of all, this might be construed as being a little bit too controversial; you’re making George Fox look as good as Joseph Smith.” So this was his recommendation: as soon as you get to be like Hugh Nibley, publish it. I have it here. It has never been published. We do come up with some things that are probably not appropriate to be put into print.

Do not teach all you know.

You have heard Bob Millet and others say to show some restraint in what you teach, and I think this is wise counsel. We all know way more than students can understand or care about. I think we do need to be selective. For example, I am quite fascinated with what I call the evolution of the temple endowment. I have studied all the things I could get my hands on; I have thought about it and looked at the development and have also been very fascinated with the parallels between Mormonism and Masonry in the endowment ceremony; I'm still very interested in that and have had some good discussions with many of you. But it would not be appropriate in most classes to discuss that. That is just one example; you all have lots of things like that. I think there are limits to what we can appropriately say.

I am really fascinated with eternal progression. Larry Dahl and I have had a lot of discussions. I think this is one of my favorite topics of exploration. It is one of the things that interested me in the King Follett discourse and the work we have done on that, but again, to push this beyond what is in the scriptures or what the Brethren have said in a class would probably be inappropriate. In a personal setting, if students come to my office and want to talk about things, I would be more willing to share such things. I think you all know what I am talking about. There are lots of things that we understand and hold personally that might not be appropriate for class consumption.

Travel, especially world travel, makes it possible to become a citizen of the world.

Travel is a broadening, liberating experience. We have been a very fortunate group in being able to travel extensively, both in and out of the United States. Better than traveling is living in another place. I might say that the six months we spent in Austria with the study abroad program were much more enlightening than the two and a half years I spent in Germany as a missionary. As missionaries, we are restricted in what we observe and in what we learn. We learn some things, but not nearly as much as you do as a resident in another place. I think those of you who have had a chance to go to Israel and live there have learned something that you certainly cannot learn in a book. In this regard, I am again very thankful for the money that has been provided and for these opportunities.

As I think about world travel, I suppose the trip to Asia that Spencer Palmer conceived first comes to mind. At that time I was associate

dean and went as an adviser to the world religion teachers; we visited nine Asian countries in forty-three days. That was a tremendously eye-opening experience in a way that I simply can't convey in words. It opened our eyes to what goes on in Asia and that part of the world and helped us become more aware of other religions. Going to an animal sacrifice at a Hindu temple in Nepal, where they dispatched a monkey for future life, was a stunning experience.

Travel does so much toward promoting understanding of other people. That is true whether it is inside or outside the United States. Our most recent experience in the British Isles last summer was very helpful in understanding different cultures and different perspectives. People are asking me what my wife and I are going to do when we retire; travel is one of the things we hope to continue if we are financially able.

Traveling together builds fellowship and friendship.

You learn things about people that you do not learn otherwise. Let me share a few things here. Going back very early, LaMar Berrett was very much a proponent of getting us out to visit Church history sites. For Larry Porter and LaMar Berrett, being on the ground was very essential, and I agree.

Being with Roger Keller on our trip to Asia was a great experience; seeing his tremendous interest in other religions was a fantastic thing. I especially remember being on the Great Wall; if you think it runs along on the level, you are quite wrong; it goes uphill and downhill for nearly four thousand miles.

It is difficult promoting our Regional Studies tours to New England or Missouri or wherever we have gone, but these trips develop our faculty and build collegiality.

Regular exercise is important.

I have been swimming for the last thirty-four years, two or three times a week. I have added strength training, and I like to walk and hike and some other things. I think to stay at your desk all day is a huge mistake, especially during the week when you are at work. Even if you just walk around the building, I think it is very important. Thinking about this talk, I took a little informal survey in the locker room, and I asked what the chief benefit of coming down there is. In almost every case they said, it makes me feel good, both psychologically and

physically. It is a break. When you are in the pool, you are not going to get a committee assignment or a student complaining about grades.

Research is as fulfilling as teaching.

Notice that I did not say research was better than teaching. I am talking about research, not writing. Writing is still very hard work for me; after forty years in higher education, thirty-four at BYU and six at the University of Maine, it is still very hard work, but research is very fulfilling. It is like being a detective, looking for clues, trying to fit things together, making discoveries. Let me offer two examples of discovery. LaMar Berrett had sent me to New England on a sweep to find out what kinds of materials were available on Mormon studies. In the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, I found a Thomas L. Kane letter that apparently nobody had found. It had not been published anyway. I brought it back and wrote something about it, and they published it in the fall 1977 issue of *BYU Studies*; it was Thomas L. Kane's first encounter with the main body of the Mormons. He had met some of them in Philadelphia. His letter heading read "Mormon Camp Near Council Bluffs, July 11, 1846." It was Kane's views on what the Mormons were planning to do and what they might do.

Second, I was studying the journals of my great-grandfather Angus M. Cannon; he has about eighty-five volumes here at BYU or in Salt Lake. I found the entry for January 1888; he was visiting David Whitmer, and Sister Whitmer asked him to stay because she figured David was dying. Indeed David died in a few days, so Angus was the last Mormon, the last Utah Mormon, to hear the last testimony of the last of the Three Witnesses. I had heard about that, but it was so exciting to read that actual passage. I did write a little article about that in the spring 1980 issue of *BYU Studies* titled "Angus M. Cannon and David Whitmer: A Comment on History and Historical Method." That has been a very meaningful thing. Sometimes you go looking and you don't find things—most of the time, in fact—but the search is really worth it.

In research, there are impressions that come. At the MHA meetings in Vermont we had 650 believers, nonbelievers, and others traveling around to the Joseph Smith sites. I think the very first time I ever went to Sharon, Vermont, Truman Madsen and Lynn McKinley were speaking. I had come up from graduate school in Massachusetts. I have been there dozens of times since, but I never cease to be thrilled by it. I love New England, I love Vermont, I love Joseph Smith, and they all come together there. It is such a magnificent place for many

reasons. The Church has done such a great job in restoring buildings, marking sites, and doing things there.

On the other hand, a quite different experience geographically is Lee's Ferry in Arizona. It doesn't look like Vermont. It is a very remote, barren, sad place, but it tells you very quickly about the Mormon frontier experience. You stand there and go to the graveyard and see the graves of children who died of various diseases and look at the sand and walk around. It is a gripping experience.

Consistent work will result in a fairly substantial volume of publication.

I have published seventy articles, twenty books, and ten book reviews so far, and there are lots in progress. Eventually, the Nauvoo Legion book will come out. The point is, I do not stay up all night. Just consistent work will produce a fair amount of publications.

Serving in the Church enhances one's teaching.

It seems that I draw on whatever I am doing in the Church at the moment. It just comes up. My wife has been a temple worker for a long time at the Mount Timpanogos temple, and I thought I had better try and catch up. But lately where it's appropriate, it has been possible to say things about temples and temple service that I could not say before. The same is true when I was a branch president at the Missionary Training Center and talking about missionary work or *Preach My Gospel*. You have experiences in Church that are very real, and they are current and are not scripted; they just pop up.

When I was first in the stake presidency, the old stake president had never held a disciplinary council. The new stake president said, "We are going to catch up"; we had two or three courts a month for a year. This is not a happy experience, but it is a learning experience. There are procedures to follow, and there is a fairness and a correctness in the procedures.

I have learned from observing you.

Your good examples have helped me to lead a better life. I have seen some really wonderful examples of how to live the gospel and how to apply it.

Stan Johnson was our stake president for a while. He used the scriptures so skillfully all the time in his role. You would never be with him for more than five minutes before he would pull out Book of

Mormon scriptures or other things that were very meaningful. This was not something he got out of a handbook; it was a very natural thing.

Brent Top's expression of love for his wife, Wendy, in his writings and in other ways has been very touching to me.

Speaking of a love for the scriptures, I remember being down at the Mesa Arizona Temple grounds while we were waiting to go into a session. Bob Matthews had joined us and was there a little early. He was not walking around the lemon groves; he was reading his scriptures, and that was very meaningful to me.

Hugh Nibley's love of the temple inspired me. Hugh was not afraid to talk about the temple, and we learned some tremendous things from him. I never did tire of listening to him.

We have a very special opportunity to gain an appreciation of the General Authorities that most people don't have.

This was more true in the old days where we had a closer interface, but it has been my good privilege to watch university presidents turn into Apostles. Dallin H. Oaks and Jeffrey R. Holland were good people when they were here. But the transformation is just phenomenal. The embrace of spiritual things, their thirst for spiritual knowledge, the spiritual power that emanates from them is an amazing thing, and it has been fun to watch and to have that privilege and to see them continue to play such a huge role in the Church. Let me mention a brief experience I had fairly recently with Elder Holland. He went to Chile, and I was teaching a course on the international Church, so I called up and said, "Sometime I'd like to sit down with you and talk about the significance of that experience, your two tours of duty in South America, if you're willing."

I tried to prepare for the questions I would ask, and as I did I thought a great deal about his job as an Apostle. I was overwhelmed contemplating their duties and their responsibilities.

When I went in and shook his hand, I said, "You have an enormous job," and his response was, "It's a big church." You could sense the responsibility and the pressure, and it was such a wonderful thing for him to take time. I said, "It's the first time in twenty-five years I have asked you to spend an hour, so I haven't taken advantage of our friendship." He was so willing and gracious to spend that time. He spent a whole hour and talked very openly about it. I asked him to rate his experiences as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and the South American experience. He said, "Way, way, way over the top." I asked, "Why?" He said, "It was so wonderful to actually live

among Saints and not just visit in a scripted way. With the routine of the meetings and the committees and the responsibilities that go with the bureaucratic side, it was so wonderful and so refreshing to be out there and mingle with the Saints.”

I have had a lot of students who have done papers on South America, specifically Chile, who have commented on the tremendous change Elder Holland made in increasing the retention rate for new converts. He took hold of that problem, which was way out of control.

Conclusion

I remember when I was very first here at BYU and we would have a faculty meeting and would listen to what was being said, I would think, “I’m not like them, maybe someday.” I am still working on that. But I do have a testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel and of the Church and particularly of BYU and its mission and of the great privilege it is to teach and to work here, and I pray the Lord will bless you all in your future endeavors. **RE**

